

Crossroads

by Fairfield

Paths cross as our characters put their lives back together after the final battle.

Can Harry find peace and meaning in an ordinary life? Can Hermione find a soul mate? Can Bellatrix, Narcissa, and Severus outwit the most brilliant witch of their age? Can the Patil sisters survive the economic collapse?

Based on OotP. AU. The beta is juliannannight.

First chapter summary:

Their brands were still on fire and their hooves were made of steel;

Their horns were black and shining and their hot breath she could feel.

She saw the riders coming and she heard their mournful cries,

Trying to catch the devil's herd across the endless skies.

adapted from Stan Jones

The Dance

Chapter 1 of 15

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The Dance

"No, you can't go with me."

In protest, the cat stretched out on the mask and cosmetics she wanted to use. A switch of its tail sent the powder compact flying off the counter.

"You would find it boring, silly, and frivolous," she explained to the petulant pet.

'I should find it silly and frivolous ... and I do,' she thought. 'But I like that.'

For the millionth time, she examined the scar that ran from her hairline down her forehead to just below and outside her left eye. If the curse had struck an inch to the right, she would be blind in her left eye. Hair style, cosmetics and charms could hide the scar, but it resisted all efforts to remove it. Everyone at work knew she had it, and for the past month, she hadn't made much of an effort to conceal it.

The scar had been the first thing she had thought of when she was given, or was it offered, her current assignment. "I can't go out in public," was her initial response.

"Au contraire," was the reply. "This fits you exactly. It is what you have been waiting for. It is an open, masked ball. You will hide your face, but your figure will serve you well."

"If they go in disguise, then send anyone," she said.

"Alas, no," was the reply. "The face is masked, but the figure must be natural. The experienced wizard can tell, especially when dancing."

"Dancing?" she said.

* * *

Several months earlier, an old friend had visited. "Have you thought about doing something else?" he asked.

"No."

"We can get on with our lives. The war's over; we won," he said.

"And what are you doing? Are you leaving?"

"I'm easing out," he said. "I'm going to spend half my time teaching Defense Against the Dark Arts...the fourth and fifth years."

"You'll prepare them for their OWLs. You'll be great at that."

"The school is getting back on its feet," he said enthusiastically. "A number of professionals are teaching part-time, and there's a position open in Transfiguration."

"I need to transfigure myself."

He looked hurt; he stumbled out an apology; but she didn't listen. 'Can't people remember I'm disfigured,' she thought.

"You're a brilliant witch. There are lots of things you could do."

"This is my job," she said.

'At least, I'm doing my job whereas you didn't do yours,' she thought maliciously. 'No, that's unfair,' she decided.

* * *

She gripped her desk as the headache began. It was the wound again. She pressed her forehead against the cool desk, hoping she wouldn't be sick this time. After an hour of roiling blackness and nausea, it left. She was pale, sweaty, and weak, but she would recover.

* * *

She would attend the masked balls as part of her job...looking for ex-disciples of the Dark Lord wherever they might be found. The agency prepared her well. The dance lessons were fun. The social and fashion lessons were not fun. The first two times she had attended, she had an escort, a different escort each time.

The masked balls were held every Friday and Saturday night. People were ready for normalcy and relaxation, and the balls were a huge success. Security was strict: no wands or other magical artifacts were allowed.

But research had developed a necklace with rectangular wood beads that was a segmented wand. When she gripped it and spoke the release word, the segments joined around the string. The string was woven from the mane of a zebra, and the wand kicked like a mule, but she practiced with it until it was better for defense than her all-purpose wand.

* * *

Her masks for the ball had given her ideas. Before going to the masked balls had been a ready option, she had considered paying for a companion who would say nice things to her. Why not? She didn't spend money on anything else. Her clothes were utilitarian and chosen to last. Her flat was bare. She didn't care for anything, and as the prospect of a life alone descended on her, she neglected what little she had. But the masks opened up possibilities. She could pretend to be kinky. Her partner would have to be satisfied with her sighs and moans and forgo the look on her face. The more she thought about it, the more she liked the idea.

Unfortunately, she thought about it too much. She imagined someone falling deeply in love with her for who she was. He would be a kind and flexible man who discovered a bookish, somewhat over-bearing witch was his soul mate. In a final climatic moment, after a tearful confession and much hesitation, she would reveal her scar, and he wouldn't care. Kinky escapades paled in comparison. After the imagined kinky escapades paled, the fantasy followed, withering in the light of her relentless rationality. A double blow.

* * *

"Good evening, miss. Is this table full?"

"Not at all," she replied, indicating an empty chair. It was Friday night and her first solo attendance at the ball. 'Is this beginner's luck,' she wondered.

"I go by John Day."

"Helen."

"Well, Helen, you have the demeanor of a professional," he said.

She thought that was a bit forward, but she was determined to be polite. "Thank you, but I'm just a clerk. And you?"

"Animal control."

"Sounds exciting," she said.

"We try to make it as unexciting as we can. Sometimes I think the real action is keeping accurate records of what we do."

"You mean the clerking part," she replied. "Now you're making fun of me."

"I assure you, Helen, I had no such intentions. Would you care for a dance?"

She would love to have a dance. 'Yes,' she thought, 'being with other people is fun.' They returned to the table.

"I'm skeptical about how dull your job is," she said. 'He's certainly confident about meeting and talking to strange ladies,' she thought.

"It does have its moments," he said.

He told several stories about unusual pets getting lost. She talked about the hubbub of losing a file. He related tales of wild animals wandering into the city. She talked about the problems with fraudulent records. As part of her cover, she had spent several weeks in the record department, learning the procedures and gathering anecdotes.

She thought the evening had gone quite well. It had been a pleasant get-acquainted chat. She was looking forward to meeting and talking to him again tomorrow night. She had heard about his job, and she was curious about his friends, family, and the rest of his life.

"Would you like to come to my place for a nightcap?" he asked.

"What?" she said, startled by his invitation.

"I said, 'Would you like to come to my place for a nightcap?'"

"I ... I ...," she began. "I really enjoyed talking to you, and I want to see you again, but I ... I have a full day tomorrow. I have to turn in early."

He was silent.

'Oh, no, did I make him angry,' she thought. 'I want to get acquainted first. I didn't expect this. I can't see his face. I have no idea what he's thinking.'

He did sound cool when he said, "Quite all right, Helen. It has been an enjoyable evening talking to you."

He stood, made a small bow, and walked to the bar where he immediately began talking to two unattached ladies.

She stood and left the ball, thinking she would like to see him again but puzzled by what had happened. She felt hurt that he had left her so abruptly to join some other girls.

* * *

Dance.

The head danced off the body pushing her aside. Her friend's head bounced and bounced. The stars danced and danced from the pain in her head.

She woke up this morning like many mornings screaming.

* * *

"We won so easily and lost so many."

She thought that if she heard that one more time, she would scream.

She tried to recall the reality of the battle that had defeated the Dark Lord. There wasn't just a plan; there were several plans, depending on the disposition of the Dark Lord's forces. The Dark Lord had used the battle order deemed most likely, and the opposing forces began with the feint that drew his army off balance. They had hoped for a slow reaction time from the Dark Lord's army. He ruled by fear, and his lieutenants flinched before obeying. They had hoped for inflexibility. He ruled by terror, and his lieutenants were afraid to use their own judgment. Her side had trained hard, and they had gone through the Dark Lord's forces like a samurai blade through butter.

She seemed to be alone in wondering where the plans came from.

She seemed to be alone in asking why the heavy losses.

Perhaps others also wondered but kept silent like her.

She woke one morning with a half-formed question. 'Did the plans and the losses come from the same source?'

* * *

After the Friday evening she had met John Day, she went back to the ball the next evening but did not see him. The next Friday, she was back again, and she saw him at one of the bars. Her heart skipped a beat, but she felt hesitant.

'You came back to see him,' she chided herself, 'but now you're afraid to greet him. If the worst happens, you can run home, change your disguise, and come back as a different person.'

"Hello, John," she said.

"Oh ... it's ... it's ..."

"Helen," she said.

"Yes, of course, you just surprised me. You're Helen the clerk. And how have you been doing?"

"Fine, John. And you?" she said.

"I've been doing very well. Look, I'm glad to see you again, but I told these other people I would spend some time with them. I'm sure you'll understand."

"Yes, okay," she said.

She watched John leave and search for his companions. She ordered a white wine and watched the crowd. There seemed to be two girls for every boy.

She made an intuitive leap. Her Arithmancy skills had not deserted her as John had. She added up those in exile, those imprisoned, and those killed as a result of the battle and its aftermath. Most of those on both sides were young, adventurous, single males. She averaged three-fourths of those lost over the eligible courting years, recalled the statistics of married wizards from her training as a clerk, and calculated the ratio of single witches to single wizards as three to two.

She looked around the ballroom with new eyes. There still seemed to be two girls for every boy.

Her soul froze. No wonder John was confident: there were plenty of witches eager for company. No wonder John had quickly abandoned her: he need not waste time on a hesitant witch. For a permanent liaison, he had his choice of the pretty; for a temporary liaison, he had his choice of the desperate.

She felt an irrational urge to empty the prisons just to get some men on the streets.

It occurred to her they were criminals. 'That's okay,' she thought. 'I'm in law-enforcement, and I'll take several of the more desirable, I mean irascible, into custody. I'll keep them busy and out of trouble. I'll put their evil imaginations to work.'

She thought about the horrible battle, her disfigurement, and being in the undesirable heap. 'Did I save the world to be condemned to loneliness?'

In the midst of these pleasant musings, she heard the splintering sound of a door torn off its hinges, the tinkling sound of windows being broken, and the screams of a crowd under attack. Her wand was out and aiming at the intruders when she noticed the chandelier was about to fall. A spell sent it crashing harmlessly against the far wall, but she had revealed herself. Before she could return to hexing the invaders, she was hit from both sides.

Once again, Hermione was falling forward into darkness. As she fell, she recalled with clarity the events preceding the previous fall: They had won; the werewolves and giants were gone; the goblins were retreating; and the humans were surrendering in droves. There was a feeling of elation; there was a sudden attack that killed most of the victorious side, including her friend who had died saving her; the attack stopped as suddenly as it had occurred; and her side continued moping up, not as leniently as before. She had a terrific headache. She lost consciousness.

The Dealer

Quickly, bring me a beaker of wine, so that I may wet my mind and say something clever.

Aristophanes

The Dealer

"There was an unusual package on the doorstep this morning, sir."

"A package? For whom?"

"For you, sir. Four bottles: two each of Chardonnay and Merlot. They arrived in a clever basket that kept them the correct temperature."

"Orphan wine? Is there a note on their parentage?"

"Addressed to you, sir. I did not take the liberty of opening it."

The wheelchair-bound nobleman read the note. Then reread it. "It advises a small glass morning and evening. It assures me they are decent, although not outstanding, vintages. It states the wine is worth the expense, and there are elaborate instructions for obtaining more."

"Will you report it, sir? The wine could be poisoned."

"I have very little chance for adventure these days, and while I don't like to whine, the days are painful enough that poison might be a favor. I think for this early hour, white would be appropriate."

Two days later, the pain-free nobleman placed an order for a case of wine that was cheaper than the ineffective drugs he had been taking.

"Are you certain it's not a subtle poison, sir?"

"It may be. It could very well be, but what a way to go...like between the legs of a woman ... which interests me again."

"May I suggest a bit of romance, sir? Your part-time secretary is not a great beauty and has a husband, but she is a handsome lady, and I know she admires you and covets you. Plus, she is the soul of discretion. Should I drop a hint and get you messily entangled, sir, or would you prefer an elegant, detached relationship?"

"A detached relationship is more sensible, and good secretaries are hard to find, but caution seems out of place since I'm possibly ingesting poison. Besides, I have become fond of Emily. Drop the hint. Let us see if she's frisky under the stern exterior. Do you honestly believe she's interested?"

"It would break her heart to see you take up with another, sir."

His thoughts turned back to the special wine. "I need to talk to their sales manager. If they packaged this as a high quality Port, they would have a winner."

"Yes, sir, that they would."

* * *

The solution to the 'potions equals money' equation was drugs.

'It took long enough for it to occur to me,' he thought. "I thrashed around for two years trying to think how a fugitive could make a living. My brightest idea during that time was to create a whole new line of shimmering fabric colors. It's rather amusing now.'

He, sooner than most, had realized that everything was going to get bad, very bad. He had his intellect, his knowledge of both sides, and unknown to most who thought him a recluse, an understanding of social conditions. Even if the Dark Lord hadn't returned, the prejudices and injustices of wizard society were brewing a storm...the Dark Lord was a catalyst. He knew he straddled both sides, and he knew he would be hunted by both sides on the slim chance that he survived.

Once the solution of drugs occurred to him, more questions arose. What could he produce? What could he sell? Who would buy? How could he deliver? How could he keep himself hidden and safe?

There was a frantic year spent searching for information on drugs. He had always ignored them...more accurately, avoided them. He had never felt safe enough to indulge...never more than one or two glasses of wine with a meal. The search had to be secret since both wizard and mundane authorities were suspicious of anyone knowledgeable about the properties and production of drugs.

His first big break came with the arrest of an organized crime chemist. He had been following mundane affairs because he thought it would be easier to hide among the mundanes and because the mundanes were a bigger market. He had posed as a family friend, visited the chemist in prison, and used his powers to extract information from the chemist. It had left the chemist with a blinding headache. Besides technical information, the raid into the chemist's head had provided other names. After several more raids he was ready to pursue research in a line of drugs and set up his network. It was three years after his original conclusion that to survive he would eventually have to go into permanent hiding.

The first nudge towards his current profession had come during an honors luncheon at school when he sat next to a Ministry official who would be called an economist by the mundanes. He had forgotten what the lunch was to honor, but he hadn't forgotten the conversation with the official.

* * *

"Wizard economics has changed the last fifty years," said the visitor when asked about his job. "The mundanes have become customers."

The official took advantage of their scholarly interest to hold forth about his occupation. "About 6,000 witches and wizards are under eighteen, over one hundred twenty, incapacitated, or leading a life of crime. About 4,000, mostly married women, are leading a domestic life of homemaking, teaching the young, sewing, baking, gardening, and community work."

"That's half of us," said the Astronomy professor. The audience was definitely interested.

"About 2,500 are in agriculture," said the official.

"Can 2,500 produce enough for all of us?" asked the Herbology professor. The Herbology professor's hobby was mundane agriculture. Magic was productive and non-

polluting, but petroleum-based agriculture was very productive.

"They could ... barely," said the official, "but they have discovered the mundane market. Magic can produce prime cuts of meat and fresh fruits and vegetables out of season."

"They could sell to the fancy restaurants," speculated the Herbology professor. "A few pounds of choice asparagus could get a hundred pounds of potatoes."

"Yes," said the official, glad everyone understood the basic idea. He continued, "There are about 5,500 of us in construction, manufacturing, transportation, and trade."

"I wouldn't think that many of those could produce anything for the mundanes," offered the Arithmancy professor.

"That's true," agreed the official. "But a significant fraction can. We're a society of artisans instead of factory workers. Sorcery lets us produce extremely fine cosmetics, liqueurs, and jewelry."

"Magic is used in the production, but it doesn't appear in the final product," said the Transfiguration professor.

"Exactly," said the official. "The economic term is 'value added,' and magic can add a lot of value."

The Arithmancy professor had been calculating. "That leaves 2,000 of us for sports, entertainment, and government services. I suppose the revenue from the mundanes lets us carry such an overhead."

"Very good," said the official.

* * *

'What a time that was,' he recalled almost fondly, thinking about the intense year of research into drug development. 'It was no-holds-barred,' he remembered. Injunctions about foolish wand waving or silly incantations had immediately gone out the window. 'I was fighting for survival.'

'It's too bad I can't publish my results,' he thought. His new spells and procedures had produced several effective pain-killing and performance-enhancing products. He experienced an occasional twinge of guilt about not sharing his discoveries with the wizard world. 'There's no help for it,' he reminded himself. 'It is they who have chosen to hunt me. If I tried to help them, they would kill me before I could transmit the information to them.'

His choice of drugs to produce came from knowledge of Great Britain statistics and the remarks by the economist about the high-end mundane market.

* * *

There were about 60 million people in Great Britain. The top five percent, about 3 million, had forty percent of the wealth. 'More money than was good for them,' he thought. He knew that ten percent of the population suffered from chronic pain. He thought the wealthy would be less afflicted. They didn't spend their lives doing dangerous or debilitating work, and they didn't suffer from the stress of poverty. Nevertheless, he could predict that at least one percent, about 30,000, of them suffered from severe chronic pain. He thought he could contact and supply several hundred customers. Each of them would happily pay 200 pounds sterling a week or 10,000 pounds sterling a year for relief. They spent more than that dining out.

He had several years to acquire a market. He would let his clientele discreetly spread the word through their exclusive clubs. It was a safe market: he was not dealing with people easily intimidated by the police. But he had to be careful: it was a ruthless crowd...easily the equivalent of the Malfoys and better organized.

* * *

His fingers tapped the glass as he looked out on the landscape. The black tilted earth and yellow sprigs of spring had become the silver clouds and green foliage of summer which was becoming the red and gold of autumn to be followed by the silver ground and blue sky of winter. 'Is that the natural progression?' he wondered. 'From industriousness to guile to bravery to intelligence?'

'I've obviously too much time on my hands,' he concluded. 'I've obviously spent too much time among the school houses.'

* * *

He felt himself attracted to the masked ball. He tried to talk himself out of it. 'This is how people get caught. They can't leave their old habits, their old friends, or their old neighborhoods behind.'

But he missed wizard society. There was something about the way wizards interacted. 'Interesting,' he mused. 'What does make us different, besides the obvious? I hadn't thought about it before, and I can't pinpoint it now, but I do know I miss it, and I better do something constructive about it before that hole in my life causes me to make a mistake.'

He prepared as best he could by changing his behavior as much as he could. He took lessons until he was a passable dancer. It seemed best to mingle and indulge in idle chit chat. He practiced by engaging shopkeepers and others in casual conversation. He didn't think he had any talent for it, but just trying created quite a distance between his current facade and his old self. There could be a variety of costumes. He considered avoiding the color black altogether, but decided that would be a connection between all his outfits. Perhaps the best disguise would be as his current self...an earnest, accomplished person who was no social butterfly but who was willing to engage in light conversation and who could dance passably. He had a better than adequate job, but he preferred not to discuss it. The evening was for relaxing in the company of others and escaping his cares.

* * *

He would enjoy escaping from his job. He let himself live well, and he kept to a healthy diet and lifestyle, but the continuous vigilance and tension were taking their toll. The profitability of his trade and dealing with the fringe of society meant a constant threat of betrayal. He knew he had to be ruthless, and he was. No flash, no show, just efficient elimination of those who had violated his trust.

But gangsters liked to go in style: "I know you're a tough, silent killer, but I did a lot of good things for you before I was tempted. Can't you say something to me?"

"Ten points from Gryffindor."

"What?"

* * *

"Good evening. May I have this dance?"

"I haven't danced in some time."

"It's an easy number, and I'm rusty myself."

He had picked her from a crowd of older women. She had been looking at the dance floor wistfully instead of gossiping with the group. He had nodded at her, and she had smiled back.

"You dance well enough," she said when the number was finished. "Can I ask for another?"

"Certainly."

Over a glass of wine she told him she managed a small fabric and clothing store. She was here with her daughter. A number of mothers, older married sisters, and aunts were here as chaperones.

"You can't tell me what you do?" she asked.

He shook his head.

"Well, you have a professorial air about you, and you dance by the book. I suppose the faculty can't be seen to let their hair down."

"Can you let your hair down?" he asked.

She pressed closer to him. "There's no one guarding the guardians."

It was okay with her if they kept their masks on. It was kind of kinky and exciting. 'It's like one of those Celtic dances where the upper torso remains rigid while the lower body moves energetically,' he thought.

* * *

It was his fifth attendance at the masked ball, and his preference for the older ladies was causing him trouble. They were marvelous. He was having the time of his life with their conversation, their company, and their coupling. They were too marvelous: They were recognizing him even when he wore different disguises.

"Professor?" asked a handsome lady, tugging at his sleeve. As he turned to her, chaos erupted. He dropped to the floor. She looked to see what was happening and was dropped by a spell.

He had prepared for being cornered by law enforcement. He put on a mundane respirator, recited the incantation that removed their protective barriers, and started throwing vials of sleeping gas. Both guests and attackers were falling.

Severus found himself making his way towards the lady who had been hexed by the attackers. 'She's open to charges because she snuck a wand into the ball, but she sacrificed herself to save dancers from the chandelier. She deserves better than to be rounded up with the rest.'

The Keeper

Chapter 3 of 15

Such, indeed, is the policy of civil war: severely to remember injuries, and to forget the most important services. Revenge is profitable, gratitude is expensive.

Gibbons

The Keeper

Mrs. Malfoy was on the battle plain with her family.

'The wizards on our side outnumber and outclass the wizards opposing us. There was no reason to make whatever deal was made with those creatures,' she concluded, thinking about the goblins, werewolves, and giants.

There was general movement, a sense that something wasn't right, and then wizards running past saying things that couldn't be true.

There was a bright light. Her husband stepped in front of her. And then silence.

There was movement in the darkness. Her son stepped in front of her. And then silence.

This morning, like many mornings, Hermione was not the only one to wake screaming.

* * *

Several months before our ballroom brawl, there was another social occasion.

"You're here because of my sister."

"I was assigned here."

"You were assigned here because of my sister," said Mrs. Malfoy, pouring tea for herself and Mr. Potter. "Help yourself to the biscuits. I'm not hungry. I haven't seen my sister."

It was a cloudy, early summer morning, three weeks after the final battle. Mrs. Malfoy wore black in mourning for her husband and son even though their bodies were never found. She had received Mr. Potter and his announcement that he would stay at the Malfoy Manor graciously. 'All of wizard England is still in shock,' he thought.

He quickly amended his original thought. 'All of wizard England except Mrs. Malfoy is in shock.' In the three weeks since the battle, she had been busy. Contrary to expectations, she had engaged mundane lawyers who had quickly created a legal labyrinth protecting the Malfoy estate. Most of the investments were in double-blind trusts. Not even Mrs. Malfoy knew the source of the funds that would appear on schedule. The wizard community did not have the knowledge or resources to challenge the mundane legal establishment, nor did they want the resulting publicity.

Mrs. Malfoy had placed a retroactive scorched-earth policy on the Malfoy assets. The wizard authorities had raided and closed one of the Malfoy establishments, but the next morning they found a small pile of ashes. The building, inventory, and land were gone. The authorities decided that further raids would do more damage to the community than to Mrs. Malfoy.

In the confused aftermath of the conflict, they did not confiscate her wand until two weeks after the battle. The authorities could barely function because of their losses.

Now, Harry Potter faced a grieving, but composed, Narcissa Black Malfoy. As Mrs. Malfoy had guessed, the administration assumed he would be eager to do anything to track down Bellatrix Lestrange. The Zeitgeist was revenge.

* * *

After the two visitors left, Harry rejoined Narcissa in the reading room. "They were from the school," he told her. "I may teach part time...Defense Against the Dark Arts. I told them I was assigned to watch you, but you were interested in plants. I suggested first-year Herbology, but said I hadn't asked you what you wanted to do."

"My goodness, you are taking watching me seriously, aren't you? Are you sure I can be trusted with innocent plants or the tender minds of first-years?"

"No," he said, "but I've got to get out of Malfoy Manor before I go crazy."

She pondered her next move. "I should show you something, Mr. Potter."

She unbuttoned the lower part of her blouse. He stared at the scar. The only place she could have got it was at the battle. It was enough evidence to put her in prison. It was the evidence the authorities had been seeking for quite some time.

"Well?" she asked.

Emotions seethed through him...from the extremes of she-killed-my-friends to revenge-is-worthless. He just stared at her.

