

Better Not Knowing

by sweetflag

Snape and Sirius reflect upon a woman who was lost to them decades before, and they must learn to work together to keep that woman alive and sane. Despite the emotional and ethical questions attacking them, the Order sought out a witch lost to the Wizarding world: a witch who possesses a knowledge that could turn the tide of the war. But with her forced recovery, no one is spared the emotional havoc that her dubious restoration precipitates. In such a short time, can Snape and Sirius smother their mutual animosity enough to save the mind of a woman that they both loved?

Chapter One

Chapter 1 of 36

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Author's note: I would like to take the time to thank a few special people; all those who have had faith in me that I could do this, you know who you are ... thank you for all that you have done to inspire and encourage! Also, I would not be in the position to post this here without the help of my beta, falcon falmorgan, her continual support, encouragement and perfect punctuation have brought me here: thank you, falcon!

Prologue.

It was such a simple thing to initiate one of the most complex and demanding of searches and such a small, innocuous start to a cascade of despair and a tumultuous burgeoning hope. It was for no small reason that he trawled through the broadsheets, eagerly scanning the neat, black print whilst sipping tea. Sometimes in the plain, black ink, in its strict and orderly columns, a seemingly innocent observation, dutifully reported, would make his lips thin and his hand tremble.

It was rare that the Muggle world would discover a secret to thrill its Wizarding counterpart, and it fell to those who took the time to peel back the countless layers of gossip, political sniping and celebrity nonsense to find it. In other words, it fell to a person like him.

This secret, the one that would prove to be one of his most thrilling and exhausting, slipped from a tabloid supplement and fluttered innocently onto his lap, so nonchalant in its disclosure. At first, he thought to ignore it as an advert for a charity asking for tolerance and money, but something about it drew his attention from the severe and reliable print. Simultaneously irritated and interested, he picked up the leaflet and read it.

Indeed, it did ask for money to support an initiative to update the image and improve public opinion of the mentally ill, giving examples of academic and artistic achievements of the people it represented. In itself it was quite well presented and compelling, but he could not determine why it held his attention so raptly.

He returned to the taunting pamphlet every so often in hopes that a fresh mind would divine its secret, but each time he only saw the same words and the same pieces of artwork. Just as some of the most beneficial and terrifying discoveries relied upon serendipity, so did Albus Dumbledore. As tragic as the news was, however, it did not seem to reflect anything more sinister than normal belligerence, so he folded the collection of newspapers and cast a spell to reduce the mass of paper to a more

manageable size.

The hour was late; his efforts to convince the Ministry of Voldemort's return, combined with recalling the Order, had drained him. In his fatigue, he spilled his tea across the desk. Stifling his frustration, he flicked his wrist; as the spell scoured the surface clean, it disturbed the pamphlet, causing the paper to curl around its deeply creased folds.

From his height advantage he saw the two edges come together and the words from the different columns align. He paused, and his brow furrowed as he read across from one side to another:

"... it is through their art seeing their place in the world.... they seek to heal themselves and endeavouring to show that they are just like you and me."

A suspicion blossomed; he looked closely at the picture inserted within the text. Rarely did a wizard pass unnoticed; in the last century only twelve had managed to slip through the many charms put in place to find those imbued with magic. He blinked and slowly picked up the pamphlet that so wantonly displayed the secret he had failed at first to see.

Small as the picture was, he could make out what appeared to be the towers of any stereotypical fairytale castle. However, when studied closely, they could be those of the very castle he called home. He quickly opened it and searched the other images for something to support his theory, and what he found set his mind thrumming with questions and theories.

In one partially obscured picture, he espied the portrait of a young woman. It lacked the finesse of a great artist, but it captured the features accurately and nicely enough. He peered closer. Staring back at him with wide, dark eyes and lips parted expectantly was the face of a girl he thought dead these twenty years. Fascinated, he reread the pamphlet and was gratified to find that the artwork sampled was on display at a research facility dedicated to improving mental health care. Tired of owling a Ministry unwilling to heed him while waiting for Voldemort to make his move, he considered himself ready to tackle a healthy mystery.

Chapter One.

"I was there!"

He towered over the table as his anger surged through him; suppressing the urge to thump his fists on his kitchen table, he lowered himself back onto the seat. The grey bowl, with its swirling, mocking memories, rocked under the impact, and Dumbledore idly steadied it.

It irritated Moody that it was placed between them; had the hateful thing cracked, spilling its condemning recollections, he would have demonstrated little remorse. "I was there," he repeated softly, "and despite what that holds, there is no possibility that we simply missed her."

He returned to the photograph that Dumbledore had procured from an old newspaper and the articles, appealing for help to identify an unknown girl rescued from a train derailment. There was little doubt that the pale girl was Ophelia Black. He thought back on that night and remembered how he had been taken aback by the sheer scale of the damage.

The train overran the terminus, coming off the tracks and smashing through the concrete wall into the station itself. Had it not been night and very nearly closing time, the number of fatalities likely would have quadrupled. As it was, only those disembarking an earlier train were on the platform, heading through the station on their way home.

On his arrival, dust and thick, black smoke billowed out from the access points and over the track, hiding the carnage and suffocating the trapped passengers. From inside the station, he could hear the roar of a terrific blaze, the screeching of tortured steel and the heavy thuds of falling masonry. In the sparse emergency lighting, the remaining ambulatory witnesses milled in shock just beyond the reach of plumbing, acrid smoke, whispering and crying. Transport police made urgent calls into their radios whilst trying to move the gathering crowd to a place of safety.

Moody and his team cast a variety of charms upon themselves as a protection against the smoke and heat and Disapparated to an area at the undamaged rear of the train. He saw in the flickering, orange lamps that only the last three carriages were on the tracks; the others had either rolled onto their sides or were twisted carcasses from which flames and fumes billowed. The track was littered with shards of glittering glass, smouldering metal and bits of debris better left unidentified.

He motioned for the others to follow and gingerly made his way to the intact carriages. The survivors clambered off the train, trembling and wide-eyed. Those who had been in the smoke-filled carriages came out swathed in black ash, clutching at their throats and rubbing at their eyes. He quickly assessed the scene for any use of magic, the only signs being in one of the burning carriages...two discrete emissions from wands being incinerated. He and three other Aurors positioned themselves around the devastation at approximate cardinal points and drew complex fiery sigils in the air. The other Aurors cast an equally complex network of spells around the wreckage that, like smoke highlighting beams of light, would determine if the ill-fated train had been the victim of malicious magic. With a final flick of the burning tip, the strange sigils tilted on their horizontal axes and expanded over the wreckage, intermingling with the others.

After a few moments, the mingled sigils rose up and shrank back to their original size. Moody summoned the bizarre, flickering sheet of light and studied it. Within the radius was a representation of the train wreck wrought from strands of magic, and within that construct were two tremulous spots of light embedded in what would be the twisted mass of metal that had once been the front of the train.

Two Aurors promptly rushed into the chaos to find and extricate the two dying wizards, but even as they worked, Moody saw the spots of light give one last flicker and then die. The Aurors found the burned bodies fused to various parts of the train, deftly collected them for their families and analysed the wand remains for identification purposes. Upon hearing the sirens of the Muggle emergency services, they quickly Disapparated back to the Ministry. He filed his report, suffered with nightmares and eventually relegated the memories to a quiet, dark corner of his mind.

"Alastor, have no doubt that I hold your dedication and abilities in the highest esteem, and forgive me if I gave you the impression that I did not," Albus continued with a hint of bridled impatience. "I did not bring this to your attention merely to rub salt in your wounds, but because it is imperative that we find her and you are the only Auror I presently trust who can do just that."

"Of course, Dumbledore," he said dejectedly as he ran a scarred hand through his close-cropped, silver hair. "The last few weeks have been difficult."

He gave an involuntary shudder as he remembered the enforced lassitude of the Imperius Curse and the consuming blackness of the trunk that imprisoned him for so long.

"As much as I would like to give you time to overcome the horror of the last year, I cannot. Voldemort has returned, and I need every able body to join together to fight him."