She was talking to him. "I wanted to stand with my family. They protested, but I couldn't bear to see Lucius and Draco go while I stayed behind. I wanted to protect them." She paused. "Our family was together on the battlefield, part of the honor guard for the Dark Lord. We knew the werewolves and giants would attack first, and we were waiting for our signal. I don't know what happened or what the other side did, but suddenly they were upon us, shining lights. Lucius raised his wand to protect me. The first spell went through his chest. The second took his head off. It seemed as if only Draco and I remained, and we were surrounded. We dropped our wands and surrendered. I think we surrendered to save each other. A wizard was assigned to watch us, we heard the Dark Lord was dead, and then a curse sliced the wizard guarding us in half. Draco saw something and moved to protect me. A curse sliced him in half." She was silent a minute. "I went to protect them, but I caused their deaths."

'What in the world did happen in that battle?' thought Harry.

"Whatever curse sliced through Draco scarred me but didn't kill me. I fell to the ground. When it was quiet, I gathered their parts together and dragged them away from the shielded battlefield to a place where I could bring them home...their parts home." She paused for a small, hysterical chuckle. Harry became alarmed, but she recovered and continued. "When I and their parts were safely home, I lost consciousness for two days. When I woke, I managed to build a pyre. I wanted to build two, but I knew I couldn't manage. I cremated them together and then lost consciousness for another day. When I woke the second time, their ashes were cold. I used two different urns...gold for Lucius and silver for Draco...even though their ashes were mixed."

'Is she telling me the truth?' wondered Harry. 'If she is, then that's why we never found any sign of Lucius and Draco. That's why they've disappeared.'

"Well?" she asked.

"Well, what?" replied Harry, still in shock from the story.

"I told you because you would eventually discover my scar. I saved my husband and son from the indignity of being counted as coup and their bodies displayed, but I can't expect to escape that fate. Are you going to take me in now or wait and use me as bait to capture my sister before taking me in?"

'Ferocious lady,' he thought. 'Hateful, dangerous, but worthy,' he thought.

He postponed his decision. "We can wait. There is your sister."

As he postponed his decision, it was made for him. "We can wait for your sister. I think it will be a very long wait. In the meantime, would you consider teaching Herbology? It would make my life and job much easier."

She gave him a strange look. "Yes, making your life and job easier is an irresistible argument. How could I decline?"

She surreptitiously eyed him. 'How does it feel to miss your destiny?' she wondered. She paused to reflect. 'I should know. I was to help establish a rich and influential dynasty. Instead, I cremated my hopes in secrecy.'

* * *

"It's a mess," declared Mrs. Malfoy.

Harry watched her toss aside the textbook and notes for first-year Herbology. 'Oh, great,' he thought. 'I argued and fought for her to teach the course, and now she's making a fuss. Isn't that woman happy with anything?'

"They're just learning miscellaneous facts and how to pot an odd assortment of plants...some of them too dangerous for first-years," she declared.

"Do you have a better suggestion?" he asked as calmly as he could.

"There are things that are true about all plants," she said. "Plants can be organized into groups that explain how they grow and what they do. There are harmless and useful plants that illustrate all of this." She paused. "Herbology can be beautiful. And safe."

With a diplomatic effort that made him proud of himself, he said, "If you want to teach the course differently, why don't you gather your information and present your case?"

"That's marvelous, Mr. Potter. Do you think they would let me?"

"It won't hurt to try," he said. 'It'll keep her busy and have her screeching at someone else,' he thought.

To his surprise, the school agreed to let her teach the course she wanted if she could provide a schedule with substantial material before the term started. She declared it would be easy since the French textbook was excellent and all she had to do was translate it. She worked on her course with the enthusiasm of the new instructor.

* * *

Harry noticed that Mrs. Malfoy walking through the corridors did turn the heads and start the tongues of the older boys. He came upon one such trio after she had passed, and caught some of the nastiness and prurience.

"Gentlemen," he said quietly.

They turned, saw who it was, and nearly came to attention.

"That's not a respectful way to talk about a professor," he informed them.

"Yes, sir," they chorused, trying to sink into the floor.

"Well, be about your business, and in the future, curb your tongues."

They vanished down the hallway.

'Strange,' thought Harry. 'When I was their age, I was thinking and saying worse about her.' Despite their coarseness, it was obvious the boys both admired and feared her. 'I did neither,' he thought.

* * *

When she wasn't in the greenhouses tending plants, Narcissa was on a balcony that offered a view of both the lake and the forest. Despite its openness for both viewing and being viewed, Mrs. Malfoy had apparently been the one to discover it the first week she was at school. She had furnished it with simple, rugged furniture and a few non-flowering plants that gave the air a fresh scent. It was a masculine décor that fit Mrs. Malfoy, totally female, perfectly. The old Charms professor, Flitwick, often dropped by for morning tea. He had been injured in the battle and now taught fourth to seventh-years. He had always regarded Narcissa Black as a potential scholar lost to wealth.

"He's an old survivor, and they always survive," Mrs. Malfoy had told Harry. "He finally admitted he was one of those who had the Dark Lord surrounded." She shook her head in disbelieving admiration. "He and his young protégé. They both survived."

"Higgins?" asked Harry. "That aloof, distant bloke?"

'They did your job for you, and they were injured,' she was thinking. 'You escaped unharmed.'

"Higgins is from the Ministry," she said. "He taught for a while at Durmstrang, but he's wary of being an instructor." Harry looked perplexed. She continued, "He thinks repetition will rot his mind and exposure to people without talent will give him soul-destroying arrogance."

"Hmm," went Harry, who had had no such thoughts. 'And how did she learn so much about aloof, distant Higgins?' he wondered.

Mrs. Malfoy was gazing into the distance with a serene look on her face.

* * *

Harry walked by the balcony during a severe thunderstorm. Professors Malfoy, Flitwick, and Higgins were watching the rain as if it soothed their spirits. 'I suppose a blizzard would warm the cockles of their hearts,' he thought.

* * *

"Malfoys, Lestranges, and now a French Herbology course!"

The upper-level Herbology professor and the Quidditch coach were in Harry's office.

The Herbology Professor was struggling to restrain herself. "It's going to pervert the first-years. Malfoy spends half her class time having those poor kids drawing stems and leaves." She caught her breath. "Okay, they're really learning the parts of plants and how they work, but it's all French stuff. What's it going to lead to?"

"There's the fleur-de-lis," suggested Harry, thinking there weren't any Lestranges around and Professor Malfoy had translated everything into English.

His two visitors looked puzzled.

"It's a stylized iris," he explained, "a symbol of the French monarchy. They used to brand prisoners with it."

The professor and the coach lit up.

"I tried," he said as he made the universal palms-up gesture of resignation that implied he had argued hard but some people wouldn't see reason. It was not school policy to brand professors.

"That Malfoy whore is going to sneak some stuff in. I just know it," asserted the professor.

"Yes, of course," said Harry. "That's where you're better qualified to watch her than I am. Why do you think we're giving her the chance?"

The professor pondered that and then developed a conspiratorial gleam in her eye. "That's clever," she said.

"But what about her wanting to go flying around the castle?" asked the coach. "Won't she fly away?"

"That is a problem," admitted Harry. "I let her fly last summer, but I wasn't worried about her getting away from me."

The coach bridled. "I think I can handle her flying. Besides, it's like Herbology. We'll give her a chance to make a wrong move."

"I'm glad you two dropped by," said Harry. "Now, I can relax at school. I am sick to death of watching that woman."

The professor and the coach left his study. "We'll watch her like a hawk."

'Yes,' thought Harry. 'Watch like a hawk. Fly like a hawk. Hawk's the word.'

* * *

"Mr. Potter," said Mrs. Malfoy.

"Yes," he replied.

"You know I don't like asking favors, but I do need one."

"What is it?" he asked.

"A book I need has come in. Would you pick it up for me?"

Harry looked quizzical.

"I'm not ready to face the public," she said. "I should be braver, but I'm not."

"I can get it," he said. "Better yet, why don't you come with me?" He paused. "You haven't shopped for a long time."

"It's not nice to poke fun at people, Professor Potter." An idea occurred to her. "Yes, we can shop together. My lingerie is in desperate straits."

"It's not nice to poke fun at people, Professor Malfoy."

There was a storm raging outside, but the two of them sat quietly on the balcony and enjoyed the refreshing rain. The storm was over by tea time, and they left the school for the day to go shopping.

"You know," said Harry, "a good principle of shopping is to purchase the smaller articles first."

"What's your preference, Professor Potter, light reading or flimsy lingerie?"

An hour later they were walking across the street to the bookstore. Harry was still befuddled by the overwhelming femininity of the clothes shop, and Mrs. Malfoy was the one who saw the two men glare at them and then pull out their wands. "Look out, Harry!" She gave him a shove that sent him sprawling behind some decorative pots. Harry rolled and came up with his wand in his hand in time to see Mrs. Malfoy take the hit, fly through the air, and land with the crack of broken bones.

"Narcissa!"

Harry hurled two stunning hexes and saw the hit wizards crumple...crumple from stunning hexes hurled in fury. Later, the investigators would tell him the two never regained consciousness.

"Mrs. Malfoy! Mrs. Malfoy!" He ran to where she was lying on the cobblestones.

"Take me home," she gasped.

"Hospital," he said.

She grabbed his cloak. "No. No. I can't go to hospital. Take me home."

'By the gods, that's right,' he remembered. 'She can't be examined at hospital.'

At the Manor, Mrs. Malfoy had painkillers and rudimentary medical supplies. Harry made her comfortable, and that night he raided the school infirmary for the potions she needed.

He had had to play nurse and clean and treat her abrasions, bruises, cracked ribs, and broken arm. She was grateful for the sponge bath he had given her. After his care and the potions, she was clean and comfortable and resting in her bed while he sat watch.

His mind was still reeling from seeing the full extent of her scar. Unlike the people on his side, she had received no medical care. No one had cleaned her wound or performed any cosmetic repair. She had opened it and ripped it as she crawled home from the battle field to collapse with fever. It ran from her shoulder across her breast to her hip, and it was deep, gnarly, and ugly.

If she had been examined at hospital, the authorities would know she had been at the battle and on the wrong side. She would now be in prison. 'Bloody hell,' he thought. 'I'm the authorities, and I've known for some time.'

She woke for a few seconds. "Obviously, my days as a beauty queen are over."

He took her hand. "You're a fine and brave lady." She smiled and went back to sleep.

* * *

She initially denied the longings she was having. 'My days for that are past.' No one could be as accomplished as Lucius. No one could transport her the way he had done. But it didn't take an expert to achieve satisfaction in this endeavor. She wasn't going to demand perfection...only some consideration of her needs. Her current house guest was an athlete. He should be great at it. She dropped the occasional hint that it was natural for couples. It could be done with her scar covered, and he wouldn't have to look. She was certain that once involved, he would forget about her scar. She remarked that she would like to be doing what everyone else was doing. There was no reason for her to be the only person in the world neglected.

One desperate evening, she put on her shimmering green dress and began their dinner with a glass of champagne in the gazebo with moonlight and candles. They would have oyster stew, asparagus, chicken breast filet with Chablis and crusty French bread. She would serve him vintage Port and peel some fruit for him. When the first course arrived, he tucked in with gusto. She watched him slurp it up. The fire of her rage reduced her carefully planned evening to a cinder...the cinder of breaking her soup bowl over his head. She glared at him until he noticed her.

"What?" said the imbecilic prat.

"Mr. Potter, if you don't take me to the masked ball, I am going to scream."

There, she had said it. She picked up her spoon. The oyster stew was delicious. She noticed he did not finish his and he merely pushed the asparagus around with his fork. 'Time to grow up, Mr. Potter,' she mused mercilessly. 'Certain things are expected in an adult relationship.'

* * *

Later, while trying to teach him the foxtrot, she had second thoughts. 'I always assumed there was a correlation between athletic skill and dancing ability. How wrong could one woman be?'

* * *

On the night they were to attend the masked ball, Mrs. Malfoy dressed in simple elegance. She twirled and Harry got a glimpse of leg. For the first time in over a year, he remembered that he was missing part of a normal life. He thought Mrs. Malfoy ruined the elegance of her dress and disguise by placing a large four-leaf clover over her ear.

"For good luck," she had said.

At the ball, they tried several simple numbers before they retired to their table. Out of nowhere, a chap with an elegant costume ruined by a large four-leaf clover appeared. Mrs. Malfoy sprang to her feet. The new chap wasn't a great dancer either, but she didn't seem to mind.

'They must be two of a kind,' thought Harry, chuckling at the large clovers and noticing they had found a table for themselves.

Harry was discovering he didn't have to be a great dancer, or even a good dancer. Girls were approaching him, he was too polite to turn any of them down, and he was discovering he liked holding girls. He told them it was his first time at the ball, and they wanted to know if he planned to return.

"Yes," he said. He rather thought he might. "Yes," he agreed when they asked about his costume. He would wear the same one the next time so they could recognize him. They told him he was very considerate.

He thought he recognized two ladies sitting at a table in a corner. The attention from the girls had given him confidence he never had before. He approached the two at the table, talked to them, danced with them, and offered to buy them drinks. He was on his way to the bar when an evening that was becoming pleasant was interrupted by pandemonium. 'We're being attacked,' he realized.

Harry panicked. Where was Mrs. Malfoy? What if that guy with the ridiculous clover was a disciple of the Dark Lord here to rescue Mrs. Malfoy and take her to her sister or husband? He was vaguely aware of the chandelier smashing against a wall. He saw Mrs. Malfoy by a far window. Harry was running toward her when glass globes began breaking and releasing clouds of mist. The room swirled as Harry fell to his hands and knees. He saw Mr. Four-Leaf-Clover breaking a window with a chair and pulling Mrs. Malfoy out after him. Harry managed a fast crawl to the window, looked out to see the pair stumbling towards a group of bins in the alley, and heaved himself out the window to follow them.

The Store

Chapter 4 of 15

Alas, my love, you do me wrong

To cast me off discourteously.

Greensleeves

The Store

"Oh, heck, it's always on the top shelf," she said. "I'll have to call my sister."

"I can get it," said the customer.

"No, no," she said. "That's considerate of you, but if you take a fall off the ladder, we might lose our insurance. Could you please wait? I regret the delay."

"Everything's tough these days," said the customer.

Padma Patil pushed the call button and sighed. "I don't know when we'll recover."

"The goblins came out ahead," said the customer bitterly.

Luckily, Parvati arrived, and Padma didn't have to answer that last comment. Both sisters tried to be diplomatic and non-committal with the customers, but it was hard, very hard—especially when they agreed with the customer. It wasn't easy to view the goblins with equanimity since they had appeared to profit from the war while others had fought and died. When they were students, the sisters might have opposed extra taxes for the goblins on principle, but now that they had to run a struggling business, they wanted others to share the burden.

Parvati had come out of the back room dusty with taking inventory of old stock. Padma saw the customer wince at her sister's scar. 'Yes, she's disfigured and I'm crippled,' she thought. 'But we survived. Neither of us had to bury the other.'

They had survived to take over their uncle's apothecary and potion shop at their family's request. It meant giving up their own hopes and dreams, at least for the near future, but the family couldn't bear to lose the shop. The Patils were hanging on to everything they could. Anything they lost, they might never get back. The Patils were spread thin and living marginally, but others were losing land and businesses to the goblin banks, another source of resentment.

After a long, weary day, it was sometimes impossible not to lament. "Oh, Padma, you could have had a teaching position. It would have been secure with room and board, and you wouldn't have to walk all over the store with your lame leg. It could have been something great, like Transfiguration."

"Now, Parvati, you could have, too. The school is not even teaching Divination. They couldn't find anyone."

Neither mentioned the after-hours palm and card readings by Parvati or the astrology charts by Padma. It was off the record and hidden from their creditors and the taxman. They did it disguised even though their clients probably knew who they were. It was cash up front. It kept them fed. 'Strange,' they both thought. 'Substantial items like potions and their ingredients can go for credit, but insubstantial items like a card reading earn solid cash.'

They had had a stroke of good luck. A friend of their uncle had mentioned an old, almost forgotten, pain-relief potion made from common supplies. The drawback was that it took great skill to brew, but the two sisters practiced until they could do it in their sleep. Some evenings after a hard day, they were certain they were. The potion was a winner after the war. Even the government had agreed and was purchasing large quantities for prisoners.

They had mixed feelings about their other profitable line. People with plenty of money bought certain items on a regular basis. Every two weeks, someone would appear at the store, and the transactions were always in cash. They had researched what the items could be used for, and the answer was various types of hallucinogens. They were uneasy, but they didn't know for sure, and they needed the sales.

* * *

"Should we go?" Parvati had asked when the masked balls were first announced.

"I could look at a different set of walls," said Padma.

"You might meet someone," replied Parvati.

'If we were wizards, it would be acceptable, even honorable, to be injured in war,' they both thought, 'but we're witches, and we're damaged goods.'

"We can't hide away," they both said.

They had kept the Patil family tradition of high-caste pure-bloods ready to fight for their beliefs. Through the ages, this had cost the family dearly, but it had made them influential. As long as the family held together, no one would dare foreclose on any Patil property. But it was the wizards who were supposed to fight. The understood, never mentioned, long-term loss was the marriage prospects for the two sisters. Once bright, it was now abysmal, perhaps non-existent.

The family tradition did not include one night stands, and no wizard was interested in scaling the high-caste walls when there were so many girls available. The two sisters had settled into a routine of gossiping with friends, listening to the music, and watching the crowd. They had been watching when a wizard arrived with a stunning blonde, danced several numbers with her, and lost her to a four-leaf-clover bloke. Then they saw him notice and approach them.

* * *

As Harry stood at the bar, having a plain orange juice for energy, he looked for the clover-pair. He saw them at a table, holding hands. Behind them, at a table in a corner, he saw two golden-skinned women. 'Or is it the darkness?' he wondered. 'Did those two survive?' As he approached the table with the two girls, he noticed the clover-pair watching him. 'They're probably hoping I will go away,' he thought. He took a circular route to avoid their table. Yes, the pair in the corner were golden-skinned. They cocked their heads quizzically as he neared them.

"Hi," he said. "Am I interrupting?"

"No. Have a chair," said one.

"Do you come here often?" said the other in a light tone of voice.

"My first time," he said.

"But you came with that stunning blonde."

'How do I explain this?' he thought. "It's a complicated story," he said, "but I agreed to escort her to the dance. Do you watch everyone that closely?"

"It's what we do," said one.

"And listen to the music," said the other.

"I'm clumsy at it," he said, "but I can offer you a dance if you like."

One of them held up a cane. He expressed his regret that he hadn't noticed. The other thought she might try it if her sister didn't mind. She was amused at his missteps in such a friendly manner that he found himself liking her. When they returned to the table, the one with the cane observed that she could probably dance as well as he could. He replied that such a gallant offer should not be refused, and this dance was a slow waltz. While dancing, she occasionally stumbled against him. The contact made him lightheaded. They appeared surprised but agreeable that he wanted to buy them drinks—apple juice was their choice.

'They seem friendly enough. I hope they like me. It would be nice to have the company of some pleasant people,' he was thinking as he walked to the bar to order. 'One is crippled. The other is wearing a full mask. I wonder if she's scarred. I'm certain it's the Patils although I didn't ask. I wonder if they recognized me. Is it okay to ask?'

* * *

When the attack started, both sisters stood to look for their recent companion.

"There he is," said Parvati.

"Yeah, right, chase the blonde," muttered Padma.

When the curses hit them, they fell to the floor in agony. When the mist reached them, they fell into an uncomfortable sleep. They were back on the battlefield, their unit had disintegrated, their defense spells were down, and they were injured and crawling on the ground, looking for each other.

The Instructor

Chapter 5 of 15

Art thou pale for weariness

Of climbing heaven and gazing on the earth,

Wandering companionless.

Shelly

The Instructor

Everyone in the Department of Mysteries joined the Opposition army.

"This camaraderie is going to get us all killed," they said.

"Yeah," they all agreed.

Among those swept along was Jack Higgins.

"But you've never liked fighting," protested his wife. "Now you're going to be a hero, get yourself killed, and leave me with a ten-year old daughter."

"Soldiers aren't heroes," he had wanted to say, but it was a weak argument when so few were volunteering. 'Not many can afford to volunteer,' he reminded himself. They were training in team tactics, and it required time away from work. The Ministry, concerned about the threat, let them train during working hours. The Department of Mysteries had forged a direct link from the Ministry to the training ground.

"We're lucky we're in this together," they had said.

Farmers, artisans, and tradesmen who had volunteered found that the Ministry had fouled up their paperwork, requiring them to be at the Ministry several days a week. They arrived and then vanished into a bottomless bureaucratic pit to emerge tired and somewhat battered several hours later.

"Filling out those forms really takes it out of you," they explained to their friends and family.

'Besides,' thought Jack Higgins, 'I can't tell my wife that it's team work and not heroism. I'm not certain of her discretion or the loyalties of her family. I sometimes think my wife would betray us if they agreed to spare me. At least, I hope that sparing me would be part of the bargain.'

To their amusement, the natural talent, group cohesion, and access to the training ground turned the people in the Department of Mysteries into the most effective troops.

"Us wienies?" they said.

* * *

Jack Higgins had been one of the survivors of a desperate fight that worked better than planned. He and the others had surrounded the Dark Lord. He had found himself beside his old mentor, Flitwick, who had fought his way to the center of action. Jack remembered the Dark Lord looking puzzled after a round of spells had disarmed him. 'We haven't got time to wait for Potter!' Jack had thought as he, Flitwick, and nine others had hurled the final round of curses.

* * *

After the battle, Jack found himself bored with his old job, but he had reestablished contact with Flitwick, who offered him a part-time position as Charms instructor. He went from facing the Dark Lord's army to facing classrooms full of young kids.

"I've developed a taste for action and danger," Jack told his wife to her dismay.

Jack Higgins thought the school the best hope for revitalizing wizard society. He was proud of his position since he believed Charms was the basis of the incantation disciplines: Transfiguration and Defense were extensions of Charms. As part of his professorship, he would act as if old hatreds and animosities were forgotten even though he knew it wasn't true.

The school also offered him room and board whenever he wanted it. A number of his wife's friends and relatives were dead, captured, or in exile because they had marched with the Dark Lord. Her affections were, at least temporarily, alienated.

* * *

He was walking past his daughter's bedroom when he heard part of a conversation. His daughter was asking about her favorite relative.

"Did Daddy kill Uncle Thomas?"

"I don't know, dear."

"They didn't fight fair, did they Mummy?"

"No."

* * *

In the midst of this appeared Mrs. Malfoy, revolutionary professor of first-year Herbology.

Jack noticed and envied that a balcony had appeared for her. "The rich always get the best," he muttered to himself. He noticed and envied that Flitwick could drop in on her for tea. "More courage than I have," he muttered to himself.

One day in the hall, Flitwick suggested that Jack join them for tea. They listened to Flitwick's tales of long-ago exploits...incidents that happened far enough in the past that allegiances to both sides had disappeared. Mrs. Malfoy related harmless stories of life in the girls' dormitory when she was a student. Jack was initially hesitant, but he talked about the artifacts that baffled them in the Department of Mysteries. He discovered, to his surprise, that both Professors Malfoy and Flitwick enjoyed the anecdotes. They treated his accounts as puzzles for speculation, research, and suggestions.

Jack found Professor Malfoy easy to talk to. She was a professional acquaintance. There was no emotional overhead.

* * *

Late one afternoon, there was a knock on Jack's office door

"Hi, Jack. Are you busy?" asked Professor Malfoy.

"No," he said, pushing aside a huge pile of papers he was grading. 'What am I doing?' he thought. 'I would have told anyone else to go away.'

She sat in a chair. She appeared nervous and hesitant, which was not like her. 'We all have off-days,' he thought.

"I really liked your last round of drawings," he said.

She nodded her head but remained silent. 'That's strange for her,' he thought. He ordered tea.

She finally spoke. "You seem to spend all your time working. You're still with the Department of Mysteries, and I know you spend an enormous number of hours on your classes."

"The Department is more relaxed these days," he began.

She looked interested.

'Uh-oh,' he thought. 'I have to back off. We're relaxed because we defeated her side and killed her friends.'

"We're taking a more contemplative approach," he asserted. "You and Flitwick are helping. I've mentioned your ideas, and the Department likes them."

That worked. She relaxed and sipped her tea.

'It helps that we're continuing the physical training from our army days...a healthy mind in a healthy body,' he thought. 'But I can't tell her that either.'

"You do seem fit," she said. "The combination of Ministry and teaching must agree with you." She paused. "But ... but surely you need some relaxation. Doesn't anything appeal to you?" She paused again. "The wizard community is trying to provide social functions."

"Ah, yes," he said. "There is the masked ball. I hear it's a big success."

She sat up straighter. "You hear? Don't you attend it?"

He shook his head no.

"Don't you dance?" she asked.

"A little," he replied. For some reason, her show of enthusiasm prompted him to say, "I've considered practicing and attending, but I'm not sure how to practice or what I would do if I were at the ball."

"I could help," she blurted out. "I mean ... I dance a bit, and if I were at the ball you would have someone to talk to ... I mean ... you could talk to others ... but you wouldn't be completely alone ... if you wanted to, I mean."

"Okay," he said, not certain what he was agreeing to.

She smiled. "We can practice a few steps, and I'll get my keeper to take me to the ball. We can meet there. We'll wear something distinctive to recognize each other."

"Good plan," he said, realizing what he had agreed to.

* * *

'There's nothing like making a fool of yourself,' thought Narcissa, after leaving his office. 'I've handled lots of tricky social situations, and now I'm acting like an awkward school girl.' She walked back to her balcony musing. 'And what am I doing? I don't even know why I went to see him, and then I'm after him to take me dancing.' She kept trying to figure it out. 'He didn't show up for tea this morning, and I missed him, so I went to see him, and when I was there, I didn't want to leave until I could arrange to see more of him ... that's crazy, girl.' She reconsidered. 'He did agree to meet me at the dance. Maybe I did okay.'

* * *

Narcissa was rethinking the end of the Dark Lord. 'It was many to one, but Jack and the others hadn't committed themselves to a life of evil in exchange for power. They were leading ordinary lives with families and jobs, but they still stood up to the Dark Lord. The men on my side all cringed, even when they were in a group. Jack and the others weren't anointed by the heavens either like Harry Potter.'

* * *

After the invitation to the dance, Jack began to look at Narcissa differently. 'She's flat-chested, not that pretty, ten years older than me, and I never liked blondes.' He wondered what it would be like working with her in the Department of Mysteries. They could talk over the puzzles. 'She spends too much class time drawing pictures.' He wanted to show her the new methods he was using in his Charms classes. He was hoping she would admire them. 'She's stuck-up. She only wants to go to the ball to show off her new gowns.'

He became critical of her admiration of Flitwick and himself. 'Is she so naïve that she takes survivors as heroes? She's a brilliant lady, but emotions can overwhelm intellect. That pure-blood stuff she was raised on could have her believing that inner-most qualities determine one's fate. What a load of rubbish.'

He imagined taking her to the Department social events, letting her be friends with his friends, and winning over his acquaintances with her graciousness. He imagined spending quiet evenings with her. He became insanely jealous of Harry Potter.

* * *

Narcissa looked out on the bleak landscape holding no promise for mankind and thought about the Ravenclaws.

She remembered one morning on the balcony when the subject had turned to the Dark Lord. Both Flitwick and Higgins had kept glancing at her, unsure about the intellectual fiber of a Slytherin.

"People like to follow something," Flitwick had said.

"There's a small group looking at the mundanes, wondering if their society says something about ours," Higgins had said.

"And?" Flitwick had said.

Many people follow a cult that worships a woman and a baby," Higgins had said, glancing at Professor Malfoy, not sure of her mental toughness.

She had wanted to rise to the challenge. "What do they offer?"

"They offer divine forgiveness of your mistakes," he had replied.

"That's attractive," she had said, "but there must be a catch."

He had nodded and smiled at her. She had glowed. He had said, "They hold that only this woman and child can do that. The individual by himself cannot atone for his past errors."

Professor Malfoy's brow had furrowed. "That diminishes us. Their divinity is like a vengeful social group."

Higgins had continued, "There's a joker in the Department who claims the gods placed the pair on earth to spread lies in order to sharpen our wits."

Flitwick had pondered the claim. "That's conceivable, but if it's true, it was one of history's bigger failures."

'Flitwick and Higgins are really nice,' Professor Malfoy had thought. 'They talk to me and listen to me. I'm having a good time at school.'

* * *

The evening at the masked ball was going well for Jack. He had no trouble spotting Narcissa despite the mask, Potter didn't protest when he waltzed her away from him, and Narcissa seemed to be enjoying the evening.

Jack noticed Narcissa looking at the emblem over the bandstand: a couple dancing on a field of stars with a moon overhead.

She delivered her appraisal. "It represents society moving to a higher orb by resolutely uniting opposites and moving in harmony with the rhythm of the universe while recognizing the limits of human endeavors."

"Made possible by keeping their feet firmly planted on the stars of past achievements," he added.

'I'm spending too much time with Ravenclaws,' thought Narcissa.

'She's great,' thought Jack.

Then pandemonium broke out.

"I can't stay here," said Jack, remembering his excuse to his family of grading papers.

"I can't either," said Narcissa.

The door was jammed by the invaders. They dashed to a back window.

The Battle

Chapter 6 of 15

So it's mathematical after all.

Longstreet at Gettysburg

The Battle

'Our plan for meeting the Dark Lord in battle always depended on spies and reconnaissance,' the strategist reflected. 'Most of the spies were peripheral, little more than reconnaissance, because few could withstand the scrutiny of the Dark Lord. Most observations before the battle were about his allies and their numbers. Most observations during the battle were aerial to determine the location of his forces. People who could conduct reliable reconnaissance were too valuable to place in the front line, but they went alone into danger, and they may have been the bravest of us all.'

* * *

For the order of battle for the Dark Forces, think of five rectangles of various shapes and sizes. On their far right flank was a small square of about 100 werewolves. Next was a small square of about 100 giants. Next was a narrow and deep rectangle of 100 goblins. Then a large rectangle of about 600 wizards. Finally another narrow and deep rectangle of 100 goblins. The Dark Lord was in the middle of the large rectangle of wizards. The giants were a buffer between the nearly feral werewolves and the rest of the army. The goblins protected the flanks of the wizards since goblins would fight to the death.

Facing this army was about 400 members of the Opposition.

The Dark Lord's obvious plan was to let the werewolves and giants savage the left flank of the Opposition. The werewolves and giants would attack first since they were considered expendable and they could not be held in check for any period of time. The Dark Lord expected them to take at least 200 members of the Opposition out of combat which left his wizards with a three to one advantage, plus the goblins. The Dark Lord's wizards would attack an army that had already been mauled.

The battle opened with globes of fiery liquid lobed into the Dark Lord's army from the far right wing of the Opposition with most of the globes aimed at the werewolves and giants. The wizards and goblins fended off the globes, but a number of them landed among the werewolves and giants who disregarded orders and charged the source of their torment. As they ran across the front of the Opposition, snipers accounted for about 50 of them. When they arrived at the far right, the globe artillerymen had retired into the mass of the Opposition army leaving six Arithmancers. Each Arithmancer swung his wand with a mighty oath. Each Arithmancer opened a pit that swallowed about 20 opponents. The surviving werewolves and giants leaped across and ran around the pits to tear the six Arithmancers apart before milling around in confusion as snipers picked them off. Globes were lobed into the six pits. The screams of the dismembered Arithmancers were followed by the screams of burning animals. The scorecard: 100 werewolves, 100 giants, 6 Arithmancers.

* * *

'I wish I had had more first-class Arithmancers,' thought the strategist, 'but it's a rare talent. It was a shame to waste it in battle.'

'But if you're not willing to lose soldiers, you'll lose the battle,' he lamented. 'The Dark Lord was willing to lose soldiers.'

'Ah, yes, casualties,' he thought. 'To the military mind, a casualty is someone who can no longer fight. Is he dead or alive? The general and his staff don't care although the casualty might. The general and his staff can't afford to care. I couldn't afford to care.'

'From the very first, we taught the people on our side that there would be casualties,' he remembered. 'We knew the value of propaganda, and we psyched them up. We told them the Dark Lord was displeased that they opposed him. We told them what his followers would do to their mothers, their sisters, their wives, their daughters, and their girlfriends. We convinced them it was better to die in battle than be tortured to death after watching your girlfriend being raped.'

'It may have worked too well,' he mused. 'The last act of one witch was to drive her wand through the eyeball and into the brain of a wizard who got in her way. I assume she was protecting her mother, her sister, and her girlfriend.'

'We've trained a generation of killers. The gods may or may not forgive us.'

* * *

The Dark Lord's first priority was the Dark Lord, and he had his 100 strongest as a body guard. The next 200 strongest were on his right flank, ready to attack the left flank of the Opposition that the werewolves and giants were supposed to have mauled. His right flank didn't think things had gone as planned, but no one was going to question the Dark Lord, and they charged forward.

The left wing of the Opposition fell back offering token resistance, but as they fell back, they activated small packets that exploded when stepped on. The packets would damage a foot or break a leg, and in the absence of medical assistance, they would take a wizard out of the battle. The steady advance of their right flank heartened the Dark Lord's army. The flashes from the packets were taken as spells from the wands of their advancing flank.

When the advancing wizards realized they were in the midst of a minefield, half of them began cautiously inching their way forward, and the other half began cautiously backing out. Scoreboard: 200 of the Dark Lord's wizards immobilized, 11 Opposition members killed.

* * *

The strategist remembered what he had told the Opposition. "The wizards in the Dark Lord's army think and fight as individuals. The Opposition should try a new tactic, and it's essential to keep it secret."

He had regularly scanned people to check if they had revealed anything. Of course, he ran into what was uppermost in the minds of adolescents. Ronald Weasley thought Pansy Parkinson was hot. Ronald was surprisingly inventive about what he would do to a stuck-up pureblood. A Hufflepuff was into both Luna and Lavender. Neither girl knew the other was involved. 'That one was placed in the wrong house,' he chuckled.

'All that security and I didn't scan the right people for the right thing.'

He knew the battle would be fought at night. The Dark Lord wanted to use werewolves, and his army was accustomed to terrorizing people at night. Hence, two people of each team were to shine cones of light that illuminated and blinded the enemy.

He borrowed the mundane idea of suppressive fire. Two wizards of each team were trained to fire stinging-hexes. They practiced until they could fire four hexes a second that no one could withstand.

Moving forward boldly and swiftly requires armor. They discarded the five-syllable disarming spell and developed a one-syllable shielding spell. Two wizards of each team wielded them.

Two wizards of each team packed the punch. They discarded the six-syllable killing curse and developed a one-syllable strike-curse that was fifty percent lethal.

"Lethal?" "Remember what they are going to do to your girl friend."

Each team was given a leader who kept them together and who also wielded the strike-curse.

'It didn't make sense: Nine people would charge the enemy with only two of them using strong curses. Everyone on the other side would be using the strongest curses they could wield. To test the tactic, we divided our army and pitted the teams against a Red Force that fought as individuals with each individual using a strong version of a stunning spell. The Red Force knew what was coming, but they were blinded by the cones of light, driven to an ineffective, heads-down position by the stinging spells, frustrated that only half their curses got through the shielding spells, and finally picked off. We switched sides and tested it again and again. To ensure the people playing the Red Force did their best, we hinted the outcome reflected on their virility. One consequence of the hint was that the witches fought like berserkers.'

The team tactic seemed to work.

* * *

After the werewolves and giants had been eliminated and a third of the wizards trapped in a minefield, it was time for the Opposition army to attack the main horde.

The attack began with a move designed to get their attention. Each of Forlorn Hope One through Four consisted of three teams. They used a penetrating formation. Forlorn Hope One and Two attacked on a broad front to shield the other groups. They were followed by Forlorn Hope Three, and it was followed by Forlorn Hope Four. The first two groups would make it as far as they could, then the third group would make it as far as it could, and then the fourth group would make it as far as it could. No one expected them to survive.

It was another case of combat sacrificing the best. The six Arithmancers were from the Department of Mysteries, as were Forlorn Hope Three and Four. It bothered the adults that Forlorn Hope One and Two consisted of young people just out of, or still in, school, but the youngsters had talent, determination, and a sense of immortality.

The globe artillerymen lobbed fire into the main body of the Dark Lord's wizards who fended off the globes but were preoccupied when 108 people left cover and charged directly for the Dark Lord, hurling curses for all they were worth.

When the Dark Lord's army was thoroughly distracted by this penetrating feint, our main body struck on his left.

Lacking any drill, the wizards in the Dark Lord's army had arranged themselves in groups of friends and family. When the main Opposition army descended upon them crying out they should surrender and live, these groups quickly surrendered to save their friends and family. The Opposition army sliced through the left flank of the Dark Lord's wizards and then swept around to capture the rest

Forlorn Hope One and Two had made it to the honor guard. Forlorn Hope Three cracked it. Shield-spell witch Nina Johnson of Forlorn Hope Three, screaming in fury, put her wand through McNair's eyeball and brain. Opponents who had witnessed it said they had felt fear. Most of Forlorn Hope Four cornered the Dark Lord. The Boy Wonder may have been the only one, but he wasn't the only thirty. Forlorn Hope Four and the remnants of Forlorn Hope Three fried the Dark Lord. They lost most of their team members, but they fried him.

This main attack was conducted a certain distance from the goblin units to give them a chance to not participate. The goblins were supposed to guard the flank, not participate in attacks to the center that could be feints. Besides, goblins have their own agenda, and these goblins, having witnessed the end of the werewolves and giants, were aware the battle was not going as the Dark Lord planned.

Both groups of goblins retired in good order. There was no reason to create feelings of revenge and reprisal by attacking them.

It was over. The Dark Lord, thinking along his lines, had expected magical razzle-dazzle, not mundane infantry tactics.

It was over. Then there was a sudden attack on our army. Our people, not knowing where the attack had come from and thinking the Dark Lord's wizards had violated their parole, lashed out and killed a hundred prisoners. A dark moment.

* * *

After the battle, it had taken the strategist some time to recover from exhaustion since it had been necessary to conceal his identity from the Opposition army. If they had known who he was, they would not have given his information any credence. The Opposition army would have been mauled by the werewolves and giants and then overrun by the superior number of the Dark Lord's wizards. The goblins would have finished off the wounded.

It also took some time to regain his equilibrium because of the horrendous casualties. Now, months later, he had the calmness and strength to examine and contemplate the battle.

No one on the winning side appeared able to face what had happened or formulate a coherent picture, but by careful interviewing and reading what records there were, he pieced together the events. He concluded the Opposition army death toll was 6 Arithmancers, 11 in the retreat of the left wing, 71 Forlorn Hopes, 3 in the main attack, and 172 in the mysterious attack.

He had an inkling of who had sponsored the mysterious attack. The attack had been carried out by highly skilled and trained operatives. Putting together such a group, arranging for it to be at the right place, and having it strike at the precise moment required foresight, intelligence, and resources. He knew who had those qualities.

Treachery was implied. He didn't think anyone in the army had leaked information, but minor clerks in the Ministry could be bribed to provide information on the time and location of the battle.

His best hypothesis was that fifty Dark Wizards had escaped detection by hiding with the goblins on the left flank of the Dark Lord's army. Almost all the after-battle casualties occurred near that flank. The goblins, too, had been bribed. That took real money, and he knew who had money.

'What was the motivation?' he wondered. He originally thought it was to eliminate the law enforcement arm of the government, but perhaps it was more general than that. 'Would they have turned on the Dark Lord's army if it had won? Were they out to cripple the existing wizard power? What had the goblins been bribed to allow to happen?'

He might be the only one who had guessed. The people who fought the Dark Lord had experienced a desperate battle, but they hadn't experienced a desperate life. They had not had to consider the options or make the choices he had been forced to consider and make. He knew what had happened.

Others had solved the 'potions equals money' equation.

The wizard world was becoming the haven of drug lords.

The strategist thought it was ideal. The mundane world, especially mundane law enforcement, did not know the wizard world existed. Sorcery could produce a plethora of consciousness-altering substances. The trade brought income to a war-ravaged economy and preyed on mundanes. That made it acceptable to many wizards. The wizard government was focused on rounding up Dark Lord disciples. It was too ineffective to recognize the drug problem and too weak to combat drug trafficking even if it wanted to.

The strategist thought it would be several generations before the wizard community had recovered enough to realize the drug trade was distorting and poisoning their world and to be strong enough to resist it.

The Rescue

Chapter 7 of 15

In the velvet blackness

Of the darkest night,

Burning bright,

There's a guiding star.

ROCKY HORROR

The Rescue

Severus reached the unconscious witch who had saved the dancers from the chandelier. When he lifted her from the floor, the wand fell out of her hand and reverted to a necklace. He picked it up and placed it in his pocket. He decided they should leave by a side door.

'I didn't think everything through,' he realized. 'I didn't bring any counter for the sleeping potion, and now I have to carry an unconscious woman. I should have some counter-potion in case I get a dose of the potion myself.'

He walked briskly away, hoping to be far from the scene when the authorities arrived. He was at a loss. He had never before faced the problem of hiding an unconscious female until she woke and he could take her home. He didn't even know how long the sleeping potion would last.

Luckily, it was Friday and several hours before midnight in a big city. He would hide in plain sight on the mundane subway. People would either ignore them or assume what was true. They were on their way to or from a masked ball, and his companion had fallen asleep. He cursed his lack of wand. Hers was ingenious, but unusable.

He considered removing her mask to discover who she was. He decided against it. He had let himself be drawn to a wizard social function and had become entangled. He could not take the emotional risk of personal entanglement. She was healthy, not married, and from what little he could see, possibly pretty. That in combination with her self-sacrifice could push him over the edge into admiration. He was discovering that a part of him yearned for a worthy companion.

The terrible monotony of a ride to nowhere was weakening his spirit. He was having fantasies about a witch who could help him plan his operations, who could point out the gaps in his plans, who would stay with him through the long evenings and nights, and who would defend him as bravely as she had defended the dancers. His reveries were interrupted.

"Who are you? And where are you taking me?" asked his now awake companion.

* * *

"Come on," said Jack Higgins, taking Narcissa Malfoy's hand and running toward the side window. "We'll go out the window and hide in the alley."

They reached the window just as a raider came through it. Jack grabbed a chair, swung it, and connected with the raider's head, knocking him out. A second raider came through the window with his wand pointing at Jack. Narcissa followed Jack's example and brained the second raider with another chair.

'Damn, what a lady,' thought Jack as he leaped through the window, rolled, and turned to help Narcissa out the window. The delay, however, had caused Narcissa to inhale some sleeping potion. Jack had to lift her through the window, and while he was doing so, he caught a whiff of the potion. The two of them stumbled towards a collection of dust bins and cardboard boxes. When they were halfway across the alley, Harry struggled out the window and began crawling after them, shouting Narcissa's name.

'Bloody hell,' thought Jack and Narcissa. The two of them staggered back to Harry, took his arms, and the three of them crawled and stumbled to the pile of cardboard boxes.

* * *

As Hermione regained consciousness, she realized she was slumped against some unknown male person and they were on the mundane subway. She demanded to know who he was and where he was taking her.

"My identity is not important," he said. "I am taking you home as soon as I learn your address." He paused. She decided not to make a fuss yet. He continued. "Do you remember the masked ball, the attack, your being hit by curses?"

"I remember the ball and the chandelier," she said.

"You saved the dancers under it. But you used an illegal wand." He paused. "Wait. I'm stupid. You're the authorities, aren't you?"

"You ought to know," she said spitefully. "You looked under the mask. Did you enjoy what you saw?"

He gave her an appraising look. "It's like that, is it? I didn't peek, but I'm regretting my chivalry."

His having guessed she was disfigured incensed the lady. "And what kind of scheme is this? What are your plans for me?"

"How perceptive you are. I staged the raid on the ball knowing that you would save the dancers and then be rendered unconscious. I could subsequently pose as your rescuer and find my way into your grateful arms. How clever I am. What a prize you must be."

Hermione thought the sarcasm should remind her of someone, but her mind came up blank. She felt the pain in her head begin. "You arrogant, misbegotten pig. You" The pain hit, and she was clutching her companion hard enough to leave bruises. She was sick on the floor of the subway car.

He dragged her off the car at the next stop and pushed her into the ladies room.

She emerged five minutes later, a total mess.

"By the gods!" he said. "Is the ladies room empty?"

Hermione just leaned against the door frame for support.

"Look out. I'm coming in with a sick lady," he shouted. He took her into the ladies room, washed her as best he could with the towels, and sat her on a couch.

"This happens every once in a while," she said. "Usually, it's not this bad."

At first, Severus was relieved it wasn't the result of his sleeping potion. Then he realized the lady was in chronic pain from her injuries. For a few short moments, she looked mellow—partly for the cessation of the pain and partly out of gratitude.

A few minutes later, she had recovered, and they were soon at the gate to the complex containing her flat.

He saw a devil's gleam in her eye. 'She's recovered from both the pain and her gratitude,' he thought. From a distance, he tossed her necklace-wand to her in a high arch. She caught it, spoke the release spell, and raised it for a capture spell. But he had vanished.

* * *

Jack and Narcissa had hauled Harry to the other side of the alley and had pulled cardboard sheets and boxes over themselves. Since they were without wands, they had decided to hide like mundanes. They thought they were about half hidden when the potion overwhelmed them and they passed out.

Jack, who had been least exposed, woke before dawn. He discovered the three of them had huddled for warmth. Narcissa was sprawled on top of him, and Harry was sleeping next to him on his left.

Jack had never been one to cuddle, but he liked the familial feel of the two of them. 'It must be the aftereffect of that potion,' he thought. Narcissa was much too cozy, but it felt right to smooth down her hair and kiss the top of her head. 'Is this a blonde thing?' he wondered. 'They can sleep on top of you, and it feels comfortable. I wouldn't mind this every morning. Well, minus Potter of course.'

He considered the hour and their predicament without wands. He decided nothing could be done until the other two recovered from the potion, put his arms around Narcissa, and went back to sleep. He woke to Narcissa running her hand through his hair.

"You saved me," she said, giving him a warm embrace.

He decided to return it—a companionable embrace to begin the day. 'I wouldn't mind this every morning,' he thought again.

"I think my keeper is awake," she said.

The three emerged from the pile of rubbish and decided 'yuck' was the appropriate word. Potter and Malfoy returned to the Manor, and Higgins returned to the school.

The Revelation

Chapter 8 of 15

Be good and you'll be lonesome.

Mark Twain

The Revelation

Harry arrived early at the masked ball the Friday following the raid. He was surprised at the disappointment he felt when he didn't see the two sisters. He danced with several girls, glad for the distraction.

As he finished one dance, he saw the two sisters walking toward a table in the back. 'They're not even looking around,' he thought, feeling snubbed. He went to the bar and waited. Surely, they could see him. He was hoping they would approach him. After all, he had approached them last week, and there were two of them...practically a pack. But the only action was an increase in his anxiety level. Another girl approached him and smiled, and he asked her to dance. It reminded him that he had a fallback. 'If the worst happens, I can dance the night away with the available girls,' he thought as he walked over to the two sisters.

"Hi," he said, sitting down.

"Hello," they said coolly.

"I'm glad you came this evening," he said, wondering if it had been a mistake to approach them.

"Thank you," they said, still cool.

He paused to see if they wanted to start a conversation. He was thinking his social skills were not up to this.

"Where's your blonde?" asked the one with a cane.