Moody's head shot up, and he fixed Dumbledore with a fierce glare. "I know my duty." The photograph crumpled in his clenched fist, and some of the righteous anger that had been doused by his confinement flared within him.

"Glad to hear, old friend," Dumbledore responded cheerfully. "Now, let's view my Pensieve, shall we?"

Grumbling, Moody stood and extended his fingers into the mysterious substance that was captured memory. He momentarily felt them like warm silk against his fingertips before his awareness was turned upside down and twisted to rearrange itself into a brightly lit foyer. He saw Albus standing by a desk, obviously being given directions by the middle-aged receptionist.

"Her directions, I'm afraid to say, were not terribly helpful," Dumbledore confessed as he appeared beside him. "We will take a few wrong turns before we reach the offices of the Barrat Trust."

"The Barrat Trust?" he queried as they followed Albus.

"Yes, a rather interesting charity devoting itself to promoting awareness about mental illness to the general public in a bid to improve its image. Unfortunately, however noble their venture, I believe their campaign is falling on deaf ears." He gently grabbed Moody's elbow. "Just wait here a moment; I have to return this way."

They watched as Albus stopped, looked around and then retrace his steps. "The Trust," Dumbledore said as they continued on their way, "was set up sixteen years ago, and at the time was instrumental in bringing about reform to help alleviate some of the restrictions placed upon sufferers. Alas, now it has been relegated to a small office in a ramshackle building."

Next to him, Dumbledore chuckled, and Moody's progress was once again halted. "We may as well wait here; I realise momentarily that the dear lady meant left instead of right. They still work tirelessly, but their influence is greatly reduced." They paused once more, and then set off when Albus had recovered from the misdirection; after a few moments Dumbledore's pace slowed. "Ah!" he exclaimed happily. "We've arrived."

They slipped through the door, following Albus into a clean and bright office replete with coffee tables, easy chairs and potted plants. Halogen spotlights dotted the ceiling, dispelling the gloom of the dreary autumn morning and refining the crisp, yet friendly atmosphere. It certainly came as a surprise after walking through the dimly lit and neglected corridors. A variety of framed pictures hung from magnolia walls. Some of them looked as though drawn by children; big yellow suns in a blue sky that never connected to the green swathe of crayoned grass. Others were darker, both in colour and tone, highlighting the anguish and frustration of the artists. Albus stopped to examine a few before meandering over to a young woman, busy tending to a collection of plants in the centre of the room.

"Oh!" She squeaked, pressing a hand against her throat, "I'm sorry, sir. I didn't see you come in."

"Quite alright, my dear. I'm sorry to have startled you."

"Think nothing of it." She placed the water spray on a nearby table and pulled off her marigold gloves. "Is there anything that I may help you with?"

Within a few minutes, Albus sat drinking tea and leafing through a thick file containing copies of all the artwork to pass through the office since its opening. Occasionally, the young woman offered a comment or two on particularly memorable ones. Moody and Dumbledore stood behind the chairs and studied the pictures from over their shoulders.

"I dread to think what could have prompted someone to paint such pictures," Albus uttered solemnly as he held up a print of a child's painting; it was red, orange and black, a swirling mass of colour with angry, jagged lines and prone, black bodies.

"Sometimes the source of a person's distress is reflected in their art. For example, that one was painted by an eight year-old who was the sole survivor of a house fire. She couldn't remember the incident but drew those pictures for weeks afterwards, always denying that she had when questioned. Eventually, though, she began to accept what had happened." She sorted through the file somewhere near the back and flipped a section over. "After several months of counselling, she drew this." The colours were softer pastels, and although the prone bodies were still black, they were surrounded by large, colourful flowers and given smiling faces.

"Wonderful." He was aware of the wondrous ability of many children to accept and overcome tragedy, letting the trauma sit lightly within their hearts and minds, colouring rather than shadowing their futures. He returned to the sombre images near the front and methodically studied each image. His companion soon left him to return to the plants and paperwork. Moody and Dumbledore took seats to either side, and they pored over the images.

Albus obligingly lingered over the more interesting images and pointed out the features that confirmed a wizard had drawn the elegant and accurate sketches. There were several of the castle and its grounds, and some of the Great Hall, eerily empty and darkened by a stormy ceiling. There were two of the Potions classroom with flames flickering under steaming cauldrons and various ingredients neatly grouped on the tables. A beautiful rendition of the castle and lake with a fat moon rising behind the towers, done in chalk on black paper, took their breath away.

There were darker images, as well, including that of a group of hooded wizards and a large snake with fat coils and a sleepy, intelligent look. It was the last picture...one that Albus took more time to consider and caused Moody to react. With a hiss of indrawn breath and a fierce glower, he saw a basilisk rearing from the gaping mouth of a bearded face hewn from pale stone. The two interlopers in the memory shared a dark look, and Dumbledore raised his hand to delay Moody's disquiet. Albus sifted through the file, taking down the serial numbers of each print before placing the file on the table. Moody and Dumbledore followed him to the reception desk and listened in.

"I'm afraid I can't tell you who drew those pictures, sir." Instead of honest contrition, her tone suggested a staunch refusal to share the truth she was privy to.

"Ah, in that case, perhaps this will ease matters."

Moody watched with professional curiosity as Albus pulled out a piece of card from his pocket. While he handed it to the woman with his left hand, he waved his right as a conductor might. Moody glanced at the receptionist, seeing her eyes glaze over and her features gradually relax until she reached for the small card and studied it carefully.

"Oh," she sighed softly. "Of course, sir. Forgive me, but we were given strict instructions not to release any personal information to the general public." Her face clouded for a moment as she fought the spell before succumbing to its effects and smiling apologetically at him. "The information is probably still on the computer; it shouldn't take too long to retrieve it."

"That should do it, Alastor," Dumbledore whispered into his ear.

With that, the memory world turned grey, and Moody felt the spinning sensation as he was ejected from the Pensieve. They both sat and stared at the pearlescent liquid in the stone basin as they pondered what it revealed.

"Could she have entered the Chamber while at school?"

Dumbledore frowned and clasped one hand within the other as if to fend off the cold. "Had Miss Weasley not been controlled and coerced by Voldemort to enter the Chamber, I would have said no without reservation."

His frown deepened, and he ran a hand over his beard. "It was not brought to my attention that Ophelia was a Parselmouth and therefore able to open the chamber. Even if she had, Harry was quite sure that the Basilisk answered only to young Tom. No, it is my guess that she encountered the image somewhere else." As he spoke he reached out and traced a fingertip around the rim of the Pensieve. "Tom was always proud; he kept trinkets to remind him, and more importantly others, of his conquests. Later, when he realised that to hold such incriminating things was less than clever, he stored his memories to serve the same purpose: memories that he could leaf through when the mood took him and to show others when the need arose."

"We know that Lucius Malfoy had Riddle's diary," continued Moody in the same thoughtful voice, "and we know that Ophelia stayed at the Malfoys'." He glanced up at Dumbledore who watched him with a suppressed grin and glittering eyes. "Yer think she got hold of the diary?"

Dumbledore nodded and chuckled. "She would have had ample opportunity to find it, and I believe that she would have immersed herself in it."

Moody smiled...not pleasantly, but with a renewed sense of purpose. The weight that had descended upon him following his laughable capture and pathetic imprisonment lifted; perhaps he saw a way to redeem himself or, more likely, avenge himself.

"We find Ophelia. We find what she knows."

"Precisely."

"What did yer find out from the office receptionist?"

"A remarkably efficient and determined young lady, she even tried to locate Ophelia for me. Unfortunately the trail, as they say, grew cold after she left an institution in Cumbria."

He pulled out a buff envelope from the breast pocket of his mauve velvet jacket and slid it across the table to the eager ex-Auror. While he read, Dumbledore flourished his

wand to prepare fresh tea and scooped the memories from the Pensieve back up to his temple.

"What's this? A news clippin'...Police confirmed today that a young girl sufferin' with serious injuries followin' Tuesday's derailment still remains a mystery. The teenager surprised rescuers amid fears that all sixteen passengers travellin' in the first two carriages perished. She is currently being cared for by the medical staff at St. Thomas' hospital, who say that, in time, a full recovery is possible."