"She's around," he said. He was annoyed by their coolness. He had tried to be friendly. And there were plenty of other women. "I told you she's not 'my blonde.' I can tell you the story if you like, but you seem to want me to go away. Let me wish you a good evening." He stood.

"You may as well tell us the story," said the sister with the full mask. "We're not doing anything else."

"I'm sure a lot of blokes would like to dance with you," he said, sitting back down.

He told them he didn't know if it was proper to reveal names, but he was Harry Potter. They said they had guessed. He offered that it was his dancing skills that gave him away. They agreed. They were the Patil sisters as he had guessed. The one with the cane was Padma, and the one in the full mask was Parvati. He said he was thirsty. They all decided on apple juice, and he went to the bar.

On the way to the bar a thought occurred to him that would not have occurred to him under ordinary circumstances: the two sisters were jealous of the blonde lady. 'It must be all these girls around that are making me think like that,' he surmised.

"We didn't think you would come back," said Parvati as he placed the drinks on their table.

"Would you rather I hadn't?"

"No. Please sit down," they both said.

He told them about his assignment: keeping watch on Mrs. Malfoy in case her husband, son, or sister appeared. They told him about the family apothecary and potion store. He preferred talking about their store to talking about Mrs. Malfoy. He found himself attracted to them again, and he remembered they were at a ball. Yes, he was dancing, but he was also with one sister at a time and holding her.

"Oh, Harry, we have to open early tomorrow," said Parvati.

"We have to open early every day," said Padma sadly.

"You haven't told us what you're doing at school," said Parvati.

"We'd like to hear," said Padma.

"Will you be here tomorrow evening? We really hate it that we have to rush off," said Parvati.

Harry told them he would be back tomorrow if he possibly could, saw them to the street, and waved goodbye. He resigned himself to waiting until Mrs. Malfoy wanted to leave. This evening she and the bloke had both worn a fleur-de-lis patch. After a few dances, Harry was sitting at a table reminiscing about raven hair, dark eyes, warm smiles, and the calm self-assurance of businesswomen.

He hadn't given much thought to the long hours of retailing. 'It's like teaching, but without the flexibility.'

* * *

Parvati helped her sister limp to the tub and listened to her moan as she sank into the water. "Did milady have one dance too many?"

"Milady could have danced all night," replied Padma. "Did mademoiselle enjoy throwing herself at the young man?"

"Mademoiselle was most restrained," said Parvati as she joined her sister.

Their high-caste thoughts turned the tub steamy and the vapors aromatic.

* * *

Certain incidents of the battle had come back to Jack Higgins, and they were disturbing, especially considering his current circumstances. 'Should I get it out and take the consequences, or should I live with it and take those consequences,' he wondered.

Professor Higgins had been pondering this problem for several days when there was a knock on his office door that he recognized. He pushed the problem to the back of his mind. It was easy to forget the world's problems in the company of Professor Malfoy.

"Jack, I've been thinking about something, but I don't know what to do," she said after she entered and seated herself.

"Okay," he said, thinking it must be serious. She had been entering and giving him a discrete embrace since their escapade at the masked ball.

"Can I trust you, Jack?" she asked. "I mean really trust you. Can I tell you something bad about myself?"

"I already know you have something of a past. Just being a Black sister and married to a Malfoy guarantees that."

"This is not a past problem," she said. "And it's serious."

"How serious? At one end of the scale, would it put you in prison?"

"Yes," she said.

"I couldn't put you in prison. You know that." He wondered if he could approach her problem carefully. "Does it have anything to do with the battle with the Dark Lord?"

"Yes," she said.

"Let me guess. I may be wrong, but let me guess. You were at the battle."

She sat silent.

"The Ministry is being punitive," he said. "I admit that if they released everyone from prison, some of them would cause trouble, but the Ministry is creating more problems by keeping everyone in prison." He paused. "There were many reasons for fighting for one side or the other."

"My husband and son were there," she said.

"Then you were brave," he said.

'If it's confession time, then it's time for me to speak,' he thought.

Narcissa stood. He thought she was going to approach him, and he motioned for her not to, but instead she said, "I have to show you something."

She removed her cloak and unbuttoned the bottom of her shirt to show him part of the scar. "I'm disfigured, horribly disfigured."

"Does it hurt?" he asked.

"Sometimes. Potter used to swipe potions from the school infirmary for me."

"Hell's bells, I'll have to follow his good example."

'There was no reason for her to show me that scar unless she wants us to be close,' he thought. 'Damn, things are going well, things are promising, and I'm going to ruin everything.'

"I have something even worse to tell you," he said. He waited till she was dressed and seated before saying, "I was at the battle, and I remember part of it that is going to make you hate me."

"I know we were on opposite sides, love."

"This is worse than that. This is personal."

Narcissa turned pale from his tone of voice.

"I remember your husband," he said. "He was in a cone of light. He raised his wand. I threw two hexes...one to his chest and one to his head."

Professor Malfoy left his office, strode down the corridor, entered the lavatory, and was violently ill.

* * *

Two mornings after the ruckus at the masked ball, Hermione Granger stepped out her front door to discover four bottles of wine and a note suggesting a small glass morning and evening.

She spent the next two days greeting people at work and noticing everyone recoil from her. 'I don't bite,' she thought. 'I have been biting,' she realized.

During the two days of clarity, she connected the dots: her rescuer at the masked ball, the appearance of the miraculous potion, and the disappearance from the wizard world of a chemistry genius.

Several evenings later, Hermione Granger stood in front of her kitchen sink. She was full of determination. She was determined to do what was right, not what was easy. "I. Will. Not. Be. A. Drug. Addict. I. Will. Not. Be. Beholden. To. The. World's. Foulest. Traitor."

She poured the contents of the bottles down the drain.

* * *

'Everything was going well, and I ruined it,' thought Jack Higgins. 'Everything was going well, and I ruined it.'

He was on his way to his first class of the day, repeating what he had told himself this morning and all last night. 'I didn't have to say what I did. There was no reason for me to tell her I killed her husband. If I had kept quiet, I could have had a wonderful relationship.'

He couldn't stop comparing his wife to a companion who would fight by his side...who had fought by his side.

'Everything was going well, and I ruined it.'

* * *

'It's such a simple thing,' thought Harry.

All Monday and Tuesday he had wrangled with the impulse to visit the Patil sisters at their store. 'I'll be bothering them while they're working ... I'll just poke my head in and greet them ... They didn't invite me ... They might like it that I took the trouble to see them ... What makes me think they want to see me? ... I'll be a customer; I'll buy something.'

Wednesday he decided that it was perfectly okay to drop in as a customer, but then he lost his nerve. He decided to go Thursday. 'This is ridiculous. I'm going to see them tomorrow at the Ball. This is terrible. They'll be angry I'm bothering them. They'll be angry I waited till Thursday to see them.'

After lunch on Thursday, Harry arrived at the Patil store, entered, and found Padma on her knees cleaning a shelf. "Hello, Padma."

She looked up in shock.

Parvati stepped out of a storage room.

"Hello, Parvati," said Harry.

Parvati gasped, covered her scar with her hand, and backed into the storage room.

Padma was flustered enough that she had forgotten how to get to her feet with her lame leg. Harry helped her up. He was thinking his visit was ill-considered.

"You caught us without our disguises," said Padma.

"I'm sorry," said Harry. He noticed Parvati had come out of the storage room. "Wait, you see other people as you are now. What's wrong with me?"

Parvati spoke up. "I suppose we wanted you to think we were pretty. We wanted to hide the fact that we're scared."

Parvati had touched a sore spot. He said, "Has it ever occurred to you that I might feel bad that I don't have one?"

"You do have one."

"I was a baby and had no choice."

The three looked at each other.

"I'm sorry," he said. "I thought I'd drop in and see you."

He stood looking at the floor, not wanting to leave, not wanting to stay.

"Harry," said Parvati.

He looked up.

"I'd" Parvati looked at her sister. "We'd like you to stay ... please."

"Yes," said Padma, "but we might be busy."

The two sisters brightened. "Can you work the cash register for us?"

* * *

Jack Higgins was thinking of ending his marriage. The gap between them was growing, and his in-laws' bitterness wasn't helping. A week ago, he had discovered he could have his wife whenever he liked. The influence of her parents had her acting like a conquered lady. The first several times it had been spicy, but it wasn't what he wanted.

His thoughts turned to Professor Malfoy. She was a member of a defeated army, but she was not a conquered lady.

Professor Higgins and Professor Malfoy were polite and professional towards each other, but that only reminded Jack of how much he had lost.

Jack Higgins tried to stop his thoughts, but they kept coming. 'I was weak. I wasn't strong enough to keep my mouth shut and live with what I did. I can tell myself she would have found out eventually and that would have been worse, but I don't know that, and being willing to risk eventual discovery is part of being strong enough to live with an aristocratic lady. Everything was going well, and I ruined it.'

* * *

'I've got the easiest job,' thought Harry as he sat at the cash register and watched the two sisters stock the store. He was surprised when they closed the store for afternoon tea. "I thought retailers never quit."

"We usually close for tea," said Padma. "We need a break, or we would collapse."

"But today went much better," said Parvati. You really helped, Harry."

He sent a message to the school. The reply came back amazingly fast from Professor Malfoy that there was no problem: She had been invited to stay for dinner. 'Are Flitwick and Higgins flirting with her, or are the old Herbology professor and the coach watching her like a hawk?' wondered Harry. He told the sisters he was free.

"You've helped so much we should fix you dinner," said Parvati.

"We're getting a lot more done since we don't have to stop and take care of customers," they told him.

"Do you like Indian food?" asked Padma. "We can make it mild."

"Would you like a little spice in your life?" asked Parvati.

The shop took up most of the ground floor; the next floor was storage; and the top floor was the living quarters. It had retained the rugged qualities of their uncle, a bachelor businessman. Harry sipped his tea and appreciated how the simple furnishings complimented the gentle curves of the two young women. They told him they had to come up here for tea. If people saw them in the store, they would bang on the door even if the shop was closed. "People may be banging on the door now," they told him.

After tea, Padma went back to stocking and arranging the shelves, occasionally checking to see how Harry was doing. He found himself fascinated by the aristocratic curves of her face and her bright eyes. "Don't stare," he reminded himself. Parvati, warm from shifting inventory, was also thoughtful enough to regularly see if he had any questions. Her perfumed aroma, patrician face, and sharp eyes had him struggling to maintain decorum. 'I don't get out often enough,' he concluded.

They closed at seven. "Dinner at eight," announced Parvati.

"It'll be simple," said Padma.

Padma looked at Parvati. "Should we show him our uncle's old room? It has a separate bath, and there are still some casual robes that our uncle liked to wear in the evening."

A half-hour later, freshly scrubbed and wearing a silk robe, Harry lounged in front of the fireplace with a glass of wine. He would have to fake his way through tomorrow's lectures. Reflecting on his current surroundings, he reviewed the Defense courses. No, they didn't include keeping your mind from going wild in the presence of friendly women. The curriculum had a huge gap.

There was murmuring from the kitchen. "Not that much," he thought he heard Parvati say. "You'll burn his tongue."

"I thought I'd melt a little cool exterior," said the other sister.

"Okay, you're right, add more," said the first sister.

He thought he heard some giggling.

Parvati appeared in the kitchen doorway with a big spoon in her hand. "We have some really spicy, I mean really spiffy, leftovers."

Padma appeared beside her. "We're going all out in here."

The sisters decided to arrange the dishes on a low table in front of the fireplace. Parvati sat on his right with her scarred side towards him, but with her hair down, it was not visible. She noticed him looking and parted her hair to show him the scar. "I think it's slowly healing," she said, "but half of it is always going to show, and the hair over the other half is going to grow back white." She sighed. She recovered and looked at him. "Want a little burlesque?" She looked at Padma. "Show him yours."

Padma lifted her robe past a shapely calf to her ruined right knee. "It doesn't bend very well, but I'm lucky I can limp around with a cane."

"We usually hide our scars," said Parvati.

"Not show them off," said Padma.

"You didn't mind, did you, Harry?" they both asked, concerned about his opinion.

Harry shook his head and looked into the distance.

Padma cocked her head. "Are you still thinking about not facing the Dark Lord?"

He nodded.

"Let's see the palm of your right hand," said Padma.

He held it out.

"Confused," said Parvati.

"It's really complicated," said Padma.

Padma took a breath. "We had to have an army to face the Dark Lord's forces. It's not your fault the army did better than expected." She paused before saying, "It would have been personal for you to have killed the Dark Lord. It wasn't personal for the army. It was kill or be killed to protect their families."

"You may have avoided a great evil," said Parvati, thinking about what she had seen in his palm.

"I'll think about that," said Harry.

'Yes, that's worth thinking about,' he thought, 'if I can stop obsessing about Padma and Parvati.'

"I propose a toast," said Padma, raising her glass, "to avoiding great evils."

"To avoiding great evils," echoed the other two.

* * *

Hermione stumbled into the women's lavatory and gripped the toilet bowl. She was sorry she had eaten breakfast. Then she was sorry she didn't have more breakfast to give back. She sank to the floor. If she vomited on the tiles, that was just too bad. She wrapped herself around the cool porcelain. She reached up and flushed the toilet to keep the porcelain cool. She clutched the cool porcelain.

An hour later, she was still dizzy but coherent enough to be glad she was a witch with cleaning spells. She took the rest of the day off and went home.

Two mornings later, she stepped out her front door to discover four more bottles of wine.

"I'm bad," she said as she violated all the rules and had a glass of red wine with an omelet.

'Good job, Severus, you evil genius,' she thought as her throbbing pain began decreasing at the first sip.

'With a sound body and a clear mind, I can track down the traitor,' she thought. 'I know he has weaknesses: he wants social interaction, he will rescue the brave, and he has compassion for the afflicted. And I know where to look for him. The wine is a superb vintage that makes me dissatisfied with anything I can afford. He is providing pain relief to the wealthy.'

She was resolute. 'It would be easy to let him continue providing pain relief to the unfortunate. It would be easy to ignore him and let his fertile mind concoct more beneficial potions for mankind.'

She raised her glass for a toast. 'We must be brave and strong in these troubled times.'

She washed the breakfast dishes and cleaned part of the flat she had been neglecting.

She was counting the feathers in her cap. 'I will hunt down the nemesis of the witch world as befits the most brilliant witch of my age. I only have to locate him: both sides will kill him on sight.'

As she set out for work with a light step, she thought, 'But not so fast.'

* * *

"I'm having lunch with an old student of mine tomorrow," said Flitwick. "Well, not that old. Why don't you join us?"

"I may as well," said Jack. "Do I know him?"

"Her. Hermione Granger, a brilliant student. But I should warn you she was injured in the battle. She's often in pain, and it's made her abrasive."

Flitwick had chosen a mundane village restaurant that was an unusual combination of rustic and sophisticated. The specialties were several stews, but Flitwick assured him the broth was nicely seasoned and the meat was braised, not boiled. The aroma of frying onion and garlic wafted out of the kitchen. The wines were decent. The two had arrived early and were having a glass to brace themselves for the abrasive Hermione Granger.

"Hi," she said pleasantly, appearing behind them. Flitwick introduced them.

"I'm glad you didn't wait for me," she said. "It feels like I'm dropping in on friends. How many glasses have you had?"

"This is our first," said Jack.

"Then it won't take me long to catch up," she replied. The menus arrived. "The stews are great," said Hermione, "but if you don't mind waiting, I was thinking of having the grilled chicken." She looked at Jack. "It comes with flat bread, humus, and tabouli."

"The owners came from the Near East by way of France," explained Flitwick.

"The grilled chicken sounds good," said Jack.

"Flitwick says you're teaching part time," said Hermione.

"A number of people volunteered," he said. "I'm surprised you're not teaching."

"Maybe someday," she said. "I hear they even drafted Mrs. Malfoy and she and you are friends."

"Just acquaintances, really," he replied.

He must have given away something by the way he said it because Hermione was looking closely at him.

Flitwick intervened. "Jack and Narcissa were on opposite sides. It takes time to forget all the old wounds." He looked at Hermione. "Is your group at the Ministry still active?"

"Don't tell anybody," she said, "but they have me going to the masked ball in case some ex-disciples are lurking there."

"There was a raid several weeks ago," said Flitwick. "Were you there? How did you get out?"

"It's all pretty confused," said Hermione, looking into the distance and tossing her hair. She wanted to change the topic. She addressed Jack. "Are you still in the Department of Mysteries?"

Jack felt as though the ball had been tossed into his court. "I've done several things. Eight years ago, there was a movement to revitalize Potions."

"Revitalize?" asked Flitwick.

"Our name for the school Potions course was 'kitchen-aid,'" said Jack. "'Stir twice clockwise; stir once counter-clockwise.' There's no information in those instructions."

"What did you do?" asked Hermione.

"We spent three years putting making potions on a conceptual basis," said Jack, "then we asked ourselves how one would reconstruct how a potion was made. We spent three years on what we called 'Analytical-Potions.'"

"I never heard about any of that," said Hermione.

"Sometimes, Jack's department is too mysterious," offered Flitwick.

"We wrote it up," said Jack, "but by that time we were burned-out on potions and the school was in turmoil. We took a rest break. I went into examining unusual artifacts."

* * *

Reflecting on the luncheon later, Hermione decided that Jack Higgins was aloof, distant, and arrogant. She considered a witch in a relationship with him. 'She would spend her life looking into those bright, shining eyes and wondering what he was thinking,' thought Hermione.

'I've got to write a nice note to Flitwick,' she thought, 'that thanks him for inviting Jack. If I offer to treat them, the three of us can meet for another lunch. Maybe something informal...we can fly out of the village to a picnic spot. I'm sure it's part of my job to learn more about the Department of Mysteries, and I'm certain Jack is a good source.'

* * *

Jack, his senses heightened because of his encounter with Mrs. Malfoy, had noticed that Hermione had been unconcerned about her scar and had been pain-free. She had been vivacious and sensitive to other people. Despite her joke about catching up, she had only sipped at her wine. She had been evasive about what happened during the raid and had given a flirtatious hair flip.

'Romance,' thought Jack, 'or drugs or both.'

Later, he mentioned having had lunch with Hermione Granger to people at work, and one co-worker responded that the holy terror of law enforcement had undergone a transformation during the last two weeks.

'Definitely drugs,' thought Jack. 'Probably pain relief. And romance, too, I think.'

Other ideas occurred to him. 'It has to be an illicit drug because other people are suffering without relief. Hermione must be getting the drug from someone else because she's not the type to keep a painkiller secret. What is this drug, and why is it a secret? Are the drug and the romance connected?'

The Assignment

Chapter 9 of 15

Only gods and heroes can be brave in isolation.

No one may ask for valor from one who is outcast and alone.

Pressfield

The Assignment

Hermione Granger used the Ministry connections to locate wealthy mundanes with medical problems. She asked for interviews and explained she was hunting a fugitive who was a wizard at chemistry. She thought that was a clever way to phrase it. The people she met were friendly and gracious to her. 'Not at all like the Malfoys,' she thought.

She paid no attention to the distinguished gentleman carrying his briefcase in his left hand as he walked by her on her left. Nor did she see his distinguished pivot that whipped the edge of his right hand to the base of her neck. She was not conscious when the distinguished gentleman helped a damsel in distress into the back of a distinguished automobile.

She woke to find two masked men holding her and a third in front of her.

"Smart girls don't bother their betters," said the one in front of her, and then he applied his truncheon fast enough and hard enough that she could not form a spell in her head...only scream until she passed out. She woke in an alley to find her pockets empty and her purse and wand ("What in the hell is this?") gone. They hadn't said it, but she knew the next time they would not stop until she was dead.

She made it to hospital and told them that she had suffered a bad broom accident.

* * *

'What a mess,' thought Jack Higgins. 'My wife and daughter are living with my wife's parents, the divorce is final the day after Christmas, Narcissa will never speak to me again, and now some Ministry supervisors want to see me.'

"Have a chair, Jack. Harry Potter ... you know Harry Potter, don't you? Mrs. Malfoy ... you know Mrs. Malfoy, don't you? You should. They teach at school, too. Potter has been watching Mrs. Malfoy, but he wants to quit...watching Malfoy that is...says he'll quit his job before he'll watch her anymore."

"I'm acquainted with them both," said Jack.

"Just acquainted? That's good. You've been doing splendid work, Jack, really splendid. We thought we would detail you to another department and you could watch Mrs. Malfoy...look for any signs of her husband, son, or sister. Actually, it's her sister that we really want. We think you can handle this. You've been doing splendid work ... splendid. We wouldn't offer this assignment to anyone. Will you accept it?"

"Okay," said Jack.

'Why the hell not? Let's make a total mess of my life,' thought Jack.

"When do I start?" asked Jack.

"Splendid ... splendid, we knew you were our man. What's today?"

"It's the first of December," said Jack.

"Splendid ... splendid, it's a good day to start. Here are the papers. They'll let you confiscate any property of the Malfoys, and they'll let you place any of the Malfoys or Lestranges in custody. And good luck, Jack"

* * *

"Would you like some fresh air?" asked Parvati.

"Would you?" asked Harry.

Harry had been talking and dancing with the two sisters. After working the cash register and observing the store operation one afternoon, he could relate to the ordinary events of their day. Now, Parvati was taking him to a balcony with a breeze and a view of the stars. She was still holding his hand even though they were no longer dancing.

"Your blonde lost her companion," said Parvati.

Even Harry had noticed. He had even figured out who her companion was. "Something happened. He's a fellow professor at school. They're cool towards each other now."

"A lovers' quarrel," sighed Parvati.

"Do you think so?" asked Harry. Then he noticed Parvati was looking at him as though he were dense. "Something's upsetting her," he said, remembering the evening rages that, one night, had ended with a pile of broken dishes.

"They'll get back together, I hope," said Parvati.

"I'm in favor of it if it calms her down. I've told the people at work that I'm not going to watch her anymore. Five months of that woman is enough."

Harry thought Parvati would chide him for dereliction of duty, but she softened and smiled.

"What will you do next year?" she asked.

"I don't know. The person teaching the first three years of Defense wants to leave. She says she's had enough of unruly students and 12 hour days. Teaching doesn't pay much, but I have room and board, and I'm tired of the Ministry." Parvati simply listened and nodded. Harry had an attack of conscience. "It's nice out here, but we can't neglect your sister."

Harry went to the bar for more iced fruit drinks while Parvati, with mixed feelings about his chivalry, joined her sister. He danced with Padma, and she wanted some fresh air. She rested her hand on his shoulder as she limped to the balcony.

"Are you going to leave the Ministry and go into teaching?" she asked him.

'If you tell one sister something, you tell them both,' he reminded himself. They were sitting on a bench. Somehow, Padma's knee was touching his. 'Oh, well,' he thought, but the contact had its effect. He felt close enough to Padma to talk to her. "I've lived my life thinking it was about facing the Dark Lord, but that's over, and I'm directionless."

Padma gave him an encouraging nod. 'Talk to me,' she thought.

"Maybe school just gives me a routine. It's easy to fill the day with lectures and grading papers." He paused. "And I can always tell myself that I'm doing something useful."

"But you are," she said, placing a reassuring hand on his shoulder.

Harry remembered Professor Higgins' observations on the downside of teaching. 'Where do those Ravenclaws get that stuff?' he wondered.

Padma interrupted his musings. "Tell me more," she said.

"I'm not certain about anything," he said. "Some professors are looking at other schools and revising our courses. Maybe I should do that for our Defense courses."

"Teaching is a challenge," said Padma sadly, "not like the routine of a store."

"Running a store looks complicated enough to me," said Harry. But Padma's friendliness had emboldened him, and she sounded wistful. "Have you thought about teaching?"

"We both have. But we didn't get a chance to try it. Maybe we wouldn't like it."

"Am I interrupting anything?" Padma and Harry looked up to see Parvati standing beside them.

"We were talking about teaching," said Harry, feeling a twinge at having neglected Parvati. 'Poor show, old chap,' he thought. 'They want to teach but can't.'

Parvati sat down beside Harry. "I think teaching Divination would be fun."

"I never could get the hang of that," he said.

"It's part intuition and part pattern-recognition, the arrangement of the cards or the planets," said Parvati.

"I hadn't thought about pattern-recognition," said Harry, thinking that Parvati may have been a social butterfly but that didn't mean she wasn't smart.

"Plus a lot of practice," said Padma. Padma was looking at Parvati. "It's pleasant out here, but it's a little cool. Some tea would be nice."

"Yes," said Parvati, looking at Padma, "some tea would be nice."

"Have I upset them?" wondered Harry, thinking they sounded a bit annoyed.

"I'll get some tea," he said. "You both like sugar but no cream, right?"

The organizers of the masked ball were eager for it to be a success. They provided complimentary tea, coffee, and sweet biscuits. 'I wish Parvati would just wear an eye mask,' thought Harry, pouring the tea. 'I'm used to her scar, and she's attractive. Padma's limp isn't that bad. I don't know why both of them believe they're ruined for life. Are high-caste Indians that finicky? They're missing out. The girls are good company.' He arranged three cups of tea and three biscuits on a small tray. 'I miss them when I'm not with them. I wouldn't mind spending tomorrow in their store, but I don't know how to ask.' He sighed. 'I wish I knew what they were thinking.'

The few minutes getting tea had given him some perspective. "I've been thinking about the store and teaching," he said as he handed out the tea and biscuits.

Padma and Parvati looked interested.

"The Ministry is nearly broke; the pay for teaching is abysmal. The older instructors are hanging on, waiting for it to get better. The new instructors have their regular jobs and are teaching part-time as a community service."

"You're saying we wouldn't be able to live on a teacher's salary," said Padma.

"You would have room and board, but you would have to wear old clothes, and you wouldn't have a social life," said Harry.

"You think we would have to quit and go back to work at the apothecary and potion shop," said Parvati. "But then the goblins would own it, and we would be slaving away for the goblins."

"We're slaving away now, but it's for our own store," said Padma.

"That's what I've been thinking," said Harry to two happier girls.

"Speaking of slaving away in the store, we have a big favor to ask you," they said.

"Okay."

"Our relatives have told us that the Holiday season will be very busy and we'll need help in the store," said Padma.

"But we don't know anyone who could help us, who we could trust," said Parvati, "except you."

"Would you?" asked Padma.

"I'll be glad to," said Harry.

* * *

"They tell me you'll be out of here tomorrow morning, but I brought you some stuff anyway," Jack told Hermione. "Here are some magazines, a book of puzzles, and a deck of cards."

"Thank you, Jack. Can you stay? No one else has visited." She immediately regretted complaining. "I'm sorry. I shouldn't have said that."

"You're injured and full of potions," he said, sitting down. "You're not yourself."

Jack had an hour before he had to return to school. They worked a few puzzles and played several hands of cards. He promised to return for afternoon tea.

He returned for tea, bringing gourmet chocolate-chip cookies. He thought Hermione was isolated but decided not to mention that. They played cards while Jack talked about teaching Charms, described a few strange artifacts, and mentioned his latest assignment.

"That's marvelous," said Hermione. "Perhaps you can catch Lucius or Bellatrix. I'm glad they assigned someone capable. I mean, Harry is capable enough, but his heart isn't in it." She spoke confidentially to a fellow enthusiast. "No one's heart seems to be in it."

"Isn't your department dedicated to finding fugitives?" he asked.

"They're playing at catching Dark Lord sympathizers," she said. "The prisoners supply us with lots of names, almost all of them innocent. People at work shadow some of them...mostly the pretty witches or handsome wizards. They gather enough information to chat them up. Any lack of progress is explained by the heavy workload of investigating all the suspects."

"Are you the only one who's serious?" he asked. He was beginning to doubt the broom-accident story and beginning to think she was hurt because she was acting as a lone agent.

She nodded yes.

"Can't you let it go?" he asked.

"Let it go?" she asked. "They tortured and killed people for sport. We catch and punish petty thieves who hardly do any harm at all. We let the high and mighty get away with murder."

"Yes, you're right," he said. "But I was thinking that your acting alone was dangerous for you."

"That's not the point," she replied.

"Your courage is admirable. It's more courage than I have," he said.

"You might surprise yourself," she said.

At that, she relaxed. She asked for his help on some difficult cross-word puzzles; and finally she became comfortable enough to talk about growing up in a mundane household and her adventures at school. He left to resume his second job of watching Mrs. Malfoy. She was thinking that perhaps the arrogant bastard had some redeeming features.

She pulled out her wand and banished the gourmet chocolate-chip cookie crumbs.

* * *

It was after lunch when Parvati stepped out of the back room and said, "Padma, can you watch the store? I need Harry to help me move some stuff."

Parvati took him to an aisle in the storeroom where an amorphous bag was wedged between some boxes on the top shelf. "I don't know what's in the bag, and when I try to get it, the boxes start to fall down. Can you hold the boxes in place while I wiggle the bag out?"

Harry pointed his wand at the boxes in turn while Parvati waved her wand, extracted the bag, and levitated it over to a table.

She was standing at the entrance to the aisle. She smiled and said, "I have you trapped now, Harry"

"What?" Incredible thoughts raced through his head.

"You're not going to escape," she said.

"Huh?" Those incredible thoughts couldn't be possible, could they?

"Jiminy Cricket, Mr. Potter, what do you come to the store for? Do you get off on retailing? Is it just Padma?"

"No ... no ... I ... I'm ... I'm in shock at being trapped."

She smiled and stepped toward him. "How shocked?"

"A lot," he said. 'What warm eyes she has,' he thought. He hadn't thought about it before, but he noticed Parvati was as tall as he was. He liked that.

She was as close to him as when they were dancing, but there was no music, only Parvati putting her arms around him.

More time than they realized slipped past.

Parvati stepped back from his embrace. "Thanks for helping me," she said.

"Did you get everything moved?" asked Padma when Harry returned to the cash register.

Harry was tending the register and remembering Parvati. He was also admiring Padma. He wasn't sure it was right to do so, but he wanted to hold Padma the way he had held her sister. Was Padma interested? Padma had always been the more aloof and serious of the two. Holding Parvati had made him more confident. He let himself watch Padma and nod at her whenever she noticed. She smiled back.

"It's tea time," announced Padma at four o'clock. She locked the store door, told her sister she was going to prepare tea, and turned to Harry. "Would you like to help?" she asked.

He followed Padma upstairs. Once upstairs, she put the tea water on with quick, jerky movements, seemed hesitant when she asked what kind of biscuit he would like, and stood fidgeting when she said she would like some yogurt and asked if he would. She flung open a cupboard door, tapped her fingernails on the counter, and said, "Could you help me choose a tea?"

He had to stand close to her to see into the cupboard. "What's your favorite?" he asked.

'I want to calm her down,' he thought. 'I want her to be relaxed and happy. Can I tell her that?'

"I'm not used to a variety of tea," he said. "I'm sure I'll like whatever you pick for us. You've always made good choices."

She turned to face him. "Do you think so?"

"I've always admired you," he said. 'Wow, I actually said that,' he thought.

"Really?" she asked, gripping his elbows.

"Yes," he said as her arms went around him. 'She's as tall as her sister,' he thought. He felt her warm breath on his neck. He felt her breathing become slower and deeper.

All too soon, they heard Parvati come up the stairs.

The sisters parceled out the tea, sweet biscuits and yogurt, and asked a favor, "Can you watch the store for us the rest of the day, love?" The two of them needed to brew more 'Calm Repose,' a popular potion over the holidays for kids excited by visiting relatives and returning older siblings, wives driven to distraction by company and holiday demands, and husbands weary of irritated wives and bickering in-laws. The two sisters knew they were saving life, limb, sanity, and marriages.

* * *

On the morning Hermione Granger was to leave hospital, she woke to find a priest by her bed.

"Am I going to die?" she asked.

"No, my child." He paused. "Not this time."

Hermione tried to cry out but couldn't. She was lying relaxed, peaceful and silent. 'Has he grown this powerful?' she wondered. It seemed natural for her to reach out and hold his hand. When she touched him, an electric shock ran through her.

"Do you hate me so much?" he asked.

She shook her head no. She couldn't even dislike someone at the moment.

"You do realize that I find you admirable," he said.

She turned her head to show her scar.

"That would not bother any one who knows you and admires you." He leaned over and gave her a chaste kiss on her forehead...a chaste kiss that expressed all the nonsexual love and admiration a wizard could have for a witch. "You now realize how careful you must be. You need a team. If you are careful and persistent, you are talented enough that your team will eventually catch me."

Hermione Granger found that she could speak. "Will you come see me again?"

Hermione Granger was thunderstruck. 'What am I saying?'

"A kind invitation," he said. "But soon after I leave, your head will begin to speak. It will tell you about duty. It will remind you of what is right." He paused. "It will feed you nonsense that you are disfigured and unfit for a companion."

For a fatal moment, the accuracy of his accusations left her speechless.

Then he was gone, leaving her feeling empty.

* * *

He could ignore Narcissa's hypothetical lament. "If my sister is still alive and hiding somewhere, then I'm going to go crazy pretty soon if I can't see her."

He could ignore her hypothetical threat. "If my sister is still alive and hiding somewhere, then she's going to go crazy pretty soon and hurt a lot of people."

It was the, "Jack, I love my sister," that touched him.

They would bring Bellatrix Lestrange to the Manor during the hubbub of the Holidays. On the Saturday morning before Christmas, Jack and Narcissa arrived at a mundane flat in Birmingham.

When they entered, Bellatrix stood. She and Jack looked at each other. Narcissa felt a sudden emptiness inside her.

"You killed the Dark Lord," said Bellatrix.

"I was among the group of people that killed him, yes," replied Jack.

Bellatrix sank to her knees in front of Jack. "I pledge you my fealty."

'Bloody hell,' thought Jack. 'Narcissa, you pillock, you didn't warn me about this.' He looked at Narcissa. She had a desperate, pleading look. 'Bloody hell,' he thought.

Jack looked Bellatrix in the eye. "I accept, Bellatrix Lestrange. I accept your fealty." He held out his hand and helped her to her feet.

"Do you want my wand?" she asked, holding it out to him.

He found it easy to look into her eyes. "No. You have pledged not to harm me."

She met his gaze lightly. "I have pledged to defend you with it."

"Bella," cried Narcissa, looking around. "You're not packed. You're not ready to go."

"I ...," began Bellatrix, still looking at Jack.

"You've been under stress and strain," said Jack. Bella nodded.

"We've time," said Jack to the fuming Narcissa. "We'll pack your sister's belongings, and we'll all go back to the Manor."

"It shouldn't take too long," said Narcissa.

'Relax,' thought Narcissa. 'It's over. He's accepted my sister. Everything else is incidental. Why do I feel as if I've been gutted?'

The two sisters embraced each other. Then Jack watched as they packed like any two women: pausing to admire the garments and arranging them carefully, remembering the sources of the knickknacks and wrapping them safely...two evil, deadly, dangerous women engaged in the sisterly completion of a domestic routine. How easy it was to accept their humanity and wonder how things had gone so tragically wrong.

'What's the charge, old bean?' he mused. 'Harboring a fugitive, old chap,' he answered.

He escorted Narcissa and Bellatrix back to the Manor and returned to school to give them a chance to settle. When he arrived for tea the next morning, he discovered the two of them had prepared a broom route that wound from the ground floor to the cellar to the attic back to the ground floor and that ran through all the halls. They insisted he join them, and the three swooped and whooped their way through the rooms, stairways, and halls for the next hour.

"Oh, Jack, you're such a good sport," said Bellatrix.

They would retire to their rooms and shower before having a late tea.

"And why isn't Jack in the master bedroom?" asked Bellatrix.

Jack stepped out of the shower to discover Narcissa in his room.

"You'll visit us often, won't you?" she said. "After all, you're now my sister's liege lord. She needs you."

"I haven't thanked you enough for trapping me like that," he replied. "I'll gladly set her free."

"Please don't," pleaded Narcissa. "She's more fragile than she looks. This is helping her cope." Narcissa offered inducement. "She asked me what you wanted. I told her you wanted her to recover and to be on her good behavior."

"That's not fair," said Jack.

Narcissa smiled the smile of the cunning.

Early Christmas morning, Jack, Narcissa, and Bellatrix, all in disguise, visited the grave of Andromeda Black Tonks. The headstone honored her for having fallen in the battle. Bellatrix fell to the ground and wept. Narcissa soon joined her. The sisters held each other as Jack fought to keep his composure.

* * *

New Year's Eve passed quietly at the Manor. Jack had left the office party early, having avoided the spiked punch. He arrived at the Manor two hours before midnight to discover Bellatrix and Narcissa waiting for him, the champagne unopened. They had time for a breakneck broom ride through the mansion. That was followed by a shower and changing into silk robes. They started a fire in the fireplace and opened the champagne.

Jack had told the sisters about the papers the Ministry had given him. They had agreed the papers were 'Letters of Marque and Reprisal.' He was a land pirate.

"Galleons on the port bow. Give them a shot of grape, me hearties," he said as he handed glasses of champagne to Bellatrix and Narcissa.

"Jolly good joke, love. Let's raise the Black flag," said Narcissa.

"Should we heave-to for boarding?" asked Bellatrix.

He thought fast. "No, we're impoverished pirates. We'd prefer your finest silver."

"Bought off with a few trinkets," declared Narcissa.

"What have pirates come to?" lamented Bellatrix.

They put on the music and danced. When the clock struck midnight, they toasted each other and the New Year. A few minutes after midnight, Jack was resting in front of the fireplace.

Bellatrix stretched out beside him and asked, "Are you tired, love?"

"I think all the new instructors are sleeping through the Holidays," he replied.

Bellatrix curled up around Jack; Narcissa curled up on the couch; and the flames curled up around the logs.

Jack woke briefly in the early hours. He stroked Bellatrix's hair. 'How can a witch look so peaceful and innocent and radiate so much power? It's raw, reckless power with no place to go, unless it's serving me, which it may very well be doing.' He looked at Narcissa on the couch. 'She looks peaceful and powerful, but it's power controlled by a calculating mind.'

He sighed. 'Bellatrix wanted to serve a reigning lord. Narcissa wanted to establish an influential family. Both plans came to nothing. Most plans do. Better than my plans though. I set out to fight for right and justice; I destroyed my life; and now I'm harboring the two deadliest witches on the other side. I was in love with the calculating one, and I'm falling in love with the reckless one. Sometimes, I think I'm still in love with the calculating one.'

The ashes of the consumed logs stirred as the currents of air moved them.

New Year's Day began bright and brisk as they made the pilgrimage to Andromeda's grave. The two sisters placed flowers by the headstone, spread a blanket, and motioned for Jack to sit between them while they passed the time in remembrance. As subtly as only women can, they shifted until they were close to him, until their fingers were intertwined with his, until they were resting their heads on his shoulders.

The strands of their hair stirred as the currents of air moved them.

'I'm giving aid and comfort to the enemy, and I want to,' thought Jack.

Back at the Manor, Narcissa cleaned and put away the blanket. When she approached the reading-room door, she heard Jack and Bellatrix.

"Jack, promise me you won't be here when they take me."

"What?"

"The wizard world will never stop hunting me. Never. My staying at the Manor means they'll find me sooner rather than later."

"We could go to the continent," he said.

"I could go to the continent and be alone. If you went to the continent, you would leave behind your job, your livelihood. I won't ask that. They would find me on the continent, and I'm not going to spend the last days of my life alone."

"There has to be something," he said.

"There's your promising not to be here when they take me. They're not going to let me live. I hope to die fighting. I'll put the wand to my head if I must. If they take me alive, they'll truss me like a chicken and slowly slaughter me while I squirm."

"Bellatrix!"

"However it happens, I don't want you to watch me die."

"I want you to remember me like this. And visit my grave."

The Storeroom

Chapter 10 of 15

The past is never dead. It's not even past.

Faulkner

The Storeroom

Jack Higgins was in his office at school and preparing for the next term in Charms when there was a knock on his door. His heart leaped. Could it be possible? No, it wasn't her knock. Harry Potter poked his head in.

"Can I talk to you?" asked Harry.

"Certainly," said Jack. "Have a seat. Pour yourself some tea. Are you thinking about teaching more courses the next term?"

Harry stared at the floor and then looked at Jack. "Yes, but this is about girls."

"My wife left me, Professor Malfoy isn't speaking to me, and you want to ask me about women?" asked Jack.

Harry nodded.

"On the other hand, if you want to lament about not understanding them, I'm your man," said Jack.

Harry visibly relaxed.

"I thought you were getting along well with the Patil sisters," said Jack.

"I am," blurted Harry. "But"

'By the gods,' thought Jack, 'we're all lost when it comes to women. I don't have any good advice, but I can commiserate.'

Jack listened as Harry told him how kind-hearted the two sisters were, how attractive they were, how responsible they were, how supportive they were, how much fun they were, and finally, how he shouldn't feel that way about both of them. Not to mention he didn't know what to do with one girl, let alone two.

The only suggestion Jack could make was to give them a massage. Harry could pay attention to both of them, it was chaste, and it would relax them. Jack thought it was feeble advice, but Harry left feeling better after unburdening himself and getting a great idea.

Several days later, Harry was back and in a good mood. "Thanks, Jack," he said.

Harry had been hesitant to mention a massage, but the two sisters had been enthusiastic once they understood what he was offering. When the after-work massage had been established as part of the daily routine, they had become friendlier and more relaxed toward him. It was almost as though they appreciated his wanting to touch them and caress them and care for them.

'The three are in the midst of seduction,' thought Jack. 'Do they know it? The girls might.'

Harry admitted to Jack that he was still adjusting. The prolonged physicality of a massage was a bonding experience, and it reinforced the ridiculous idea that he could relate to both of them. The girls had bought some books and wanted Harry to include a foot massage...an intimacy for which Harry was not ready.

Jack was amused. 'I envied Harry when he was watching Mrs. Malfoy, not knowing he hated it. Now, I'm watching her and hating it. Next, I envy Harry because he has the two Patil sisters even though he's in a pickle. The next thing I know, I'll be in a pickle with the Black sisters. No, it'll be more than a pickle. I could lose some body parts with those two. Then I'll really envy Harry.'

Jack was more amused. 'The quickest way into a pickle is to offer to give them a massage. I'm surprised I didn't think of it before.'

* * *

"It doesn't make sense that Bellatrix has a wand and you don't," Jack told Narcissa.

In response, she took him down into the Manor's dungeons. Her counter-spells opened a door, and they stepped into a storeroom. Jack was attracted to a Winchester repeating rifle and a case of cartridges.

"They're in a stasis enchantment, and they should be as good as new," said Narcissa. "They belonged to Uncle Walter. He was an adventurer who spent some time in the American Old West, as you can see. He died when I was a year old, and I never had a chance to meet him. I do remember my aunt talking about him. He thought worrying too much about the mundanes was as foolish as not worrying about them at all."

She opened a drawer. "This was his wand: sixteen inches, yew, cockatrice feather."

Jack thought few could handle such a wand, but Narcissa waved it easily. A breeze blew her hair back, and she appeared formidable. But she wielded the wand, not it her. She struck a drum-major pose. "This will look smashing with my school robe," she announced.

Jack almost protested, but caught himself in time. She was smiling. It was a joke. He did say, "You could have had a wand anytime, but you walked around unarmed."

"I would never betray your trust, Jack," she said, stepping closer to him. "Thank you for the wand." She was very close. "Thank you for my sister."

He could only think that he had killed her husband and she would never forgive him and he loved her.

"Aren't you going to say anything, Jack?"

"I'm glad you like your wand."

"Is that the only thing you can say, you soulless bastard? I chased you all over school. I've been waiting for months for one kind word from you, for one feeble attempt to see me again. There was nothing from you, nothing. You're cold and cruel, and I wish I had never met you."

"I thought you would never forgive me."

"If I hadn't forgiven you, you would be dead, you dumb idiot."

She took a breath. "I couldn't hurt you. I hated you. I raged at you. But I couldn't hurt you."

In a move braver than anything he had done on the battlefield, he reached out and held her. He heard her sigh and felt her relax. Tension he didn't realize he had left him.

Narcissa hands went from his waist to his back, from resting on him to pulling him close. She was lost in the wonderment of holding him.

They heard someone outside the door. "I seem to have interrupted something," said Bellatrix.

'Does Bellatrix know I killed Narcissa's husband?' wondered Jack. 'Of course she does,' he concluded. 'Do they think I'm a killer?' he wondered. 'They might,' he concluded.

As they stepped apart, an incongruous thought came to Jack, and he said, "The Department of Mysteries has been asking if this one-wand-per-wizard rule is nonsense."

"It's a shame that we're so easily disarmed," agreed Bellatrix.

The two sisters looked at Jack. "Uncle Albert," they said.

'Lots of uncles,' he thought as they led him to a cabinet of memorabilia.

"Uncle Albert was in the tea and coffee business," they told him. "He used to go hunting with Uncle Walter. The two would go by themselves so they could stun the animal with their wands, take a picture of themselves with their trophy, and then let it go. There are photographs in the library."

The sisters opened a drawer. "Here's his wand: sixteen inches, rowan, unicorn horn."

They watched apprehensively as Jack picked up the wand. They celebrated as the wand hummed in his hand and he smiled.

The two-wand idea was catching on. "Aunt Elspeth," said the two sisters to each other. They turned to Jack. "She dedicated her life to teaching young pure-bloods. She was nearsighted, and she was constantly losing her glasses and wand, so she had two pairs of glasses and two wands." They raided another cabinet. "Fourteen inches,

cherry, owl feather."

Jack looked around the storeroom. "I had no idea this was here," he told the two sisters. "What else is here?" He considered for a minute. "How old is this mansion?"

"Several hundred years," they replied.

"It's almost a castle," he said. "Castles have escape routes. Let's look."

For the next hour, the three of them explored the dungeon. They noticed nothing. Jack wanted to stroll through it again even though the two women thought it a waste of time. The second time through, Jack resolutely kept himself unfocused.

"There was a place I felt like avoiding," he said after the second tour.

"Then it's best to leave it alone," said Bellatrix.

"There's some nasty stuff down here," said Narcissa.

But Jack returned to the wall he had trouble looking at. He sat on the floor in front of it and dropped into a meditation level. After a while, he said, "There's an exit there."

It took half an hour before one of his spells worked. The wall shimmered and a barred door appeared.

"Let's try it," said Bellatrix.

"No, no, wait," said Jack. "We have to be more careful."

Narcissa and Bellatrix, however, were excited by the possibility of an escape route: they did not have to die trapped in the Manor. They dashed into the tunnel, and Jack reluctantly followed. When they were ten yards inside the tunnel, the door slammed shut, leaving them in total darkness. Jack heard Bellatrix snarl, turn, and flick her wand. The door flew open with a crash. The light streamed in.

'Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow, I will fear no evil: for thou art with me,' thought Jack.

"We should search for information in the library and be more cautious," said Narcissa.

Full of hope and energy, the sisters dragged Jack to the library where Bellatrix examined the shelved volumes while Narcissa rummaged through the drawers. But locating and opening the tunnel door had exhausted Jack, and he collapsed in a chair. The energized witches felt abandoned.

"Can't you help us look, love?"

"It's a big library. We could use your locator spells."

He felt tired and irritated. 'Can't those two search the library? They've lived here and visited here, not me. What's the rush? The posse's not banging on the front door.' Nevertheless, he made an effort to keep the peace. "I'll be okay in a few minutes," he said, leaning back in the chair.

"He's asleep."

"He's tired. You pushed him too hard."

"I pushed him too hard? He located the tunnel for you, sweetie."

"It was his idea, and he did it for both of us. You wore him out looking for a wand, sister dear."