Dumbledore serenely sipped his tea and motioned for him to continue reading the collection of news clippings, police and hospital reports, along with the notes regarding her stay at Edmont Institute. They detailed a mental deterioration following placement at a care home and repeated hospitalisations following injuries to herself and detentions following injuries to others. Then, there was a brief stint in a psychiatric hospital following a series of violent attacks on her peers. Finally, she was sent to Edmont Institute in Cumbria. Recovery was not expected, and eventually the world forgot about her.

However, years later she was, remarkably, pronounced healthy and released on probation into the custody of a local outpatient department. She diligently followed their recommendations and requirements until they were satisfied of her coping abilities, and then she just disappeared.

After half an hour of reading and cross-referencing, Moody sat back and pinched the bridge of his nose. "Don't really give us much, does it? Young girl with no memory and no ties to anyone let loose to go where she chooses, whenever she chooses. She could be anywhere!"

"I know!" Albus exclaimed gleefully.

Moody glared at him, unable for a moment to express his feelings over the sheer enormity of the task that Dumbledore had just dropped in his lap. "You can't just wave yer wand and hope yer know!" he growled out angrily.

"I'm well aware of that, Alastor, and as such, I and the Order will be at your disposal." His jovial mood gone as quickly as it had come, Dumbledore drained his tea and stood to tower over the simmering Auror. "Do what you can; I'm certain that I don't need to impress upon you how little time we have."

Moody nodded grimly. "I have a Muggle acquaintance who can help."

Dumbledore paused and arched a white eyebrow questioningly.

"She's lost in the Muggle world, so who best to help find her?"

"Quite so. Keep me up to date and good luck." With that, he packed away his Pensieve and Disapparated.

Chapter Two

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Dumbledore reveals his discovery to Sirius and Severus and discloses his future intentions. Sirius grapples with the concept, and his world shifts as his memories are twisted and lost ones recovered.

Chapter Two.

For a moment, Sirius was taken aback at the headmaster's attire; he had never seen him wearing anything other than rich and voluminous robes. He gaped at the sight of the brown jacket over a knitted, grey turtleneck jumper and charcoal trousers with a cream fedora balanced on his cascade of silver hair. He stood in the doorway for a few moments and then shuffled awkwardly aside, at which silent invitation the headmaster strode in to reveal a sobering sight: Severus Snape scowling up at him from the bottom step.

The man's black hair hung in limp curtains, plunging his face into shadows; the weak autumn light only succeeded in catching his hooked nose and the swell of his cheekbones. He was wearing his habitual, black, three-quarter length jacket and trousers which would easily pass muster in eclectic London should any Muggle see him, and he carried what looked like an old-fashioned doctor's bag in black leather. It struck Sirius as strange that Snape should find such a compromise between Wizarding and Muggle fashion while endeavouring, through reputation and design, to isolate himself from both worlds. Snape quickly followed Dumbledore and swept past Sirius with barely a glance or acknowledgment.

Snape and Dumbledore were already seated when he strode into the kitchen, and he felt a rising frustration and anger as he played host, preparing tea; he could feel Snape's smirk burning the back of his neck.

"There has arisen a matter of some urgency of which, I believe, you both have some vital information." Dumbledore divulged after taking an unhurried sip of lemon tea. "I believe that both of you, at one time or another, knew Ophelia Black."

Sirius had been glaring at Snape and so caught the slight, unexpected flinch as Dumbledore mentioned a name that had good cause to make his own breath catch in his throat and his insides squirm.

"Evidence has recently come to light, indicating that she survived the train wreck and has since forged a life for herself in the Muggle world."

"How is that possible?" Snape seemed more cautious than curious, and Sirius was distressed to find that his own curiosity about Ophelia's miraculous resurrection was outweighed by his increasing desire to know exactly how Snape and Ophelia knew each other.

"We are not sure of the exact details, but we believe that she was taken to a local Muggle hospital before the Aurors arrived. Until we find her, I doubt we will ever know the complete truth."

"The complete truth?" Snape queried softly, his attention now riveted to the headmaster.

"There exists some confusion as to how she was slipped passed the Aurors into the hospital and why she has refrained from making her way back to the Wizarding world. Suffice it to say that we suspect she was removed from the train prior to the accident and later the victim of a memory-modifying curse."

"Who did it? Death Eaters?"

Snape turned to glare at Sirius. "Contrary to popular opinion, the Dark Lord and his Death Eaters were not the sole instigators of terror and violence. I take it that you have forgotten the powers bestowed upon the Elite Aurors formed under Barty Crouch's administration? They had the right to bring anyone in for questioning at any time without

the benefit of counsel. They were also granted the right to kill any suspected Death Eaters on sight."

Sirius glowered back, partly due to Snape's infuriating condescension and partly to the memory of Barty Crouch Sr.'s quivering face condemning him to life in Azkaban.

"I, better than most, should be aware of how dire it was."

To his surprise, Snape tilted his head in the smallest gesture of acknowledgement.

"I would appreciate," Dumbledore interjected smoothly, "your thoughts on how easily Ophelia may be assimilated back into the Wizarding world."

"You've found her?" Sirius felt a thrum down his spine and a fluttering in his gut; a godson and a cousin restored to him ... Perhaps life was not so bleak after all.

"Alastor has contacted an acquaintance, who will, he believes, be able to lead us to her quite quickly."

"And you want to know of her loyalties before approaching her?"

"Now, listen here, Snape," Sirius growled, offended at the suggestive tone in Snape's voice. "I knew her well, and she never showed any inclination to follow in the footsteps of the rest of that family."

Snape merely sneered and waved a thin hand dismissively. "I tend to agree with you that she certainly seemed to avoid the traps that ensnared her family, but have no doubt that she was eager to be a part of that family."

"No," he whispered hoarsely, "she never shared their philosophies; for Merlin's sake, she was practically a Muggle when she was found!"

"As I understand, your contact was severely curtailed when she was invited to live at Malfoy Manor where she had ample opportunity to embrace certain principles without your unique moral compass to guide her. And if you believe that exposure to Muggles would somehow make her immune, then I suggest that you think back on your friend, Pettigrew; he is a half-blood, is he not?"

Sirius flushed and gripped the edge of the table. He was tempted to pull his wand, but was painfully aware of the headmaster listening and watching intently. He forced down the fury at the impugnation of his moral character and the hate at the casual mentioning of his regretful association with Pettigrew. "How do I know that those certain principles were not inspired by befuddlements or potions?"

Snape bit out a harsh laugh and shook his head indulgently. "I assure you that she needed nothing more than space; her natural predispositions soon manifested themselves."

"And how, exactly, would you," he sneered in partially concealed disgust and disbelief, "be in such a position to determine her predispositions?" His heart hammered in his chest; his mind had skirted around his suspicion since it had bloomed, and he dreaded confirmation. Ophelia had been sixteen when she had supposedly died; Snape would have been twenty-two. He swallowed around a suddenly dry throat and kept a hold on the table, lest he draw his wand and hex the gloating man in front of him.

"While she was Lucius' ward, I had ample opportunities to meet with Ophelia."

"Ah, yes!" Sirius sighed, "I forgot that you were on Malfoy's leash as well as Voldemort's."

"Do not," Snape ground out through clenched teeth, "speak his name!" His face was flushed, his eyes glittered, and the fingers on his right hand traced a pattern over the fabric covering his left inner forearm. Sirius found his gaze oddly drawn to those pale, slender fingers moving over the black cloth, and he fancied that those fingers soothed the writhing Dark Mark beneath.

"Don't be melodramatic, Snape," he said lazily. "It's just a brand, a mark of ownership." Sirius' tone was light, but his expression was vicious.

"This," snarled Snape, lifting his arm and stabbing a finger into the black cloth and the corrupted flesh beneath, "is more than that, Black, as you very well know. Azkaban must have robbed you of your wits!"

Sirius blinked, his anger smothered by the disquieting and recurrent fear that the Dementors had indeed stolen more than he thought; he cast a nonplussed glance at Dumbledore, who watched Snape closely.

"Headmaster?" he asked, hoping more to affect an air of annoyance than display his need for reassurance.

Dumbledore turned, peering at him over the rim of his gold spectacles, concern crinkling his brow. "The Dark Mark is a link between each Death Eater and the Dark Lord: the mechanism of this is not clearly understood, and although we have endeavoured to discover its secrets, we have as of yet failed. From Severus' information regarding its creation and the lingering side effects, we believe that Riddle is aware, on some level, of the emotional state of any Death Eater he focuses on, and this is what makes him a formidable Legilimens to those within his ranks. As with Legilimency, distance decreases this effect; however, a surge of power from the Mark...from hearing its creator's name, for example, can overcome that obstacle, and it is possible that for an instant, Riddle may sense the emotions of one bearing the Mark."

"So Vol...erm, He can basically spy upon his own through the Mark?" His brow furrowed further, and as he considered the ramifications, he pinned Snape with a fierce gaze and pointed at him. "What's stopping him," he said vehemently, "from inadvertently passing on something to Him via this link?"

"Severus," Dumbledore spoke quickly to override Snape, who merely glowered at the headmaster, "is an accomplished Occlumens, and as you are aware, everything discussed here is protected by the Fidelius Charm. I doubt that there is, in this instance, any cause for concern, but it is something that you should be made aware of."

Sirius nodded slowly and felt a wave of nausea rush through him; did Voldemort unconsciously employ the same mechanism when he foisted his emotions and thoughts onto Harry? He shuddered at the horrible implications.

"Now," Dumbledore stated firmly, "back to the matter at hand. Severus, you were suggesting that Ophelia's loyalties may lie closer to her family."

"Yes," he replied, ignoring Sirius' huff of denial. "She was particularly close to Narcissa and spoke quite fondly of Madam Tonks, with whom she lived before the train accident."

Sirius closed his mouth with a snap and jerked forward in his chair. "You stayed in contact with Ophelia after she left Malfoy's?" It was impossible. He had visited Ophelia at his cousin Andromeda's house at every opportunity, and never had she mentioned that she was in correspondence with Snape. She had never even hinted that she knew of the man's existence.

"Indeed," Snape smirked, obviously enjoying the hurt flashing across Sirius' face. "Did she never tell you?"

Sirius eased back with an air of nonchalance that he did not feel: the knowledge that Ophelia and Snape had shared something generated a surprising spark of jealousy, and the fact that she had kept it a secret only increased the hurt. The fact that Snape knew added a subtle element of humiliation to the confusing coagulation of emotions clogging his chest.

"Severus," Dumbledore chided quietly, "if you would kindly continue." He knew from past experience that Severus Snape would hold onto his secrets far more tightly if he felt they were being prised from him, but would divulge them readily enough if he thought they had the power to hurt. To be fair though, Sirius was no altruist, either, when it came to releasing information; if he did not think it relevant, then it would stay locked in some dusty recess, irrespective of how useful it could have been. Sirius would, however, scrounge up those distant and neglected memories quick enough if he felt in some way threatened. He was learning more from drinking his tea and listening to the verbal barrage between them than if he had sat them down individually and simply asked. He smirked to himself behind his teacup: pride was a terrible thing.

"Ophelia, as you both know, lived with Lucius and Narcissa until shortly after they were married, whereupon she was sent to live with Andromeda."

"Why would they not ask Bellatrix to take up her guardianship?"

"As I understand it, Headmaster," Snape replied, seemingly incredulous at the notion that they were not already aware of the reason, "Ophelia and Bella were not content in each other's company...so much so that sending her to live with Madam Tonks was the far more rational, if not disappointing, decision."

"She seemed happy enough at Andromeda's, and I never saw her or heard her do anything that suggested that she was disappointed or discontent with the arrangement."

"Nor did I suggest any." Snape sighed and pinched the bridge of his nose.

Sirius gritted his teeth at the gesture of patient tolerance being tested and began to hope that Dumbledore would depart suddenly, leaving Snape stranded. A few moments were all he needed.

"Ophelia enjoyed living with Andromeda and even told me of her great fondness for her cousin and her Muggle husband. Other family members were disappointed with the decision."

Sirius felt that he had missed some part of the conversation; surely Snape had said that Ophelia had been steadily conforming to those twisted principles and philosophies that had so appalled him as a youth? A cold sliver of realisation pierced the smog of resentment and jealousy. Snape actually never said such a thing; he had merely allowed Sirius to come to the conclusion that he had formed as soon as Snape said she was close to her family. Sirius cursed inwardly and glared at the source of his sudden embarrassment. Hadn't he at one time been close to his family? Hadn't Regulus and Andromeda?

"Do we know why they were so incompatible?"

Snape grimaced slightly and reared back as if the question pained him. Intrigued, Sirius forced down his frustrations and focused on the suddenly uncomfortable man practically squirming in his chair.

"Bella considered Ophelia a threat." Snape finally muttered after an uncomfortable pause.

"A threat?"

Sirius was surprised that Snape allowed his inane comment to pass until he saw the man's jaw clench and a vein pulsate in his temple.

"At the time, the Ministry saw the Dark Lord as nothing more than a political dissident: rumours about his activities either repulsed or attracted, but none of them encouraged any direct action against him. It was therefore quite common for the Dark Lord to be entertained in many of the great houses, and such a house was Malfoy Manor."

Sirius noticed that although Snape appeared calm, he was scratching at the Dark Mark, apparently oblivious of his actions. "We already know that, Snape. I was asked to speak with Ophelia about the soirees that Malfoy hosted; remember?"

Snape shot him a look, and Sirius felt the hairs on his nape prickle at the emptiness of it; he had seen such a deadened look in the eyes of the inmates of Azkaban and more often than he cared in his own. "That may be so, but I'm sure that she refrained from divulging certain interesting snippets." He brought a hand to his mouth and gently rubbed a forefinger across his lips.

"I didn't question her regarding the latest gossip."

"Don't be naïve," Snape snarled, the passion back in his eyes. "More often than not, it is the subtle, unconscious acts that yield the most important information."

"I did not have the time to have her comment on who was wearing what and who was draped over who. I was after names and information about impending attacks."

"Foolish," Snape muttered from behind his fingers. "You compounded her belief that it was a mere triviality. She, herself, would not have seen the importance of it. But you," his voice empty and quiet, "you would have discovered the greatest secret and weapon against him. Had you but asked."

"Sometimes she wouldn't talk to me, you know," he roared. "But she wasn't there anymore; she was with Andromeda, so what did it matter? The Order had no further use for her."

Dumbledore took another sip of tea and carefully slid out his wand; he was quite convinced that they had temporarily forgotten about him, and he did not want the discussion to deteriorate into violence due to a perceived lack of authority. In the meantime, he sat back and waited for the rising torrents to stir up the answers he sought.

"You amaze me, Black." Snape placed his hands flat on the table and leant forward. "In the palm of your hand, you had a direct route to the Dark Lord," his voice wavered and cracked, "and you squandered it because you were bored by high society politics."

Sirius threw up his hands and moaned out in frustration. "I have absolutely no idea what the hell you're blathering on about. She was just a child, for Merlin's sake. She spent the first years just being amazed by the fact she was a witch; she didn't know, couldn't begin to fathom what being in that family meant. She was gentle and sweet and nothing like them." He turned to Dumbledore and spread his arms wide. "Don't listen to him," he implored, "Ophelia was nothing like them. Granted," he conceded, "she may not join us, but I'm damned sure she won't join them."

"I wouldn't be so sure, Black."

"Look, Snape," he hissed, "I'm really getting sick of this. Just what makes you so cocksure that Ophelia would? Some chance meetings at Malfoy Manor? Perhaps a few letters from Andromeda's?"

He watched the colour drain from Snape's face, and glancing, down he saw Snape's potion-stained fingernails bite into the veneer on the kitchen table.

"Come on, Snape," he urged, "how exactly did I mess up? Because I can't help but think that you're supposed to be on our side, and surely if there was something that important then you would have just told us."