"That was his idea."

"I suppose your snogging him was his idea, too."

"I suppose your flopping on top of him on New Year's was his idea."

They stopped to catch their breath and whispered, "We're going to wake him up."

"It was my best night's sleep in ages," hissed Bellatrix.

"It was my best hug in ages, and I like my wands," hissed Narcissa.

They looked at the library, concluded it was best to let Jack help them search, and decided they needed a rest, too. They waved their wands to broaden the chair into a couch and curled up with Jack.

'Bella's right,' thought Narcissa. 'This is comfy.'

'Cissy's right,' thought Bellatrix. 'We need a hug.'

* * *

"Harry, I have some really heavy jugs of extract to move," said Parvati.

Harry stood by while she decanted several large jugs of extract into small bottles. His job was to make certain nothing slipped or spilled. When she finished, she set her wand on the table with a sigh of relief and gave him an appreciative smile.

"You have the nicest eyes," he said as she stepped toward him. He brushed her hair, damp from exertion, out of her face to behind her ears. Her forehead touched his. They breathed the same air. The aroma of a warm Parvati surrounded him. As he moved his hand from the small of her back up her spine to between her shoulder blades, she moaned and arched her back. He experienced that strange, female combination of both soft and firm. She sighed as he moved both his hands from between her shoulder blades down her back to her waist. Her arms were around him, and her lips were on his and caressing them. She nibbled her way to his neck where she laid her head on his shoulder.

He stroked her hair while he sorted out his new emotions. He had always thought of romance as being attracted to the most beautiful woman. At the moment, he knew other women who were more beautiful than Padma and Parvati, but he wasn't attracted to them. He had spent enough time with the two sisters to know they weren't always sweet. They raged when they botched a potion, lost their tempers when they miscounted inventory, and snapped at him and each other when customers annoyed them. They weren't the calm, self-assured women he once thought they were. He was still coming to terms with his wanting to be with them despite their imperfections.

Parvati was wondering why his holding her was so comforting. He was a bit clumsy and would occasionally spill things and ruin potions. He was too aloof with the customers. He was becoming an absent-minded professor, prone to misplacing items they really needed. He certainly wasn't tall, dark, and handsome. Most certainly, he had no idea what to do with girls.

So they thought as they held each other and felt content.

* * *

"Harry, can you help me get some packages of herbs from the first floor?" asked Padma.

Part way up the stairs to the first story, Padma stopped to rest.

"You're working too hard," said Harry.

"I'll be fine," said Padma.

He helped her up the rest of the stairs with her arm across his shoulder and his arm around her waist...up the rest of the stairs with her leg against his...moving together up the stairs. At the top of the stairs, he did not let go. His other arm went around her and pulled her close. She was that wondrous combination of firm and soft, and her lips were on his.

A warm feeling flowed through Padma. Harry was clumsily embracing her and inexpertly kissing her. It was wonderful. She was making incoherent noises, and she was moving sinuously. The only thing in the world was Harry.

Harry couldn't believe that Padma Patil was holding him and kissing him back. When he had reached the top of the stairs, the contact with her had driven all reason and caution out of his mind, and he had embraced her and kissed her regardless of the consequences. He couldn't not do it. Now, her awkward moves and fumbling efforts were taking him to a new plane. He had never felt anything like it.

They stopped to catch their breath.

Harry noticed Padma was flushed, disheveled, and quite lovely.

"We have to get the herbs," she said.

"Right," he said.

He gently leaned his forehead against hers. The tip of his nose touched hers. They enjoyed breathing the same air. Her lips were moving over his face. Her lips were gently caressing him, and she was pressed gently against him, but her arm around his waist and her hand on the back of his neck had him in a grip of steel. If he had been the least rational, he could have told her he wasn't going anywhere.

Padma was floating and floating and holding Harry. It slowly came back to her where she was. She gave him one last squeeze, and then the breathless, happy lady said, "We really have to get those herbs."

He was hardly aware of what he was doing as he carried the herbs to the ground floor and returned to help Padma down the stairs

'Can this be true?' she thought. 'Is it possible I won't have to spend my life alone? Can I have someone I like, who likes me?'

Once downstairs, Harry insisted that Padma rest. She could give him directions for shelving while she tended the cash register.

Parvati came to the front, carrying bottles of a freshly brewed potion. She looked at her sister, and then she looked again.

'That's not fair,' thought Parvati. 'He snogged her senseless, and I got a little peck.'

"Padma, I have to make another potion, and I need Harry to stir my cauldron."

* * *

'Isn't anyone worried except me,' thought Bellatrix.

She was by the Dark Lord's side as they approached the Opposition army. The Dark Lord and his other lieutenants thought they had all the information they needed from the Ministry clerks they had bribed. She had wanted to torture the clerks to make certain, but the Dark Lord and others had been afraid she would kill them.

'I'm not the reckless girl I was sixteen years ago,' she thought. She was sure she could have extracted all the information the clerks had and leave them their sanity and no permanent marks. Something about their manner had told her that the clerks were not telling them everything, but the Dark Lord and others had only inflicted minor pain.

She had endured much worse than the clerks received. Once, after being tortured for a failure, she had hung limp, chained to the wall by her wrists. The Dark Lord had administered the punishment personally to his favorite servant.

After some minimal torture, one clerk had confessed that the entire Department of Mysteries had joined the Opposition army. 'The Mystery Department? They're a right bunch of wienies,' Bellatrix had thought.

'Speaking of wienies, where's the rest of the Black family and the Malfoy family?' she thought, looking around the Dark Lord's army. 'Lucius is here because he has to be. Draco was dragged here, that little poofster. Narcissa is here because Lucius and Draco are. She's estranged from Lucius for putting her son in danger, but she's still here. The Blacks are either hiding or traitors to the family that gave them so much. They want to live the aristocratic life of leisure and fancy clothes but aren't willing to do the dangerous work that goes with it.'

They were approaching the Opposition army when fiery globes arched towards their ranks. The globes were easily repelled. 'Amateurs,' thought Bellatrix.

Bellatrix thought the giants and werewolves had attacked the wrong flank of the Opposition army, and she still thought the Dark Lord should be more cautious. She ran to the right flank of the Dark Lord's army to see what was happening: his most trusted servant would perform above and beyond her duty. She found the captain of the right flank ready to attack even though it was obvious the giants and werewolves had not mauled the left flank of the Opposition army. She tried to talk him into sending scouts forward first, but he replied that he didn't dare delay carrying out the Dark Lord's orders.

She watched the attack. They were advancing too fast. Something was wrong. 'It's a trap or ambush,' she thought. She decided she would warn the Dark Lord even if it meant punishment.

As she started back, the fiery globes appeared again, but this time Bellatrix did not think they were amateurish. She had a sense of foreboding and tried to run faster. Suddenly, there were a bunch of lights and yelling people headed straight for the Dark Lord. 'I deserted my post,' she thought. 'I'm not by his side to protect him.'

She ran into the attacking force. Hexes stung her. It was like running into a swarm of wasps. She was on the ground before she had made any rational decision that she should get there. She was beside a member of the Dark Lord's army, a whimpering witch. "It's no time to whimper, love," she said, rising and grabbing the witch. She tried to run forward while pushing the witch in front of her like a shield. A cone of light illuminated them. Hexes tore the whimpering witch apart, and Bellatrix went flying with the air knocked out of her.

When she recovered, she decided she should circle around to be by the Dark Lord's side. On her way, she heard general shouting that the Dark Lord was dead. The Opposition army was closing in on her. She ran towards the goblin flank to discover they were retreating in good order. "Cowardly, traitorous weasels," she railed. But she followed their example and their path. The Opposition army was not pressing the goblins, and Bellatrix was not the only one who escaped by staying close to them.

A week after the battle, Bellatrix appeared at Malfoy Manor. Her sister's lawyers plunked her in a mundane flat in Birmingham.

* * *

Bellatrix was coming out of a deep and dark hole. She was chained to a wall, barely aware she was sobbing and twitching as the Dark Lord finished with her. She was rolling down a gulley, her body stung and battered by the hexes of the Opposition army. She was clutching at everything, especially her sanity, and trying to escape...from the wall, from the gulley, from the pain, from the disaster.

She was waking, realizing she was twisting and grabbing and clawing and kicking. She was awake, clutching Jack and breathing deep, ragged breaths. She was in the library with Jack and Narcissa, and they were going to research the tunnel.

Jack held her gently. "I have bad dreams, too," he said.

"But nothing like hers if her dreams are like what she's done," he thought.

She remembered her impetuosity had nearly got them trapped in the tunnel. She told Jack she was sorry.

"We were all a bit foolish," he said.

'Is that all?' she wondered. 'Perhaps punishment and forgiveness is for children. Adults accept the consequences and get on with their lives.' She returned to nestling against him.

Jack's arm and shoulder muscles were cramping, and he was overheated from the two, but he couldn't bring himself to disturb them.

'I've got to be careful,' thought Jack. 'I've been divorced less than three weeks, and they say divorced men go crazy the first three to six months. I don't feel crazy, but if I am crazy, I wouldn't, would I?' He shifted gears. 'What am I saying? I have one arm around Narcissa Malfoy and the other around Bellatrix Lestrange. And I like it. It doesn't get any crazier.' He tried to think things through. 'What am I doing? I'm not evil. I'm not domineering. These two were raised to rule the world. What am I going to offer them, their daily dose of warm fuzzies?' He sighed. 'That's me, Jack Higgins: career bureaucrat, part-time school teacher, and guardian of the rich and sadistic.' He shook his head. 'But I like them. I really like them. I do want to protect them and save them. What a mess. And yes, everyone's right, I am crazy.'

Bellatrix was nestled against her new liege lord, who, she was certain, would never torture her, who, she was certain, didn't want to hurt her feelings. 'This is strange,' she thought.

Even stranger was the urge to kiss his forehead. Bellatrix checked that her sister was asleep. 'Yes, my sister's asleep, and it's safe,' she thought. 'No,' she realized, 'it's not safe. What if he doesn't want me to?'

She realized her new liege lord could hurt her: he could hurt her by rejecting her. She had never had any doubts about the Dark Lord: he would certainly accept a Black sister into his service. Bellatrix now faced a new and unfamiliar brand of pain. But the desire to be closer to him was overwhelming, and he had been kind to her so far.

She lightly kissed his forehead. He responded by stroking her hair. Thus encouraged, her lips moved over his eyes, over his nose, and onto his lips. He returned her tentative affection. She looked into his eyes and gave him the warm smile of someone who has been accepted. Then she cuddled against him. Her ice core melted. She became warm and moist.

The Vamp

Chapter 11 of 15

To everything there is a season.

And a time for every purpose under heaven.

Ecclesiastes

The Vamp

"Oh, what am I to do?" she asked her cat, who, unlike its mistress, was taking the situation calmly.

Nothing had prepared her mistress for what she was about to undertake, and her mistress wasn't certain her skills and courage were up to it.

Her cat had seen her initial disappointment when Flitwick's letter arrived Friday noon saying he couldn't attend the Saturday picnic lunch. His injuries had flared up. Her mistress had expected Flitwick to mediate and be a common bond of trust as she enticed Jack into an active role as a law-enforcement officer. The cat had listened to her mistress complain that someone with his capabilities...he was certainly arrogant enough...could do more than passively watch Mrs. Malfoy.

"There are fugitives to be caught," she told her cat, "but there's the problem of getting him to help."

The cat learned that Jack's aid wasn't certain. During a conversation, when he had visited in hospital, its mistress had discovered his disdain for history courses. Jack regarded them as stories touting robber barons while ignoring the people who had made real contributions. Her mistress's heart sank: Jack would shrug off their struggles with the Dark Lord as a tale of glorified gang warfare written by the winners...complete with virtuous heroes and nefarious knaves.

"No wonder he didn't get the grades he was capable of," Hermione told her cat. "He didn't believe anything the professors were telling him."

"I even tried getting information about him from Harry," she confided to her pet.

"He's not so bad," Harry had said, remembering Jack's sympathetic ear and good advice. "But I don't know how sound he is. He is from the Department of Mysteries, and he did have a thing with Mrs. Malfoy for a while. Why are you so interested in him?"

"I'm not interested in him," she had said. "I'm just curious about a law-enforcement colleague and one of your fellow professors."

Hermione scratched her cat's ears. "All I found out from Harry is that his wife has left him, Mrs. Malfoy is still angry at him, and he doesn't socialize even though there are beauty queens at the masked ball longing for company."

Her cat purred as Hermione's thoughts went tangential. "Harry's not going for beauty queens either. He's interested in the Patil sisters, who appear to be good for him although I don't know what he's going to do with two of them or how he's going to handle their family."

"Maybe that's it," she said, changing to running her hand along her cat's spine. "Maybe Jack's not interested in beauty queens. I do remember Harry saying Jack, Flitwick, and Mrs. Malfoy had weird conversations that went over Harry's head. Could Jack like brainy girls? Apparently, Mrs. Malfoy held up her end of the conversation."

The cat lifted its head as her mistress stopped her petting and slipped into deep thought. "Okay, but Mrs. Malfoy was trained from birth on how to dress well and how to flirt and remain chaste. My parents are dentists; they don't do that."

The cat watched its mistress heave a sigh. Sometimes, class inequalities were hard to bear.

But the struggle with the Dark Lord had taught her to persevere even though she faced obstacles: bushy hair, small bust, scar, and no flirting skills.

"Oh, what am I to do?" she asked her cat, who twitched its tail in response.

The cat watched her do her best.

"Meowr," went the cat.

"Cheap," went the mirror.

She tried again, toning it down. She wanted to bring him over to her side, not seduce him. He wasn't her type. Then she worried her outfit was too subtle. "Men probably like cheap," she told her cat.

The cat listened to the frustrations of a sincere and gracious lady. "Who knows what men like? Why can't someone like me for myself? I'm bright, friendly, and loyal, and I know I'd be really affectionate. So what if I don't have big breasts?"

Her cat was in total agreement when she said, "Men are a bunch of baboons. Why can't they appreciate kindness and sympathy?"

Having achieved a harmonious state of mind, she set out to meet Jack Higgins for lunch.

She spotted him at an outdoor table, sipping coffee and looking relaxed and dashing.

'Bloody mysterious bastard,' she thought. 'How am I supposed to know how to dress for you?'

He waved. "Good morning. Glad to see you. It's wonderful weather although a bit cool. Are you dressed warmly enough? You look smashing, but let me lend you a spare cloak I brought in case it turned windy."

Hermione thought his friendliness was undermining her plan for slowly breaking through his reserve, subtly gaining his trust, and gradually bringing him over to her side.

"Thanks," she said, thinking his misplaced chivalry had ruined an entire morning's effort by providing her with a concealing cloak that was keeping her comfortably warm. And it didn't help in the least that she liked his consideration and enjoyed flaunting the fact that she was wearing a cloak a wizard had lent her.

Jack gave her a wistful look and shook his head. "I'll tell you, Hermione, I've had one heck of a week. It's good you showed up. I need some company. What do you feel like doing?"

"I haven't given it much thought," said Hermione as his openness made all her morning's wily schemes look shabby.

Jack's first choice was a place where they could order some Margaritas and then enjoy the stormy skies and watch the waves crash on the rocks.

"Ah, yes, grey, bleak, turbulent desolation," said Jack. "I can live the poetic conceit of nature matching my inner soul. The mind-numbing drink helps, too."

They were sitting on a bench with a view of the wild shore. Jack's relating to the grey, bleak, turbulent desolation warmed Hermione's inner core. 'I was afraid he would be sarcastic about everything and not like anything,' she thought. 'And the stormy shore is attractive in its own way. The mind-numbing drink helps, too'

"What else do you like?" she asked him.

She thought he looked briefly sad.

'I love my daughter who now hates me,' he was thinking. 'She's certain I killed her friends' parents and made Mummy angry. But I need to brace up. Hermione is trying to be friendly.'

"I don't know if we like it," he said, "but at work we're still doing the army exercises. The standing joke is that it keeps us from being wastrels going to seed after our disastrous victory. We have to be bright-eyed and bushy-tailed the first thing in the morning."

Hermione nodded understanding. She wanted to hear more.

"Seeing enthusiastic young kids is good for me even though I took a cut in pay to spend half my time teaching."

'Most of his friends were killed. His wife left him. He's still recovering,' she thought. She put a reassuring hand on his shoulder. When he didn't object, she left it there. 'His friendliness and my sympathizing with him are throwing my plans for vamping him into a cocked hat.'

They finished the Margaritas, and Jack suggested someplace sunny for lunch.

"We can do the Ruby Hat," he suggested. "Paradise is a sandwich, a mixed drink, and ... and a third item I can't remember. It's probably not important."

"Thou art but a dead man," Hermione told him.

"I know the Ruby Hat, too" she said. "The finger scribbles and our trying to rub it out and crying over it just smudges the ink and stains the parchment."

Jack was thinking she wasn't such bad company.

Hermione's first thought was that he could move his finger and writ something on her. Then they could rub it out. She wouldn't cry about it. Hermione, reflecting on her first thought, decided she shouldn't have had a Margarita and she would like another. He had had a bad week. She had had a terrible six months and a crappy Holiday.

"You're corrupting me," she accused him. "I opt for sherry, fruit, and a secluded spot. Or would you prefer knickers and biscuits ... I mean kippers and biscuits."

"I didn't know they came on biscuits. And here I've been eating naked biscuits all my life."

"They're only sold in gourmet shops," she said. "Only refined gentlemen buy them," she added.

An hour later, Hermione had poured two glasses of sherry and arranged some melon slices.

"And what do you like?" he asked her.

"I haven't had a chance to do much," she said. "There's the work of tracking down the Dark Lord's disciples, and there's dancing, but dancing is part of work even though it's fun sometimes."

"You mentioned that people in your department weren't enthusiastic," he said.

'Damn his willingness to listen to me,' thought Hermione. 'I'm going to prattle on about my problems instead of bringing him over to my side.'

"At first, they made an effort, but they lost their enthusiasm," said Hermione.

"My guess is they joined your department to fight the Dark Lord as soldiers. But detectives aren't soldiers, and soldiers aren't detectives. Now that I think about it, they're not soldiers either. There's going to be a mismatch until the people in your department leave for their true calling and they're replaced by law officers."

"Perhaps so," replied Hermione, thinking about his description. She decided she would like to hear more cool analysis accompanied by sympathy. The other wizards she knew didn't do that. It gave her a calmer attitude towards her co-workers, and it was entertaining in its own right. It brightened the day.

"Are you certain you're a detective?" he asked. "I keep thinking you're conscientious and you'll perform the task at hand even if it's not to your liking."

"Are you suggesting I do something else?" she asked.

"Not necessarily," he replied. "I am saying you're talented, the wizard world is in bad shape, and there are things as valuable as bringing criminals to justice."

"I sometimes think that getting people out of prison who shouldn't be there would be good," she said.

Jack was thinking that Hermione might have a bit of humanity in her.

Hermione was thinking that Jack might have a bit of compassion in him.

Hermione regretted having dressed cheaply. His sympathy to both her and her coworkers made her want to approach him on a more meaningful level. Could she still approach him? Would he be forgiving of a lapse in judgment?

She stretched out close to him, propped on her elbow. "Most people think that if I do something well, I enjoy doing it," she confessed.

"It's called will-driven performance. It's unusual," he said.

"Is that what you do?" she asked.

He shook his head. "No. This is going to sound immodest, but there are things difficult enough that no one can be ordered to do them and will-driven performance isn't enough either. They can only be done by someone who enjoys that particular challenge."

'He's more arrogant than I thought,' she mused, moving closer to him.

"There's a downside," he said. "People driven by challenges ignore orders from above and look down on work that's merely hard."

'I like it that he's talking to me,' she thought, running her fingers through his hair. She was close enough that she was touching him.

Jack Higgins, like any normal person, was willing to provide solace to the lonely. He stroked Hermione Granger's hair as she laid her head on his shoulder. 'She was an over-achiever in school; she's an over-achiever at work; and she's isolated herself,' he thought. He was recalling wizards he knew, trying to think who might be compatible with Hermione Granger.

"I'm glad you're talking to me," she told him.

"It's easy to talk to you," he said.

'She's too righteous for me,' he thought. 'She would never accept or forgive my sheltering Narcissa and Bellatrix.'

"You're the only person I feel comfortable around," she said.

"I'm glad you can relax," he said.

'We're incompatible,' he thought. 'I ignore a lot of the routine niceties of life because they're not a challenge. Hermione would never understand not responding to ordinary demands.'

"You have very high standards," she said. "I doubt I could live up to them."

"I think you have the wrong impression of me," he said.

'I'm a slug,' he thought. 'Hermione deserves a bright version of Harry Potter, a partner she can admire.'

'I need someone,' she thought. 'I know I have lots of faults and I'm not pretty, but I wonder if Jack could like me anyway. He talks to me, he listens to me, and he understands what I'm doing. He's not such an arrogant bastard once you get to know him.'

'I don't have to worry about this going too far,' thought Jack. 'Nothing will happen if I'm not an aggressive bad-boy. The double standard will save me.'

Hermione was nuzzling Jack, then stretching her leg across him, then kissing him, then moving on top of him. "We can go to my flat," she said.

'If this doesn't take the biscuit,' thought Jack, 'the one with knickers.'

* * *

'I thought only boys felt content and smug,' Hermione was thinking. 'I'm supposed to be fretting about my lost innocence.'

She and Jack were in a restaurant, and the salad had arrived. She smiled at him and picked up her fork.

'I'm comfortably quiet with him,' she thought, 'although I was loud enough an hour ago.'

She sighed, still confused. 'There was the physical release, several in fact. He's considerate. Perhaps it's the understanding before and the affection during and after...that silver-tongued devil. I'd still be in bed clinging to him and listening to him if I hadn't had to pee.'

After a sensible salad, Hermione was certain they could go to a quiet place, have a coffee and pastry, and decide on their strategy for capturing the outstanding fugitives.

"The two most wanted people are Bellatrix Lestrange and Severus Snape," observed Jack.

Hermione nodded.

"Perhaps they are together," suggested Jack.

"No!" said Hermione.

Jack gave her an inquisitive look.

"I mean ... it wouldn't make sense, would it? It would double their chances of being spotted, wouldn't it?" blurted out Hermione. "Besides, they're not compatible, are they? The Black sisters are such snobs. Sev ... I mean ... Snape wouldn't put up with them, would he? I can't imagine them being together."

"Perhaps they are not together," said Jack, having wild thoughts about painkillers and a missing Potions master, and thinking wilder thoughts about the emotional lives of young ladies.

"At any rate, we want to track them down," said Jack. "Lacking any other leads, we can keep an eye on the masked ball. It's an excellent place for secret socializing and clandestine meetings with friends and relatives."

Hermione did not look enthusiastic about the suggestion.

"Aren't you going to suggest that I get back into the good graces of Mrs. Malfoy and take her to the dance in hopes that her sister will try to contact her?" prodded Jack. "It would be a good way to watch for Snape, too."

"That's ... that's an idea," stammered Hermione.

'Definitely does not want to stake out the dance floor,' thought Jack.

"That might be too obvious," said Jack. "What about pretending that we're not watching Mrs. Malfoy closely enough? Eventually, she'll lead us to where her sister is hiding. Bellatrix Lestrange is the one everyone wants."

"Yes," said Hermione. "Yes, that's brilliant."

* * *

"Where have you been?" asked Narcissa.

"You told us you were going to have lunch with Flitwick," said Bellatrix.

"Flitwick couldn't make it. Hermione Granger showed up, and she wanted to plot how to catch Bellatrix."

"Do tell us more, dear," the two women said.

Jack related the essentials of the long luncheon, omitting some minor details. The three were in a quandary. Should Narcissa lead Hermione Granger and her minions on some wild-broom chases? It might mislead them into thinking Bellatrix was not at the Manor, but it would have them thinking that Bellatrix was alive. Hermione and her colleagues might conclude the wild-broom rides were a ruse and raid the Manor. Or Hermione and her colleagues might raid the Manor out of frustration at never catching Bellatrix. If they did nothing, Hermione and company might raid the Manor just to do something. The three felt as if the world was closing in on them.