"Her death nullified the dilemma."

"You wanted her dead."

"No!" Snape shouted, colouring violently and smacking the tabletop. He breathed slowly and noisily until his face and breathing returned to normal. "Suffice it to say that should she return and her loyalties remain where I think they have always been, then she will be a threat to the Order."

"Your opinion, Snape."

"Black," Snape whispered softly, once again pinching the bridge of his nose and inhaling slowly. "I once came across Ophelia on the terrace at Malfoy Manor trying to convince Nagini to devour Wormtail while he was trapped in his Animagus form." He glared up when a snigger escaped from Sirius' clenched lips and then shrugged generously; it had been amusing. "It appears that I must thank you, by the way." He smirked suddenly. "She was so intrigued by the one who had fuelled your hatred through school and occupied much of your conversations together that she was positively thrilled to finally meet me."

"Get to the point," Sirius said tonelessly.

Snape's smirk slipped, and that deadened look that had chilled Sirius returned. "She was fascinated by you, I think."

Sirius wondered if the chilly tone concealed a hint of jealousy.

"She sought out those who had affected you the most deeply. Her familial acquaintance with Regulus deepened, and the two became inseparable; the Dark Lord even humoured her fondness for her cousin and asked it of Lucius to open up his home to him; no other Death Eater was treated so kindly."

Sirius' throat tightened and a knot twisted in his gut. "She never mentioned any of this."

"As you may know," Snape continued smoothly, ignoring Sirius' comment and the man's growing trepidation, "Regulus disappeared about the time of his first anniversary; it wasn't made known, but Regulus' body was recovered by Evans and brought before the Dark Lord. He spouted nonsense of a vicious duel, but in all probability, waited until his target was asleep and cast the Killing Curse without much fuss. Ophelia was notably absent during that time and..."

Sirius started and lunged across the table as if to grab Snape, his face twisted into an ugly fierce, scowl, his trembling fists upraised and tightly clenched. "Think carefully about what you're planning to say."

"It was rumoured that Ophelia had somehow discovered Regulus' hideout and divulged the location to the Dark Lord himself." He ignored Sirius, who spluttered with rage, and turned to face Dumbledore. He flicked his tongue over dry lips and settled back in the chair, allowing his greasy hair to curtain his eyes. "At first, I was inclined to think as you do, Black, that the idea was ludicrous, but..." He paused, and in the sudden silence, Sirius could hear the man's erratic breaths. "...but not after seeing what she did to his body."

Sirius barely heard Snape's whispered recollection through the thunderous roar of blood rushing past his ears, and it was more the defensive hunch of his shoulders than the words that prompted him to slowly draw back and cool his temper. He slumped back into his chair and ran a quivering hand over his face. He had struggled to escape Azkaban to a life that was comfortable and secure, and it was crumbling around his ears; it was as if his memory had been a fancy, and the reality was hell.

"She immolated it until even the ash had been destroyed. I had never seen her so violent and passionate: even Bella seemed cowed by her display. It seems quite plausible that Ophelia only ever had the Dark Lord's interests at heart; it earned her the fear and respect of the others and secured her as the most favoured and adored of the Dark Lord. So impressed with her skill and devotion, the Dark Lord offered her any reward she wished: she ordered that Regulus' name no longer be mentioned amongst the ranks."

"Why?" Sirius croaked. The thought ricocheted inside his skull, cracking the thin veneer of contentment that he had crafted to hide how he split and bled inside. His cousin, the child he had loved as a sister, had been culpable in his brother's murder; even rejoiced in it.

"Because she could!" Snape snapped out. He raked his fingers through his hair and gripped the back of his neck. "Because she wanted to," he said wearily, allowing his hand to fall into his lap. "The Dark Lord called her Opella. For some reason, he was taken with her...scrawny eight-year-old who was more Muggle than witch. Did you ever wonder why Lucius was so amenable to having the brat stay at his house while he wooed his soon-to-be wife? Ophelia was the must-have item for the ambitious Death Eater; she had the ear of the Dark Lord himself, and all those she loved were favoured."

Sirius placed his head in his hands and stifled the sob trying to erupt from his throat. His despair doubled, and his thoughts scattered as the image of Ophelia and Voldemort together blasted through his mind.

"Did she take the Mark?" he asked fearfully and desperately from behind his fingers.

"If she did, then only she and the Dark Lord ever knew of it."

"But," Sirius wailed, clenching his fists and banging them against his thighs, "she told me things that would help destroy him." He turned to Dumbledore, almost reaching out to him. "The information I passed on was helpful."

"As you said; she was a child. I doubt that she thought anything remarkable about her association with the Dark Lord." Snape frowned and then scowled. "When did she stop talking to you?"

"What?" he responded angrily, taken aback by the harshness and eagerness of Snape's inquiry.

"You said earlier that she sometimes wouldn't speak with you; when did her silences start?"

"I don't know!" he huffed, but part of him was frantically searching for the answer. "I guess they started just before she moved to Andromeda's."

"You guess?" Snape sneered, his lip curling up in barely disguised disgust. "Think hard, Black!"

He ignored Snape and forced himself to relax. He followed a trail of memories back to the early days when he had first met Ophelia; the outrage at the apparent ease of the assignment and the disgust at using the little girl. Her joyous smile as they performed simple and secret magic, and the whoops of delight as she rode on his back, clutching at his fur and kicking his sides, urging him on.

"She was eight when she moved to the Malfoys', and I know that she moved in with Andromeda just before the start of her fifth year." He desperately sought a reference... a clue to pinpoint her change of behaviour. Why hadn't he noticed at the time? Had something happened to overshadow the change in relationship? Then, a memory surfaced like the flick of a shark's fin, inspiring dread and desperation as he battled to stay afloat in the churning waters of his mind. He pursued the elusive memory, diving deeper into the murky depths of his Dementor-affected mind until the memory coalesced into breathtaking clarity.

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She had been at this house; his home until he could no longer stomach the vitriol spewing from his mother's mouth; he had seen her step into the street dressed in black and carrying a small bouquet of purple flowers. Her cheeks had glistened in the mid-afternoon sun, and her red-rimmed eyes stared into the distance. No one else had mourned; they had paid their respects to his mother and father and left without sparing a thought to the young wizard whose body lay somewhere, untended and unclaimed. He had wondered why she wept; had her tears fallen for Regulus or had she shared the burden of shame weighing down on her aunt and uncle? He watched the breeze lift stray tendrils of rich chestnut hair, and he was struck at how different she was; gone was the clumsiness and the fussiness of youth. There stood a young woman with quiet grace and mature composure.

He had given a small whine, and her gaze focused on him sitting in a gap between the laurel hedges surrounding a private garden for the square. Content that she was moving towards him, he shuffled back and into the copse that had sheltered him from time to time when as a child he had needed space. He transformed back into a man, stretched out the kinks in his back as best he could beneath the low branches and settled himself on the cool ground between the roots of a sycamore. He heard the soft crunch of dry grass and the brush of fabric, and then she moved to sit before him on a patch of yellow, sun-starved grass. He noticed her fingers idly plucking at a bouquet of violets, held in a bruising grip.

"I'm surprised you came." Her voice conveyed no such sentiment; in fact, she seemed uncomfortable.

"To be honest, so am I." He watched the torn petals flutter on her lap, and he felt the skin prickle on the nape of his neck. "Why are you here?" He, himself, had been asked by Dumbledore to watch the house and had reluctantly agreed, only to see her unexpected face amongst those supporting his mother.

Her fingers paused in their quiet destruction.

"I came with Narcissa; she's still in the house, comforting your mother." Was there a hint of admonishment in her voice at his absence, or a stray cadence indicating her frustration at her own presence? She turned her face towards the house hidden behind the bushes, and he was just able to catch a glimpse of anger flit across her pale features. Her fingers dug cruelly into the flowers, and she ripped several blossoms free, carelessly scattering them across her lap.

"I take it that congratulations are in order." Sirius said conversationally, only to be surprised when she turned sharply, her expression almost fearful. "I saw the announcement in the *Daily Prophet* that Malfoy had proposed."

She relaxed and gently, consolingly, caressed the remains of the bouquet. "Narcissa certainly seems happy enough with the arrangement."

He recognised the subtle undertones in her voice; on occasion, he had engendered it in the voice of women and tried not to think that she was jealous of Narcissa. He moistened his dry lips and moved forward to gently, reassuringly, squeeze her shoulder, but his hand unthinkingly moved to graze her cheek. Her eyes, moist and unfathomably dark in the shadowed spinney, flickered in surprise and held his gaze. He suddenly felt uncomfortable at the unfamiliar connection and eased himself back until he felt the tree's solid girth behind him. "Will you still be able to stay at Malfoy's after the wedding?"

He sighed in relief when she rolled her eyes, such an innocent, childish gesture that it swamped his rising dread that he had unwittingly crossed some hitherto unseen and unnecessary line.

"Malfoy Manor, according to Lucius," she added so irreverently that Sirius chuckled, "is large enough that we could live side by side for years without actually ever meeting."

"So, you're okay with them?"

He watched her turn to stone as the humour drained from her, smooth, hard and impervious. "Lucius is a perfect match for Narcissa." Her face clouded, and she ran her fingers through the brittle grass. "Besides, I doubt that Lucius will ever ask me to leave." The subtle stress on the name distracted him from her actual words, and he was left wondering if her flare of jealousy was in fact directed towards Lucius for sequestering Narcissa's time and affections. "I'll be fine; it's not as if I didn't know that they were getting married."

A heavy silence settled, and an underlying tension stifled conversation. "It must be pretty dire in there?" Sirius remembered asking lamely in an attempt to prolong her presence and to draw out what was disturbing her.

"I heard your mother talking to Narcissa; she doesn't want a service for Regulus, and she's removed his name from the family tree; there's just a... a... blackened and charred hole in the fabric." Her voice cracked and her shoulders trembled. He saw her screw up her face and bite down hard on her lower lip, and he once more reached out to her, pulling her into a strong embrace. Her hands moved around him, and he felt her fingers dig into the skin on his back while she buried her face in his chest just as she had when she was a little girl. He had been unsure how to comfort her, being uncomfortable with weeping women, himself, and so had resorted to the tried and trusted method of gently rocking and rubbing her back. He had felt dismayed to feel how thin she'd become, even as she gripped him with a fierce strength. He had listened to her stifled mewling sounds and suffered her fingers digging painfully into his back. He crooned softly and whispered in her ear all the nonsense things that he'd heard others say in similar situations while she had taken deep, shuddering breaths. His feet had gone numb from how he was kneeling, and her hip had dug into his thigh, but nothing could have compelled him to release his hold on her. His own breathing had accelerated, a sudden cold sweat chilling him, and he listened to her distress as it almost overwhelmed him. It had taken him a moment to realise that she was muttering something against his chest, and eventually, between the keening sounds and the erratic breaths, he had caught his brother's name.

"He was unfaithful; a disgrace," he had said gently. She had stiffened and then slowly eased herself away, her face flushed, glistening and dappled by golden sunlight filtering through the leaves.

"Mother will never forgive him, Ophelia; he will never deserve it."

He recalled how she had flinched, and fear had slid down his spine to coil in his belly; how tainted was she? Was this display brought on by Regulus' death or the realisation of the fate awaiting anyone unfaithful? He had mentally cursed Dumbledore for allowing this situation to continue, to have kept an innocent in such filth for scraps of information. Her eyes, bloodshot and swollen, had focused on him with such intensity that he shivered.

"Aunty says that you are unfaithful," she had whispered. "Perhaps you are more like Regulus than you think?"

Releasing her and resting back on his heels, he had allowed the anger to break through the dismay and despair that her outpouring had evoked. "Regulus and I are nothing alike. If you knew him, then you'd see the difference; don't compare us on a few comments raised by her."

The vehemence in his voice had made her blanch and recoil.

"Look! Regulus made a mistake, and he died because of it. If he had come to me, I could have helped him." He remembered how he had felt panic and dread swirl unpleasantly in his gut as he tried to convince her that he could protect her. He had pulled her into his arms, not noticing at the time that her arms had stayed stiffly at her sides. "If someone ever tries to push you into doing anything that you don't want, then please come to me. I can protect you. Do you understand, Ophelia? You don't have to get burned like he did." He had willed her to understand; tried to convey his unspoken offer through tone of voice and fierce grip; he had thrummed with the silent plea that she would just know. Gently pushing her away and scrutinising her face, he had hoped to see some spark of comprehension, but her expression had been frantic.

She pulled herself free and stared at him with fearful eyes and slightly parted lips, the lower lip swollen and bloodied. Now that he viewed the memory dispassionately, he noticed her right hand slip into the folds of her robes and, with a thrill of horror, realised that while he had comforted her, she had armed herself.

"Regulus," she had whispered harshly, "didn't make any mistakes; that's why he died."

He had misinterpreted her, believing her to advocate Regulus' decision to join Voldemort and his rising panic had clouded his thinking. He could not bear the thought of another slipping into the quagmire that had suffocated his brother, whom he had once loved. In his desperation, he had lunged for her, but she scurried backwards, the laurel leaves fanning out as she pushed into the hedge. His heart had leapt into his throat; he did not want to be the one who pushed her into their arms just as Mother had pushed his brother. Swallowing rapidly and backing away, shocked at how easily he had lost control, he recalled trying to ease her alarm and fear. Ophelia, however, had remained crouched against the bush, staring at him, aghast at his actions and panting slightly.

"I'm sorry. I guess that his death bothered me more than I thought."

She had nodded slowly and eased away from the hedge, but he knew that she was far from content. He had tried to lighten the mood and had chuckled at the sight of leaves in her hair.

"I have to get back to Narcissa," she had said while pulling small twigs from her hair.

He took one of her hands as she moved away and had been disheartened to see her grimace at the contact.

"When can I see you again?"

She turned to him, but had kept her eyes locked on the tree behind him. "I don't know. Everything is a little confused at the moment; Regulus' death seems to have hit a lot of people hard."

"Do they know how he died?"

He had been chilled by the vicious smile curving her lips, and now he wondered if Snape's suspicions regarding her involvement in Regulus' death were valid.

"No." She looked up at him, all malicious humour gone, and smiled sadly. "People will ask themselves that for years, thinking that it is the most important question."

"Well," he had demanded, annoyed at her flippant observation, "in your opinion, what is the most important question?"

She cocked her head to the side, and her smile was indulgent. She leant towards him until she could whisper in his ear. The sensation of warm breath across his cheek and neck had sent a tingling wave rolling across his skin. "The most important question, dear Padfoot, is why did he choose to die?"

Her face was flushed, and her eyes glittered disturbingly as he gripped her shoulders and pushed her back. He had smiled sympathetically and shaken his head in confusion. "Ophelia," he had explained gently and slowly, "Regulus wanted something that he couldn't have, and he was killed because of it."

"He wasn't killed," she responded shrilly, her mouth twisting into a furious scowl. "He chose to die, and do you know what the worst of it all is?"

He shook his head in confusion, anger and trepidation running rampant.

"The worst thing is that his part in it will never be known. His hand in it will go unrewarded and unacknowledged, and all the time, people like you will consider themselves to be the heroes."

His temper had flared, and he remembered gripping her shoulders with bruising force. "He was no hero, Ophelia. He was a Death Eater!" He could feel an echo of the anger and desperation that had seized him as he sat in his kitchen, remembering something that he couldn't have forgotten. "Regulus was an impressionable fool! He was shown his destiny and didn't have the brains or guts to change it. He chose his path and got what he deserved."

"You left him there!" she had hissed out through clenched teeth. "Perhaps if you hadn't been so self-obsessed, then you would have protected him better instead of leaving him to the wolves." She inverted the tattered flowers and had shoved the bouquet forcefully into his chest, her face twisted with anger and disgust.

"What?" he snapped, reflexively grabbing the bouquet and relinquishing his hold on her. "You never even knew him!"