Jack lamented that playing along with Hermione had created problems. The two women reminded him that he didn't have any choice. Any show of reluctance on his part would make the over-achiever suspicious.

In the midst of this despair, the most unlikely ideas collided. Jack outlined his plan. The two sisters agreed. There might be hope after all.

"Vous parlez Français, mon ami," Bellatrix demandé.

"Not yet," said Jack. The phrase 'sleeping dictionary' came to mind, reminding him that he was a half-crazed divorced male.

"Je l'enseignerai que le Français," a dit Bellatrix.

"Permettez-moi, si vous plait," disiez Narcissa.

"Je suis plus âgé et plus sage," Bellatrix affirmé.

"Je l'ai vu d'abord," a dit Narcissa.

'French isn't so hard,' thought Jack. 'I don't understand a word, but I know what they're saying.'

"Vous parlez Français, mon ami," Bellatrix demandé.

Do you speak French, my love?

"Je l'enseignerai que le Français," a dit Bellatrix.

I will teach him French.

"Permettez-moi, si vous plait," disiez Narcissa.

Allow me, if you please.

"Je suis plus âgé et plus sage," Bellatrix affirmé.

I'm older and wiser.

"Je l'ai vu d'abord," a dit Narcissa.

I saw him first.

The Parents

Chapter 12 of 15

Journeys end with lovers' meetings.

Arthur Conan Doyle

The Parents

"He's just a friend who's been helping in the store."

"Even your father knows better than that, dears," said Mrs. Patil to her two daughters.

Padma and Parvati had brought Harry to a family social occasion. Their mother's sister and her husband ran an import-export business of both magic and mundane items. The Brit wizard economy was down, but the mundane items were doing well, and the Brit wizard jewelry was selling at a number of mundane locations. They were celebrating their success by a catered buffet.

Padma and Parvati had been worried about Harry and the spicy food, and they had been worried about his fitting in, but he had sampled the food carefully, and he and their male relatives were deep into sports and the poor economy.

Trouble is always the unexpected.

"He's taking advantage of you," said Mrs. Patil.

Parvati recalled the time she had cornered Harry for a snog when he had helped her move some heavy jugs of extract. It was becoming more and more natural to corner him.

Padma recalled the time she had lured Harry into a snog when he had helped her fetch several boxes of herbs. It was getting easier and easier to lure him someplace.

"His chasing both of you is going to ruin your reputations and break your hearts," said Mrs. Patil.

Parvati remembered pressing her breasts against Harry and feeling extra tingly knowing that within the hour Padma would be pressing her breasts against him.

Padma remembered holding Harry and feeling warmer and damper knowing that an hour ago Parvati had been holding him and feeling all warm and damp.

"Well, as unsuitable as he is, maybe he will be decent enough to choose one of you," said Mrs. Patil.

Padma thought about Harry never again giving her sister that mischievous grin. The light left the room.

Parvati thought about Harry never again giving her sister that special smile. The air left the room.

"Be that as it may," said Mrs. Patil, "your father is still negotiating with Mr. Chanda. He might take Parvati, but he's asking more than your father can afford now."

"He's only forty years older than I am, and he can put a bag over my head at night," sighed Parvati. "Then he can go count my dowry."

"Parvati, your father is doing his best," said Mrs. Patil.

The two sisters had a contingency plan for such an occasion. The sister in question would tell her fiancé that they should marry soon because she was pregnant but didn't know who the father was. A week later, she would say the wedding needn't be rushed because she wasn't pregnant after all and she was in no hurry to change her life. If that didn't do the trick, she would reconsider and suggest an early wedding because although she wasn't pregnant it could happen anytime and if she were married the child would have a father.

Mrs. Patil patted Padma's hand. "Your father is trying his best for you, too."

The three women knew what the problem was. Padma's injury was hidden, but she could become a cripple, unable to perform her domestic and wifely duties. The two girls recalled that Harry, emboldened by their growing intimacy, had been insisting that they rest at the cash register while he stocked the shelves and brewed potions. Padma, freed from over-exertion, was moving around better these days.

"We should rejoin the party," said Mrs. Patil, rising to leave. "But you two need to freshen up. You look like your best friend just died."

Padma and Parvati wanted to locate Harry for a hug.

After their mother left, Parvati spoke first. "Do you think we're immoral, that we're perverts?"

Padma was a bit depressed and spoke quietly. "I've never asked you. It just happened. Do you mind that I snog him? I like it that he likes you."

"I'm glad that he likes you," said Parvati.

"I am jealous sometimes," admitted Padma. "You have the bubbly personality that he likes.

"I'm the one who's jealous," said Parvati. "You have the serious personality that he likes."

"Hmm," went the two girls, thinking their parents were pushing things too far and too fast, thinking their parents were too eager to get their daughters married off.

Their mother had driven them to a gloomy outlook about the two of them and Harry. "This shouldn't be possible. This shouldn't be happening," said Padma. "Do you think he's playing with us, leading us on?"

Neither of them had noticed any evil intent or mendacity. Harry was the opposite of a smooth seducer, and the sisters appreciated that. They were equal partners in a great adventure.

"It would be a great adventure if Harry really likes us," they both worried. "Maybe our parents are right. He can't like both of us, and his being with both of us means he doesn't really like either one of us."

They concluded none of them knew what they were doing but it felt right. They decided they should pry Harry loose from the party and take him home early. They needed some quality time with him before he returned to his school lodgings.

* * *

Mrs. Patil was upset. Her sister and others had informed her that her daughters' behavior was shameful. Mr. Chanda had haughtily announced he was no longer seeking Parvati's hand. She had done the best she could to stop the public scandal by having the Ministry issue an edict banning Harry Potter from the store. Now, other friends were telling her she was driving her daughters straight into Harry Potter's bed. The worst of it was her husband had been no help in the first place and was not supportive now.

"We can protect our daughters from Harry Potter if they want to be protected from him," he said. "Otherwise, not."

He tried to console her. "They're not going to do anything foolish. The two of them always talk everything over."

"Are you telling me my daughters will talk about it and decide to sleep with him?" wailed Mrs. Patil, who was not the least bit consoled by her husband's infuriating reasonableness.

It came to Mr. Patil that the household was quieter and life easier since his two daughters had moved to the store. He would never admit that to his wife although he was certain she was thinking the same and didn't want to admit it. He thought about someone voluntarily living with both of his daughters. 'Not if he has half a brain,' he thought. But even he had to acknowledge his daughters were lovely and could be most gracious. 'Young men don't have half a brain,' he thought. 'I know I didn't. What does that Australian bloke on the telly say? "That's nature's way."'

"I'll talk to them," he told his wife.

"And what will you tell them? Be sure to talk it over before you sleep with him and ruin the family reputation?" asked his exasperated wife.

"If they were sons instead of daughters, no one would fuss," he reminded his wife. "But we had daughters, not sons. Our daughters, not our sons, went to war. Our daughters, not our sons, are running a family business."

His wife wondered what in the world he was carrying on about. She, more than anyone, knew they had daughters instead of sons.

Mr. Patil had arranged to have lunch with his daughters at their store. He walked to the shop, once again grateful that his wife and daughters were no longer under the same roof...saving his eardrums and his nerves from another assault. He couldn't say that of course, no more than he could say he was glad he no longer had to tolerate Mr. Chanda.

* * *

"He helps in the store," said Parvati as soon as they had closed the shop and taken their father upstairs for lunch. "He saved us by brewing potions and stocking shelves during the Holidays. We thought everyone would be grateful."

"He reads and grades papers and watches the cash register," said Padma. "He can't do as much this term as last term because this term he's teaching the first five years of Defense Against the Dark Arts. It's a lot of work for a beginning teacher. We thought the family would appreciate that he's still trying to help us."

"He feels bad that he didn't face the Dark Lord. He's adjusting to living an ordinary life," said Parvati. "We wanted him to feel welcome with our family."

"We hoped you and Mum would accept him as a friend," said Padma, "not insult him."

"You two are becoming more like your mother every day," said Mr. Patil.

"Dad!"

"How can you say that!"

He reminded his daughters how protective their mother was, how the malicious rumors had hurt her, and how she would probably rescind the Ministry restraint herself once she had calmed down.

Mr. Patil listened as his daughters protested that they had behaved properly, as they agreed they could try to be more careful, and as they asserted there was nothing they could do if people wanted to spread malicious gossip. He agreed they had behaved properly. He did not mention the main problem: it was obvious both of them were attracted to Harry and Harry to both of them. He did not think there was any way the three could hide that.

Mr. Patil returned to his office. His wife had vented; his daughters had vented. He calmed himself by walking around and chatting to various co-workers. He reflected that by listening to his daughters talk about Harry without protesting, he had given his tacit consent to the relationship, but he realized there was no alternative. The restraining order from his wife had jeopardized family relations, and he had had to make concessions.

Back at his desk, Mr. Patil remembered that he had met Harry Potter before. During the battle, he and his wife had been part of the escort for Potter, Weasley, and Granger. The escort would make the final effort to get Potter to the Dark Lord. The Opposition army had chosen mature witches and wizards for the task, thinking they would see the task through to its bitter end. They had experienced the first rise of the Dark Lord, and they knew the terrible consequences of failure.

But the escort was not needed. When they heard the Dark Lord was dead, Mr. and Mrs. Patil, like others in an inexperienced army, had broken ranks to search for their friends and relatives. They had found their daughters with the few survivors of Forlorn Hope One and had taken them to hospital. Mr. Patil had returned to the battle field to help others. He had arrived to find a nervous army back on the alert after a surprise attack from an unknown quarter.

He had followed the trail of the Forlorn Hopes, sinking deeper into despair as he had passed the still bodies. 'The Department of Mysteries is gone,' he had thought. 'They

were crazies, but they'll be missed.' Mr. Patil had reached the spot where the Dark Lord had met his end. Mr. Patil had stood there, staring blankly ahead, overcome by the loses. He had become aware that Flitwick and Higgins were standing on either side of him and trying to rouse him from his stunned state. Together, the three of them had mustered enough fortitude to search for those still living and take them to hospital. 'There's a reason there's only one war per generation,' he had thought.

* * *

"Did you talk to your daughters?" asked Mrs. Patil when her husband arrived home.

"Yes, but you need to talk to them about contraceptives."

"Oh my gods, has that Potter brat defiled them?"

"No," said Mr. Patil. "And he may never, but we want to be safe. Besides, 'defiling them' may not be the right way to describe it."

"I get to do the hard part," said Mrs. Patil. "And what do you mean that's not the right way to describe it?"

"They may be serious about each other."

'Men,' she thought. 'They're useless. Of course it's serious. That's what I've been trying to tell him. How can he calmly stand by while his daughters are defiled and the family humiliated.'

Mr. Patil, having used up his emotional reserve for the day, settled into his chair with the evening paper. His afternoon reminisces about the battle had given him a somber perspective that was immune to scandal. If they were going to have a threesome, there was precious little he could do about it. What precious little he could do was to keep the fiery females of the family together. He ran through what he knew. His daughters had become re-acquainted with Potter at the dance four months ago. His best guess was that the two of them were snogging the living daylights out of the poor bloke. Under normal circumstances, if it were a pair, he would expect them to start having sex in about two months. A threesome would create more barriers to cross. If they remained together, they would start having sex in about four months...plenty of time for their mother to calm down and for everyone to be reasonable and prudent about the whole affair.

Mr. Patil was a moderate man who was careful what he asked of the gods and fate. He had asked that his daughters live through the war. He would not make another request until it was time to ask that his grandchildren be healthy. He would work out the rest himself.

Propelled by forces that baffled her, Mrs. Patil began massaging her husband's shoulders. She had been doing this almost every evening for several months, and the consequences were always the same. When his shoulders were relaxed, she changed to massaging his chest. He took her hand and led her around the chair to his lap. When she was younger, she would let an argument interfere with this.

She took it slow, beginning with stroking his temples. Her fingers let him know she was a gentle soul who was ready for any affection he would like to bestow upon her. Her lips and tongue showed a willingness to reciprocate any attention he decided to give her. Her body moving against his said she was a warm-hearted person who would return any passion he felt for her. Her whispered words said she was ready to receive him any time he desired her. Her tender embraces displayed an eagerness for him to take her any way he wanted to have her. Her deep moans let him know that he could do her...right here and right now would be fine.

Some time later, a contented lady served a simple evening meal. But times were hard, and she could not spend the hours after dinner relaxing with her husband. The two worked in the Ministry instead of in any of the family businesses, but they were experts at accounting and paperwork. After dinner, because the family could not afford to hire help, she and her husband did accounts and completed official forms for several shops.

Mr. Patil, not much the worse for wear and tear, was more convinced than before that saying someone had "defiled" or "taken advantage" of two Patil women would not be an accurate description.

Mrs. Patil was reconsidering. 'Maybe he's not completely useless. He talked to them, and the family is still together. He loves his daughters, and he's not going to abandon them. I hadn't considered how terrible it would have been if he had gone into a rage and disowned them. If they have feelings for each other, perhaps I should let romance and passion take its course. That's what my husband and I did. It's a struggle now, but we're okay because we have each other.' She sighed. 'Oh, this is going to be so embarrassing.'

Author and Beta Note: And so, dear reader, our characters are at the crossroads. Can Hermione locate Severus? Can Severus trust Hermione? Will Hermione pursue Jack? Who will Harry choose? Will the Patil family accept him? Will Jack survive the Black sisters? Can he protect them from Hermione? Can he learn French?

The Plan

Chapter 13 of 15

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He falls into a pit. Misfortune.

But if there is faithfulness in his heart, he will be blessed.

And along the road, he will rise.

I Ching

The Plan

"Meowr."

Narcissa flicked her wand.

"I hope you didn't do permanent damage," said Jack.

"I'm not dumb. I'm not a dumb blonde. And when did you become a cat lover?"

"Okay, I'm nervous. I've never burgled a flat before. Let's find where Miss Granger hides her drugs, get a sample, and get out of here. Are you sure Bellatrix will keep watch?"

"Bella will do fine," said Narcissa. "She went through a wayward period, but she's recovering."

"You're telling me the Dark Lord was a bad influence on her," said Jack.

"That's one way of putting it." Narcissa looked around. "This flat is something of a mess."

Narcissa was standing in the middle of the room, watching Jack.

"Are you trying to reason through where she might have hid it?" he asked.

"I'm thinking Miss Granger is young, intelligent, and good looking," she said. "She has a scar, but after a while, a lover wouldn't notice it."

Jack was annoyed she was wasting time instead of searching. "Are you trying to be jealous?"

"Should I be?" she asked.

"Miss Granger is an over-achiever with her head full of what's right and wrong," said Jack. "Miss Granger has no time for romance ... unless some paragon of virtue and industriousness should appear."

"Do you observe her that closely, think about her that much?"

"Others have observed her closely, I've talked to them, she's the enemy, and I think about everything," said Jack.

He wished Narcissa would stop talking about Miss Granger. He wanted to get in her drugs, not recall getting in her knickers.

"Wait, there's something out of place. Most of this stuff is duff, but that's a fancy wine rack," he said.

He went over the collection. "I bet this is it. It's an inefficient method of delivery, but it's safe and usually unnoticed. Let's get a small sample from each bottle."

He had brought various types of containers to hold whatever they might find.

"I'm glad you're standing calmly in the middle of the room and not helping," said Jack. "I'm a middle-class twit committing a felony, and my hands are shaking enough that I'm going to break something."

He bit back the rest of his thought that she was calm because she was an aristocrat who robbed people every day.

He heard her say, "I'm not a dumb blonde."

He filled the vials and turned to her. She was very close. It sent him over the edge and he said, "What are you on about?"

'I can't do it,' he thought. 'I can't risk loving her and losing her again. The first time nearly killed me.'

A mean spirit rose in him as he fought her tempting him with her proximity, teasing him with her sexuality, taunting him with the desperate remnants of his hopeless love and passion. His images of what he could do to her in the exciting privacy of a crime scene shamed him and reminded him he was a toad, a divorced toad deprived of the love of his life. He clamped down on his thoughts.

"Let's get out of here," he said. "And resurrect that dumb cat."

* * *

Jack was sitting at his desk, surrounded by student essays and preoccupied by the problem of the Black sisters, when Harry knocked and entered. Maybe Harry could reciprocate and offer some good ideas. Too bad he couldn't ask. Then he noticed that Harry looked devastated.

"The Ministry sent me a restraining order," said Harry. "I'm not to enter Patil Potions and Apothecary."

Jack nodded for him to continue.

"It declared me a public nuisance, and then it stuck itself to my office wall. I tried peeling it off, but it resisted. I left before I went into a rage and blew a hole in the wall."

"Someone is very angry at you, angry enough to want to embarrass you," said Jack.

"Paddy and Parvy wouldn't ...," began Harry. He stopped, realizing he had let slip his pet names for them. What would Jack think?

"If they're still 'Paddy' and 'Parvy' to you, they probably didn't," said Jack. "In fact," he said, going over to a window and opening it.

In flew two owls, each dropping a letter in Harry's lap. Harry tore them open before Jack could politely leave the room.

"It's okay," said Harry. "Everything's okay."

Jack noticed the neat and curly handwriting on the two envelopes and concluded that 'Paddy' and 'Parvy' had expressed their feelings about the matter ... and about Harry, who was enjoying rereading the letters.

Jack picked up his wand. "Let's go get that insulting piece of junk off your wall."

* * *

'Let them think I'm guilty of nepotism,' he thought. 'Let the lesser crime hide the greater.'

Beatrice LaGrange, one of Jack's relatives from Canada, had received a position in the Department of Mysteries. She would help Jack in the Potions Lab as he edited, revised, and published the old manuscripts: 'Principles of Potions' and 'Analytical Potions.'

This served several purposes. Beatrice could mingle instead of being confined to the Manor. They could use an existing lab instead of installing one at the Manor. If Miss Granger were to raid the Manor, a lab would be difficult to hide from her. If Miss Granger were to conduct a raid, it would explain why three people were living at the Manor since Miss LaGrange may as well use the spacious mansion and help Jack watch Mrs. Malfoy.

The Ministry, highly budget conscious, was content it was getting double-duty from Miss LaGrange. They had explained the situation to her. She had been reluctant to spy on an acquaintance who might be Jack's friend, but she had finally agreed that Mrs. LeStrange should be caught.

Jack had been honest with the Ministry about one thing. He could not face working in the lab alone. His partner, Edwin Fisher, had been by his side in the battle when they surrounded the Dark Lord. Edwin had vanished in a white, searing bolt. He hadn't intended to mention that to Beatrice, but she had watched him enter the lab and meander through it in remembrance.

"He was a good friend, wasn't he," she had stated.

Jack had always thought it was against the rules for a villainess to be perceptive and sympathetic.

They would begin by practicing with the lab equipment, reviewing the manuscripts, and trying versions of the stasis spell. They were certain Severus had protected his potion from mundane analytical chemistry...he would not want his clients to produce their own version of his product. Jack and Beatrice would need spells to keep the compounds from disintegrating while they analyzed them. They hoped Severus had not had enough time while developing his potion to give it protection from spell-chemistry.

* * *

Jack, like Harry, had protested spending all his time watching Mrs. Malfoy. The three reached an agreement with the Ministry. Jack would spend his mornings in the lab, his afternoons at school, and his nights guarding the suspect. Beatrice would spend her days in the lab and her nights helping Jack. Narcissa would confine herself to the school during the day and be escorted by Jack or Beatrice otherwise.

And dutifully escorted she was: to the masked ball on Fridays and on trips of well-mannered frivolity on Saturdays. Very dutiful were her escorts.

* * *

"There are Professors Higgins and Malfoy," said Harry, pointing out a pair walking to lunch. "These days, they're civil to each other at least."

Hermione was visiting the school. She told others it was to check on Mrs. Malfoy. She told herself it was to visit Harry. A chance meeting with Jack didn't figure in her plans at all.

Hermione watched the pair stroll casually through the corridor with Professor Malfoy chatting and looking at Professor Higgins. She remembered chatting and looking at Jack that way. She blushed as she remembered more. A sharp sensation stabbed through her as she watched Narcissa. 'She's fawning over him,' thought Hermione. Harry seemed not to notice. 'How thick can you get?' thought Hermione.

"Let's go to the village. It's my treat," said Hermione, suddenly aware that she could not endure the sight of Jack having lunch with that purebred feline in heat.

Halfway through his corned beef sandwich, Harry said, "What are you brooding about?"

Hermione had been thinking about Jack and Narcissa, and this had led to other thoughts. "I'm thinking that witches and wizards can't stay away from wizard society or their relatives forever. Eventually, if Bellatrix is still alive, she'll come to Malfoy Manor to be with her sister. We can catch her."

Harry shrugged.

"She killed your godfather," said Hermione.

"I haven't forgotten that," he said. "She killed and tortured a lot of people. I'm not going to live my life for revenge."

"This is justice," said Hermione.

"What's justice?" asked Harry. "Revenge by a third party? Revenge by the state, by divine intervention?"

Hermione fought off feelings of despair. Everybody was spending too much time around Ravensclaws and thinking everything to death. Harry, who she once counted on, was obviously letting himself be influenced by the Patil sisters, who didn't want to look beyond their cash register.

'Jack Higgins is hopeless, too,' she thought. 'And I expended all that effort on him, thinking he would help capture Bellatrix.' It was obvious that Jack was in the clutches of a lady without morals and no decent woman could compete. It was up to her, and her alone, to put things right. She changed the topic and asked Harry about his Defense courses.

* * *

Jack was afraid breakfast would be awkward, and he paid extra attention to his attire and grooming as he braced himself to play the self-possessed gentleman. He found the two women on the patio having coffee. First Bellatrix and then Narcissa caught his eye. "Good morning, Trixie. Good morning, Narcy."

They rose, embraced him, and whispered, "Good morning, dear," in his ear. They had him sit between them.

Narcissa placed her hand on his shoulder and looked content as she sipped her coffee and remembered how considerate he had been to her early last evening. When she had wrapped herself around him and pulled him close, he had asked her to make love to him. She still felt peaceful even though he had left her to spend the rest of the night with her sister. Tonight, the roles would be reversed...except she didn't want to wait until tonight. Perhaps after lunch he would be kind, and they could revisit the part of her life she had thought gone forever. She would be happy with being cuddled.

Bellatrix was determined to act proper. She held her cup with one hand and her saucer with the other, her face was composed with a calmness she had never felt before, but her knees had a mind of their own, and they were pressing into his leg. Last night, her whole body had had a mind of its own. When she had been half way to mindlessness, he had asked her to make love to him. She had not been prepared for her response. She was looking forward to this evening when he would, once again, torment her with the piercing agony that led to ecstasy. But she didn't want to wait. Perhaps after breakfast he would be considerate enough to spend some more intimate time with her. He didn't have to be superhuman...just holding her would be sufficient. She didn't think she could wait until this evening to relive what she had believed to have died forever.

"There was no help for it," thought Jack as he recalled yesterday afternoon. It had been Friday, and he and Narcissa had returned from school. Bellatrix had raged about being left all alone. Narcissa had raged about unruly kids and stupid faculty. Jack had wanted something stronger than tea for tea. Both sisters had complained about his unfeeling attitude. He had snapped and shouted that he would take care of their tender feelings as soon as he could feel something himself. He had braced himself for being hexed by both of them. But they had each taken one of his arms, had led him to the couch, and had sat on either side of him.

"We're asking a lot from you," Bellatrix had said.

He had immediately felt bad about shouting at them. He had taken their hands and said, "We have rough patches, but I'm glad I'm here with the two of you."

"We've been wondering," Narcissa had said. "Do you like both of us?"