Her face had paled dramatically, and her eyes widened in fear. Sirius had an idea what would happen soon; the fact that up until this moment he had no recollection of any such meeting in the hedges allowed him to come to a disturbing conclusion. He had remembered watching the house for several hours but recalled that he had gained nothing to show for it but a few muscle pains and a headache, not even the petals fluttering in the dirt. In the memory, Sirius watched in disbelief as she deftly pulled out her wand and aimed it between his eyes. Behind the glowing and unwavering tip, he saw tears running down her pale face and her lips quivering with despair.

"I'm sorry."

He had moved to stop her, but her whispered spell struck him in the throat.

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"She Obliviated me!"

At Dumbledore's insistence, he recounted his memory to them, too shocked at the discovery to care that Snape was gloating, or that the headmaster looked agitated. He hinted at the distress she was concealing, whether it was caused by her cousin's impending marriage or the apparent sense of betrayal overshadowing Regulus' murder. With a lead weight in his stomach and a hitch in his voice, he mentioned her careless reference to Regulus and her terror upon realising it. He kept his gaze fixed on Dumbledore's lower lip; he could not bring himself to look at Snape's face. No matter how he looked at the memory, the condemning fact remained that she had known Regulus and knew something of his death, which was more than anyone else. He could not bring himself to truly believe that she had been directly responsible for his brother's death, but the doubt instilled by his own recollection and Snape's observations allowed him to concede that she may have had a hand in it after all. But those flowers still haunted him; those differing shades of velvety blue with their yellow tinged hearts, held in a white knuckled grip and torn apart by frantic fingers.

Dumbledore frowned; whatever answers he had hoped to uncover, he had not expected anything quite so damning. He had hoped that Ophelia had begun to walk her own path away from the darkness that had consumed the majority of her family, but the two wizards confirmed his worst suspicion. He had no choice but to find her. He could not risk leaving her in the Muggle world; it was not unheard of for someone to spontaneously recover from memory modification curses. Neither could he guarantee that she would remain undiscovered. He had hoped that she would join them willingly, but either way, he would use the invaluable information that he believed lay in the depths of her damaged mind. He glanced over at Snape, who had his habitual scowl in place but seemed to be directing it at some inner turmoil; no doubt he was re-evaluating his relationship with the young girl. A shiver ran down his spine at the implications of her apparent devout loyalty to Voldemort; for his spy, the ramifications would far outweigh any familial disillusionment on Sirius' behalf.

"Severus, how does this affect you?"

Snape rested his forearms on the table and clasped his hands together. "I see no reason that she should endanger my role. Our meetings were quite amicable, and it is possible that her influence, should it remain in effect, would in fact be beneficial." Despite the optimism, his scowl remained as potent as ever.

"Of course it would; friends with a budding Death Eater cosy with the Dark Lord!" Sirius replied hotly, his voice filled with bitterness.

"She was eight," Snape responded disdainfully, "and, as you say, cosy with a man who once told her stories, and not with a despotic overlord bent on cleansing the Wizarding world. By the time Ophelia was sixteen, she would have gained enough political acumen to realise that refusal would have earned her a painful death and that compliance would guarantee her a future, even if it would be bleak." He slid his hands off the table and hugged his ribs sullenly.

"So you agree with me that she won't join Vol...er Him?"

Snape suddenly shot forward and from behind his lank black hair fixed him with a baleful gale. "Do you understand nothing?" A fleck of foamy spittle landed on his upper lip, and his nostrils quivered as rapid puffs of air passed through them. "She has spent years within their grasp, subtly learning that he is all-powerful and without mercy; learning that he is life and death." His face was red and trembled, his eyes were glinting shards of flint, and his voice was scathing in its contempt. "Her fear will encourage her to seek him out. Her fear will keep her loyal."

Loyalty: the notion sent his mind back into his memory; he kept seeing her delicate fingers destroy the violets as if some clue to her thinking, to her soul, could be divined from the pattern of twisted and torn petals littering her lap. There was something about violets; he had the vague and unreasonable impression that the flowers were somehow more relevant than their unthinking destruction. An image of Professor Sprout came to mind, humming as she wove a garland of ivy and periwinkle blossoms, and her blush when she noticed him watching her from the doorway.

"If we could allay her fears, convince her of her safety, would she be content to stay with us?"

Snape eased back, his face schooled into impassivity as he turned to face Dumbledore. "It would take a great deal of encouragement and effort, and even then, I doubt that she could be entirely trusted."

The concept of Snape attacking the trustworthiness of another rankled Sirius, and he turned from his inward musings to glare incredulously at the sullen man across from him. "We have to trust you!"

A muscle along Snape's jaw twitched and he flashed Sirius a look of pure venom. "Her every waking moment as a witch has been overshadowed and influenced by the Dark Lord; he has affected her far more profoundly than many of his devout followers and as such has a much more powerful hold over her. I was merely pointing out that she may unconsciously continue to assist him."

"As I cannot leave her in the Muggle world, that is a risk I will have to take."

"Wait!" Sirius forced out through a constricted throat and held the headmaster's gaze beseechingly. "I thought that she'd be left alone." He licked his lips and fidgeted on the wooden chair. "Surely, we could just leave her; after all, we're the only ones who know about her."

"It is pure luck that she's managed to stay hidden for so long without the Ministry or Riddle discovering her." Dumbledore looked discomforted. "I fear that we have no choice but to find her and protect her as best we can." He seemed to shirk off the sudden anxiety and smiled warmly at the two wizards. "I think it best if we treat her as a misplaced witch and deal with the more complex issues when we've been able to ascertain her proclivities."

Sirius shook his head and mouthed wordlessly. The implications were staggering. "We're just going to keep her? We're just going to grab her and lock her away?"

"Until the threat is over, I can see no other way of keeping her safe." He smiled sadly at Sirius, conveying in that slightly trembling quirk of the lips that there was no argument potent enough to rescind the decision and that this must be suffered with grace: Sirius' protest died in his throat. Dumbledore inhaled deeply and patted his chest. "I think that given the hour, we shall continue to discuss Ophelia another time, perhaps closer to when we have found her." He stood and surreptitiously stretched the tight muscles in his back. "Thank you for the tea, Sirius, and your time. Severus has a batch of Wolfsbane potion for Remus and a list of instructions for its usage, and now I must return to Hogwarts."

Snape bent down and lifted his bag onto the table. Sirius gave it a curious glance before following the headmaster into the hallway. He lifted down Dumbledore's jacket and held it out for him. "Headmaster?" He queried softly and securely, knowing that Snape was still in the kitchen fussing over his phials.

"Yes, my boy?"

"It's a little strange, but..." he stumbled over the absurdity of it, but Dumbledore's gentle curiosity encouraged him. "In the memory, Ophelia was carrying a bouquet of violets."

"Really!"

"Yes," he continued, heartened by Dumbledore's lack of criticism and derision. "I don't know why, but I have the feeling that they were somehow important, or at least that she did." He floundered for a moment as he tried to put across how deeply he had responded to witnessing their ruination. "She was casually tearing them apart, and when she accused me of leaving Regulus, she practically threw them at me."

Dumbledore's eyes flickered over his face before he gave another sad little smile and laid a hand gently on Sirius' shoulder. "I can't think of the relevance just yet, but a chat with Professor Sprout will undoubtedly yield something. Violets, you say." His gaze drifted off and he patted Sirius absentmindedly. "Lovely flowers. Oh well," he sighed, plucking his hat from Sirius' hands, "mustn't dally." He stepped over the threshold, only to startle Sirius by suddenly spinning on his heel to face him. "Oh, while I'm here, it gives me the opportunity to see if you're amenable to a little company."

His grip on the door tightened and his mouth went dry. "You mean Harry?"

Dumbledore gave a broad smile and nodded. "I was also thinking of asking Mrs. Weasley and a few others to help with giving the house a good airing."

Sirius sagged against the doorframe and grinned madly. "The more the merrier!"

Dumbledore nodded once more and, with a flourish, donned his hat and promptly Disapparated.

"I have left seven phials on the table with a list of simple instructions, and now I have things to attend to, Black." Snape's voice echoed in the hallway and grated down Sirius' nerves. "So, will you end this immature posturing and allow me to pass?"