"Very much," he had said. He groped for his feelings. What were they?

"I know I shouldn't feel this way, and I shouldn't say it, but I want both of you around." He had paused. "Life would be empty without the two of you."

"You could take care of us," Narcissa had said softly.

"Yes," Bellatrix had said. "But I don't know if I can. A lot of me is dead. I don't know if I can anymore."

It had gradually dawned on Jack what they were talking about: there had been tension and frustration. He had been keeping his growing attraction for the two hidden because he had assumed he was a crazy divorced male.

"I am very fond of both of you," he had said. He hadn't told them he was falling in love with them because it was weird to say it to two women at once. 'Perhaps when we're alone,' he had thought.

"I'm a mess, love," Bellatrix had said. "If you're going to care for us, it might be better to start with Cissy."

"We're not going to leave you out," Jack had said, surprising himself.

'I don't know if I can deliver on that promise or not,' he had thought.

It had been an important occasion, and they were adults, not twittering adolescents. Jack had remembered to treat them as ladies. They had had tea where they reaffirmed their social relationship. What was going to happen would be a normal part of their everyday lives. They had listened to Bellatrix and the day's adventures in spell-chemistry, to Narcissa and the dense faculty, and to Jack and the mountain of papers to grade. Jack and Narcissa had walked hand in hand to Jack's room. The three had had dinner. Jack and Bellatrix had walked hand in hand to Jack's room where Bellatrix had spent the night.

Jack was certain he was committing suicide: two women ... two sisters ... the two Black sisters. Lovely suicide, though.

* * *

Jack was in his office, thinking of the pit he was sliding into. 'I'm busy helping Trixie escape and Narcy recover the Malfoy fortune. I don't have any time to work for my own future well-being. The romance phase will wear off, and their gratitude will vanish. How long before they revert to type? How long before they want things I cannot afford? How long before they become their mother's daughters? My only hope is to make them no promises, give them no reason to believe I will stay with them, and leave as soon as I graciously can.'

* * *

Jack and Narcissa left school, arrived at the Manor gate, and stopped in alarm. Something was wrong. The wards had been breached. They looked at each other with the same question, "Is Bellatrix okay?"

They stood in a small clearing, Jack standing guard with his wands out and Narcissa casting for intruders and signs of her sister. Finally, Narcissa called out, "I think it's safe, Beatrice."

Bellatrix stepped out from behind a tree. They decided Jack should enter the house because he was not a fugitive. He would give it a quick once over and then return. He told the sisters to escape if they heard a commotion.

"Not a chance, love," they said.

He told them they were being foolish, but they gave him a disdainful look that said they weren't listening to any nonsense about abandoning him.

Jack made a tour and found nothing. Narcissa, more familiar with the Manor, made an inspection and found nothing. The three gave the mansion a thorough search and decided the intrusion had been an attempt to search the place without triggering any alarms. But they knew it was the first raid and more extensive raids would follow. Miss Granger was on the move. England was no longer safe.

The Attack

Who by fire

Who by water

Who in the sunshine

Who in the nighttime

Cohen

The Attack

The morning dawned bright and inviting. The young lady made her way down the stairs to the street and on her way to work...greeting her neighbors and the early morning tradesmen. Another lovely lady, well-attired, watched the first lady walk along a quiet boulevard.

"AVADA ... "

The well-attired lady's wand hand was grabbed, and a hand clamped over her mouth as she was hauled back into the alley.

A moment later, the well-attired lady turned to her abductor in fury. "She's going to kill us! She's going to kill us, Jack!"

Her fury built. "Don't you care for us? Do you want to see us dead? Do you want to see me dead? Why don't you just take my wand and kill me? Take my wand and kill me, Jack."

Her fury boiled over. "The Dark Lord was weak. He was weak. Do you hear me? He could have killed Potter a dozen times. A dozen. He could have killed the whole damn trio. But no, he had to play around, playing with petty revenge. He had to send a boy. He should have sent a witch. The Dark Lord threw it away trying to set up pretty scenarios. It's not pretty scenarios. It's them or us."

"Oh, Jack, you're going to kill us," wailed Bellatrix, grabbing his cloak and shaking it in frustrated anguish.

'Damn all the gods, she might be right,' thought Jack. "I don't want to make the mistake the Dark Lord made of not listening to Trixie."

'But I couldn't live with myself if I let Trixie or Narcy do it,' he thought as he folded Trixie in his arms.

'I'll kill the meddling witch,' he decided.

* * *

"Witch seeking Potions master to stir her cauldron."

"No, no, no," muttered Hermione to herself. "I've got to be more subtle."

She had had the brilliant idea of contacting Severus through the Personal Ads of the more popular newspapers. She had thought it would be easy to place innocuous looking, but identifying, ads in the mundane papers even though doing the same in the wizard publications would be trickier. The whole process, however, was proving more difficult than she had imagined.

'Maybe if I adapted some of the usual ads,' she thought. 'Let's see.'

"Enjoy walks on the beach and candlelit dinners. Appreciate sense of humor."

'There's a start,' she decided. 'All that's needed is a bit of rephrasing.'

"Enjoy dank old dungeons and brooding evening meals. Humor is overrated."

'I think I'm getting the hang of this,' she concluded.

* * *

"You're being careful, aren't you?" she accused him.

'Marvelous,' he thought. 'The first thing in the morning, a squabble.' He sipped his coffee, waiting for more accusations. If he were lucky, they would contain enough information to let him know why he was in trouble.

"You wake up and double check to see who's in bed with you before saying anything. I wouldn't mind if you called me Narcy, and Cissy wouldn't mind if you called her Trixie. You act like you're afraid you'll call us something else."

"Oh, Hermione, you've got to let me get more sleep," he moaned.

"That's carrying humor too far, love. The cream in my coffee curdled."

She showed him her cup. It had curdled. There are disadvantages to being a witch.

He snapped his fingers, and cream appeared in his coffee. He handed it to her and rubbed her shoulders. It was another morning at the Manor.

He showered, thinking he shouldn't appear in front of a bunch of kids reeking of Trixie and sex, but then he remembered she had worn his shirt last night. He borrowed it back, thinking he was lucky the school allowed only cats, owls, and toads...a hound would mean instant exposure. He mentally reviewed the faculty roster. No, no werewolves.

Contrary to his expectations about villainesses, Trixie was a morning person and a gifted and meticulous experimenter. She got the other two moving in the morning and spent the day working on the painkiller potion swiped from Miss Granger's flat.

'The patience of a saint,' Jack had joked to himself.

He occasionally wondered why Miss Granger had not tried to develop such a beneficial potion.

The combination of Trixie and Jack in the lab and Narcy and Jack blocking out lines of investigation had them identifying the compounds in the painkiller within a month. Luckily for them, Severus had been rushed. He had modified a mundane narcotic, and he had not protected his potion from spell-chemistry. Now the three were working on reproducing the compounds and protecting them from both mundane and magic analysis.

The project and the threat of Miss Granger were taking their toll. By the time Jack, Narcissa, and Bellatrix arrived back at the Manor for afternoon tea, the three sought release in action. It was wild broom rides and ferocious spell casting. Jack had obtained a copy of the confidential manual for the law-enforcement division, and they had worked on the counter-spells until they were doing them in their sleep. They expected to face overwhelming odds. In case they couldn't make it to the escape tunnel, they practiced a mobile defense designed to separate and pick off their opponents.

The exercises were followed by showers and Jack giving a massage to the two women. There usually wasn't much left in Jack, and the massages were occasionally perfunctory, but he dared not skip them. What he had told Potter was true: it was a chaste way to pay attention to both of them, and it contributed to a harmonious evening. It relaxed them enough that they usually decided who was going to spend the night with Jack while getting their massage. Not that there was much to decide. It was almost always an every other night arrangement. The ladies thought that a bit unromantic, but neither wanted to give up her night. After years alone or estranged, they were beginning to like sleeping with their lover and greeting him the first thing in the morning.

Their tolerance for a threesome, their dedication to the task at hand, and their enthusiasm for the world around them had Jack enamored as never before. Every night he participated in the transformation of a professional companion into a loving companion.

Not for a single second did he believe it would be okay to begin the morning with a wrong name.

* * *

Several weeks later, Jack was in his office reviewing what Trixie had said after she returned from a trip to Canada. The Quebec wizards had settled around Montmagny, a village on the St. Lawrence River, and the Quebecois had no interest in the recent Brit civil war. The district shop had offered Trixie a position as a Potions mistress, and it would like to market the painkiller developed by her research-oriented husband, Jack Holt.

Jack thought about the next two years as planned by Trixie and Narcy. Trixie was certain she could set aside her aristocratic habits and play the part of a professional for two years. It was better than being a fugitive...and she was an early riser as she reminded them. Narcy thought that in two years she could regain active control of the Malfoy assets and transfer them to the Americas. Jack could spend a month in Quebec brewing potion for Eastern Canada and the Northeastern United States while continuing his potion research. Then he could spend a month in Great Britain helping manage and transfer the estate while continuing his potion research. The two women were certain he could handle all this and keep two witches with a growing amorous appetite happy.

"You're very capable, Jack."

Narcy had smugly informed him that Trixie had February.

'Two sisters,' thought Jack. 'Trixie is gentle and loving, and she likes her sex life, her new-found sex life. Narcy is more tightly wound, but when she lets go, it's like a coiled spring.'

There was a knock, and Narcissa entered. The approaching major change in her life had her in a serious mood.

"Do you love me?" she asked.

"Yes."

"Do you love my sister?"

"Partly. Somewhat."

"That's what my sister thinks. You're treating her very well. She really likes you."

"If this goes on much longer, I won't be able to leave either one of you. Perhaps things will change when we get to Quebec. Your sister will have a chance to meet people."

'Yes, things might change,' thought Narcissa. 'You could fall in love with my sister instead of me.'

"If this goes on much longer, Bella and I will never want it to change," she said.

'I'm being drawn into a long term relationship with them,' thought Jack. 'I know better. I know they're aristocrats who'll never accept me, but I can't resist them.'

* * *

"Is he practicing again?"

"Yes."

Even the Black sisters had to suppress a shudder. They had checked the storeroom and discovered Grandfather Vogel's wand was missing. The two sisters assumed the wand had called to Jack when he entered the storeroom in his current state of mind. Grandfather Vogel had often been called 'The Bird' because he had sent many souls flying.

One misty Friday evening, Jack announced that he was restless, he would take a short walk, and he would be back soon.

Two sisters, fully cloaked and determined, met him in the foyer. "You're not going alone, love."

* * *

Hermione, giving up on romantic relations, was being one of 'the boys.' This Friday evening, she had gone bar-hopping with Edmund and Rogers, two new members of the Ministry.

The mist and a cloak swirled out in front of her.

"Hermione Granger."

"Huh?"

"Fill your hand, you Gryffindor witch."

"What?"

Time slowed for Hermione. She saw Edmund step in front of her and be knocked aside. She saw Roger step in front of her and then land unconscious. She hurled her strongest defensive spell and then went flying backwards to land temporarily stunned.

* * *

Casting the three spells had brought him to his knees.

At the last moment, Jack could not bring himself to kill. The first two curses hurt him as he fought to restrain their lethality. He was empty when the third curse tore out of him and tore him up.

His two ladies lifted him from where he knelt and took him home.

"Say something, Jack"

"That wand must be taken back to the Manor and cast into the abyss from whence it came."

"Yeah, right," said Trixie, checking his pulse.

"Sure," said Narcy, shining a light into his eyes and looking for movement.

"Jack, are you there?"

'Oh, Jack,' they thought. If he did not recover, that Hermione bitch was dead, her family was dead, her friends were dead. Everyone would rue the day that Hermione bitch had not received a fatal curse.

The two witches placed Grandfather Vogel's wand on a bed of charcoal in a circle of stones. They aimed their wands by looking in smoky mirrors as the wand and charcoal were utterly consumed and the rocks turned to slag. Then they brought Jack to his room. Trixie held his head in her lap, and Narcy sponged his brow.

"We did not finish off the Granger," they told him. "We did not think you would want us to."

"Yes, yes," he said, squeezing their hands in gratitude. "I am very proud of you."

"I wanted to poke her in the eye," said Bellatrix.

"How are you?" they asked.

"I'll recover. I should not have tried to use that wand or those curses."

His two ladies felt relief. He would be okay, and he had not stained his soul. They brought him several brandies and then snuggled around him to make certain he slept peacefully.

* * *

There were nine people in the room for the four-way contract on the painkiller potion. Padma, Parvati, an uncle on their father's side, and a nephew on their mother's side were the four co-owners of the Patil Potion and Apothecary Shop. There was a Ministry official from Social Services, one from Contracts and Records, and one to preside and witness. Harry Potter and Jack Higgins represented themselves.

Each of them had checked and double-checked the projections and agreements. A week's supply of the potion would sell for one Galleon. There were at least 200 private individuals who needed and could afford the potion. In addition, the Social Services Department would agree to buy at least 100 units a week with the contract to be renewed each year at the discretion of the Department. The Shop would agree to supply at least 100 units a week for the Social Services Department and agree to let the Department renew for four more years with no increase in price. Harry Potter would immediately pay 20,000 Galleons to Jack Higgins and receive half the profits. The Shop would produce the potion and receive half the profits. For the next seven years, the Shop would send 30 Galleons a month to his ex-wife or to the guardian of Jack Higgins' daughter and place 100 Galleons a month in a trust fund for his daughter. She would inherit the trust fund when she completed school or when she was eighteen, at her preference.

Jack was satisfied that he had severed all ties. There was no reason for his ex-wife or anyone else to pursue him. The money from the rich Potter would give him a good start in his new life. The only person seriously pursuing Narcissa and Bellatrix had been Miss Granger, but she had been neutralized

Jack remained fairly certain the original potion belonged to Snape. He fought down his feelings of guilt by reminding himself that Snape was making millions selling an illicit drug to mundanes. Snape, the fugitive, could not risk selling to the wizard world...just the kindhearted act of supplying Miss Granger had placed him in danger. 'In danger from Granger,' thought Jack. 'That lady's a menace. I did society a favor.'

Although outwardly calm, Padma and Parvati could barely contain their excitement. Their parents and others in the family had examined the projections and concluded this potion would be the Shop's mainstay for the next decade. And the family's attitude toward Harry had changed. It was more than his money; his investment had been one of trust and commitment.

Padma and Parvati were taking the trust and commitment personally. It was more binding than the sex they had been having since Harry was temporarily banned from the store. That Friday evening, Padma had appeared at the grim old place to reassure Harry. She was in his arms, clutching him and crying. She was in his bed, clutching him and moaning. Parvati had appeared the next evening, expecting equal treatment. Harry had been hesitant about having an intimate relationship with both sisters, but Parvati had convinced him it was what they wanted. She had been understanding, gracious, and irresistible.

* * *

"Awk," went Bellatrix as she jumped back.

The three were exploring more of the Manor's dungeons.

Jack had his wands out in a flash. What could have possibly frightened Bellatrix? He held his first wand ready and used his second to illuminate the storeroom. He could see nothing. That made him more apprehensive.

"There," pointed Bellatrix.

"Yes, right there," said Narcissa.

Jack saw nothing. He gripped his wands tighter. Then he saw it...a small brown furry creature.

"It's a mouse," said Bellatrix.

He must have been giving the two of them an incredulous look because Narcissa confirmed the sighting. "Mouse," said Narcissa.

They were looking at him expectantly. It slowly dawned on him that mice were the province of wizards. He turned manfully to the task at hand. Boy, could that little devil scurry.

Zing. A near miss.

Zing. Almost got him.

The mouse squeaked and jumped.

The two women squeaked and grabbed Jack. "Oh! Don't hurt him! Don't hurt him!"

'Situation equals delicate,' thought Jack.

The Finale

Chapter 15 of 15

Peter was not very well during the evening. His mother put him to bed and made some chamomile tea. But Flopsy, Mopsy, and Cotton-tail had bread and milk and blackberries for supper.

Beatrix Potter

The Finale

Hermione noticed the guards that were supposed to keep her confined to her hospital room had vanished. She had heard no disturbance. 'If it's who I think it is, I wouldn't, would I?' she thought.

Severus entered and sat in the chair beside her bed. "I hope you've recovered enough to escape."

"Escape? Why would I want to escape?" she asked.

"You're being charged with abusing your position in order to participate in the growing drug trade," he replied.

"That's ridiculous," she said. "I can easily show that's not true."

"How are you getting along with people at work?" asked Severus.

There was silence.

"The prosecution will use the people in your department to paint an unflattering portrait of your character."

"But I was the only one working hard," she protested.

"They will tell the court that you did not get along with others. They will say that they knew something was wrong, but they had no idea you were on drugs," he said.

He paused. "Can I assume you have continued your school-day habits of breaking the rules and flaunting authority?"

There was more silence.

"Since you have disagreed with your supervisors, they will be more than happy to testify that you are unstable," he said.

"But I'm innocent."

They examined you when you were brought in. They found traces of a narcotic in your system, the same narcotic that's in the wine bottles in your flat," said Severus. "Haven't you noticed anything unusual?"

"I've been sleepy, but I thought I was just tired," she said.

An idea occurred to her. "How do they explain the fact that I was attacked?"

"You were on your way to a drug deal that went sour. Edmund and Rogers have sworn they did not know you were dealing drugs," he replied. "There's a good chance they will send you to prison without a trial for trying to corrupt fellow officials."

Hermione reasoned her way through more of the trap. "If we reveal the wine contains a painkiller, we would have to explain how that happened, and that would point to you. I would be accused of withholding evidence and harboring a dangerous fugitive. And they would begin an extensive hunt for you." She thought about what had happened. "Whoever it was intended to kill me, and then have the Ministry find the wine with the narcotic in it. The conclusion would be that I was killed in a drug deal."

Hermione looked bleak.

"I meant to do you a favor with the painkiller," he said, "but it has wrecked your life. I can offer you sanctuary."

"I don't want to run," she said.

"Even if they find you innocent or don't prosecute, your life is ruined. People will say the Ministry let you off because you're Harry's friend," said Severus. "You will spend the rest of your days on welfare or scrubbing toilets." He paused and smiled. "If you come with me now, I won't have to break you out of prison."

"I did want to be with you, but not like this," she said.

"You would be a professional associate in the business of providing pain relief to the wealthy. We would provide pain relief to all if the social and legal system allowed it, but we are doing the best we can. We will be isolated for a while, but we should be able to retire wealthy in a few years. We'll change our identities, live among the American wizards, and start new lives."

Hermione looked as if there was some hope left in the world.

"I need help," said Severus. "I need a partner I can trust."

Hermione still seemed hesitant.

"It's best to leave now," said Severus. "You know the system is unfair and people are spiteful, but if you experience the unfairness and spitefulness, you'll leave with hate and resentment. Now, you may have regrets, but you will leave calmly and with peace of mind."

"There's the stuff in my flat," said Hermione.

"I've packed it, including that ugly cat."

"What if I had decided not to go with you?" she asked.

"Then you would have gone straight to prison, and I would have to take care of that misbegotten ball of fur. You would have had that on your conscience."

'Thank the gods for Jack Higgins,' thought Hermione as she packed the few belongings in her hospital room. 'I'm not becoming a partner with Severus as an innocent virgin. Severus has had more experience, but once is all it takes. Jack is one of my few fond memories.'

'I almost wish Jack were rescuing me. He talks to me and listens to me, unlike this snarky bastard. After we did it that one time, Jack went immediately to the apothecary shop for the Morning-After-Draught, and he sat there until I drank it.'

She sighed. 'But Jack would never be able to tolerate a fugitive, and I couldn't ask it of him. If he did volunteer, we might have been able to solve the mystery of who attacked me and why. He'd have to give up hunting Bellatrix Lestrange, but I'd like to think he'd do that for me.'

Hermione crammed the last of her stuff into her bag. 'I'm off to be the mistress of an evil genius.'

Severus saw the resolute look on her face and observed the determined stride in her step.

'I'm in for it now,' he thought.

* * *

Jack nuzzled Trixie until she woke and nuzzled him back. He took her by the hand and led her to her room.

"Are you sure we have to be this private about it?" she asked.

He nodded yes. He looked at her thin, white scars and traced them with his fingers. "No one had to do this. Giving your loyalty is natural to you. Whoever has it should be kind to you."

She put her hands on his shoulders.

He ran his fingers across her temples, brushing her hair back behind her ears and calming her. "People think you're cruel; but you were just protecting your liege lord the only way that he allowed. You can make your own choices now."

She kissed him on the forehead.

He looked into her bright, alert eyes. "Whoever has your loyalty should pay attention to you. He should let you help him."

She held his hand. "I'm not used to this. I don't know what to do."

"You're not alone. Your sister is here with you."

She nodded. "Yes, that helps."

She rested her forehead on his and touched the tip of his nose with hers.

"Your companion should care about the survival of your family. The Black line should not die out."

"You brought me in here to tell me that?"

"I thought I might make love to you. It should be private. After I've held you for a while, you look like a little girl. Your lines vanish from your face. Only your lover should see you like that."

She smiled at him.

"I want you."

"Yes," she said.

* * *

Jack nuzzled Narcy and discovered she was awake. He took her by the hand and led her to her room.

"Are you sure we have to be this private about it?" she asked.

He nodded yes. "This is just for us."

She softened.

"People think you're an ice queen, but you love your family."

She moved closer to him.

"People think you're a criminal, but you were protecting your own."

She moved very close and put an arm around him. "I don't know if I can try again, if I can start all over again."

"You're not alone. Your sister is here with you."

She nodded. "Yes, that helps."

He held her hand. "You could do great things."

He looked into her eyes. "What you love should not be betrayed for hate and vengeance."

She embraced him and kissed him. "You didn't have to bring me in here to tell me that."

"Yes, I did, and I brought you in here to have you. You're affectionate; you're vulnerable; you lose yourself in passion. I want to be the only one who sees you like that."

"Oh," she said.

* * *

Back in his room and back in his arms, the two witches murmured, nestled against him, and fell into a deep sleep. Both were reassured by the presence of her sister, knowing her sister would help her cope with the strangeness of romance and the wizard who loved them.

"I'm in for it now," thought Jack.

* * *

"Tea time, love."

The three proceeded to the upstairs living quarters where Harry fell into a chair while the sisters fixed tea in the kitchen. He had spent the last week at school grading finals, and his mind was a blur. He could hear intense whispering, and then they brought out the tea.

The two girls looked at each other before breaking the silence. "There's plenty of room here, enough for three."

"That castle's drafty. It's not good for your health."

"We've been to the grim old place. It's creepy."

"It would be more convenient for you to stay here. If you're going to help us in the store, we mean."

"Okay," said Harry, beginning to realize what life was going to be like with the Patil sisters.

Harry knew the first ten months in the store had been hectic with the sisters barely keeping the needed items on the shelves. Now there was time to plan. Jack Higgins had shown the Patil sisters a stasis enchantment saying that if it worked for a Winchester, it should work for potions. They thought Jack weird but accepted his strangeness as essential for what he did. They wanted Harry to help them organize and carry out a summer of brewing. They hoped to have a year's supply of potions in stasis before he had to return to school. Even through the fog of fatigue, Harry noticed they wanted him to participate in putting together a household and their eyes were shining with the prospect.

"The school farewell banquet is the day after tomorrow. We checked."

"The students leave the next morning, and everything should be quiet by noon. We can help you pack and move."

"It'll be easy with three of us."

"Everything will be easier with three of us."

"That's great. Thanks," said Harry, wondering how in the world he was going to handle the next topic, wondering how in the world he could bring it up without embarrassing himself.

"We were thinking of every other night with us," said Parvati.

"Parvati's first. We drew straws," said Padma.

"Is that okay with you, love?"

"That's fine. Yes. That's good," said Harry.

With his usual lack of foresight, he did not predict that within several months neither sister could sleep if she were not snuggling him.

He did get one thing right.

'I'm in for it now,' he thought.

*** END ***