The giddy euphoria inspired by Dumbledore's request came crashing down, and the belligerence that only Snape could incite rushed up to fill the void. He slowly turned to face Snape. The pallid face was oddly striking, a dash of light against the smothering gloom of the hallway; should Snape turn away, the shadows would swallow him up. Snape's arms were folded tightly across his chest, and his right hand was undoubtedly reaching into a pocket to remove his wand, and a disdainful sneer played about the man's mouth.

"It must gall you to be at his beck and call, on a leash and down at his heel." Black said smoothly.

He seemed nonchalant enough, leaning against the door frame, his arms folded across his chest and one leg carelessly crossing the other at the ankles, but Snape knew that the wizard seethed with anger and disappointment.

"No more than it pains you to be kennelled."

Sirius pushed himself away from the doorway and took a step towards him, slowly lowering his arms; Snape glanced down at Sirius' empty hands so quickly that Sirius almost missed it. "Enjoy this while you can, Snivellus," he whispered softly. "When they finally come to their senses and see you for what you really are, they will leave you to rot in Hell."

"As they left you."

Sirius felt his fingernails bite into his palms and yearned to smash his fist into the smirking face before him.

"Oh, yes, Black," Snape continued, breathlessly and ruthlessly, "it must hurt to know that after seeing the worst in both of us they gave me sanctuary and yet left you to waste in Azkaban." He smiled as he watched the mutt's mouth open and close in silent rage. "Tell me, when they have eased their own consciences regarding their desertion of you and they return to those memories with less clouded eyes, will they, I wonder, see that your arrogance and yours alone instigated the subsequent years of misery? Will they forgive that?"

The thought of it stole his breath, and the blood drained from his face so quickly he actually felt it. His thoughts had barely skittered over the concept, uneasy with the repercussions, and certainly no one had hinted at it, much less express it so forthrightly. He rallied; he knew his own actions and behaviour had condemned him; how could he blame them for believing the worst? He had forgiven them, hadn't he? They had forgiven him? He forced himself to stare Snape in the eye, but the man had used the distraction to slip past him into the dimly lit street. He caught a glimpse of a black coat disappear into the shadows and then a muted pop. Cursing softly, he began to push the door closed and ran a trembling hand through his limp hair, grimacing at the feel of grease. He thought back to the uncomfortable and stilted conversations with Lupin when he had sought shelter with his friend. They had reached some resolution; achieved some reconciliation. He was sure that Lupin understood and accepted the motives regarding his fateful decision to make Pettigrew the Potter's Secret Keeper. Without thought, he allowed the door to bang shut, and with a high-pitched shriek, the large portrait behind its tattered curtain sprang to vitriolic life.

"YOU! YOU BLOOD TRAITOR! YOU FOUL BETRAYER! YOU DO NOT DESERVE TO LIVE! YOU WORTHLESS WORM, YOU SURVIVE TO CORRUPT THIS HOUSE! I SHOULD HAVE THROTTLED YOU WITH YOUR CORD AND SAVED OUR NOBLE HOUSE THE DISGRACE!"

Sirius listened, his breath coming in short, laboured gulps, and his body trembling with the effort of merely standing. Her words echoed his own swirling, treacherous thoughts, drawing them out until, with a barely contained sob, he was sucked down into a maelstrom of self-loathing and suffocating despair. James Potter's face shimmered into focus, the grey eyes red-rimmed from exhaustion and sunken from months of worry. He had pulled off his glasses and pressed the heel of his palm into his eyes and then fixed Sirius with a beseeching and desperate look. He remembered with painful clarity the moment that James had asked him to be Secret Keeper. His friend had come close to begging, and the sight had plucked at his heartstrings until his chest had hurt from the pressure.

He had promised.

He had felt James' fingertips bite into the flesh on his arms and heard the tremble in his voice as his red-rimmed eyes darted over his face.

He had promised.

Sirius lurched down the hallway into the parlour, his mother's screeching voice muffled by distance and the pounding thoughts in his own head. Had James suspected Peter but not wanted to believe? Sirius howled and clutched his head. The desperate and waxen features of his friend morphed into the pink, glistening face of Peter. The young man's face was lit up with eager anticipation as Sirius demanded that he become the Potter's Secret Keeper. He had put the unshed tears and the hitching breaths down to burgeoning pride and awe.

He had promised James.

He recalled the anger while digging through the wreckage at Godric's Hollow, the anger that evaporated his desperation and his shock. He had sobbed when he found the little bundle in the charred but miraculously intact cot and had succumbed to the remorse and regret that had scratched unheeded at his insides. He remembered placing Harry into Hagrid's arms when his anger gave him the strength to function. The half-giant had not protested or queried; he simply held the trembling and sniffling baby in his arms and let his own fat tears drip onto the pastel blue blanket.

He had promised.

Sirius yanked open a small cabinet and used his forearm to shove the delicate crystal glasses out of the way, not caring as they smashed on the floor, and his eager fingers slipped over the decanters until his eyes alighted upon an amber coloured liquid. He pulled it free from its stand and reached for a glass, cursing as he saw the glittering remains on the floor. Removing the stopper, he upended the decanter and greedily swallowed the liquid, oblivious to the excess running down his cheeks and chin, mingling with his tears.

He had promised.

He drank until he was forced to take a breath, and gasping and crying, moaning and sobbing, he collapsed into the rotting, leather chair, cuddling the decanter to his chest and mumbling to the lengthening shadows.

He had promised.

Chapter Three

Chapter 3 of 36

The search continues, causing ripples within the Ministry, and an old friend of Moody's comes to the rescue.

Chapter Three.

Alastor Moody stood across from the decrepit house and watched the Healers levitate Sigmund Norwood's body out of the front door and free from the anti-Apparition Charms. With a series of pops, they disappeared, leaving sombre Aurors to assess the scene of Norwood's death. Some of them were young enough to feel outrage at the death of a hero; however, one who remembered him loitered on the front step, illuminated by the torches flickering in the large porch. Moody waited until the last of the eager Aurors scurried into the house before detaching himself from the shadows and limping across the dark courtyard.

A bent wizard with scars as deep and terrible as his own met his eye and nodded a respectful greeting. Moody hobbled up the stone steps and settled himself next to the other wizard in the storm porch. His shoulder scraped against the stone bricks, dislodging ancient cocoons and the desiccated insect remains of a spider's feast. His companion deftly flicked his wand, and a thin wall of light shimmered in front of them, sealing the alcove off from the rest of the building. It distorted the outside view as if they were standing behind a gentle waterfall.

"Can't be too careful," griped the old man. "These whippersnappers were taught that old Sigmund was a great defender, a good man doing what was necessary to overcome a terrible evil. We o' course know better, but I can't say that the myth doesn't have its uses; his untimely demise will remind all o' 'em that even the so-called great and good can be surprised by their past catching up to 'em." His tone was light and bland, but Moody had known Onesiphorus Smith since their days as Auror trainees and knew that as his temper shortened, the more conversational he became.

A young Auror bounded out of the door; ignoring the old men, he quickly Disapparated.

"See that! Eh, Alastor?" Smith snorted contemptuously. "Don't train 'em right these days. Here's a pretty powerful Privacy Charm right under their noses, and they don't even think to check it out. Assumptions!"

Onesiphorus was tall, but injury and age had bent his back, giving him the appearance of a veteran vulture, and just like that carrion eater, he could smell a kill a mile away.

"Just like the assumption that it's suspicious that, after twenty years, Norwood's name should crop up in general conversation and then within forty-eight hours we should find ourselves here, attending the scene o' his murder."

He sucked thoughtfully on his front teeth and slowly shook his head. "Terrible tragedy. I thought I'd come and show my respects...see if I could help in any way." His face twisted into a sneer as he spoke, indicating the shallow depth of both his grief and respect.

"Now," he said cheerfully, "I dare say that the first thing to do in such circumstances is determine if the victim had any enemies; in this case, o' course, you'd be spoilt for choice. Next, it'd be wise to place some o' 'em at the scene at right about the time o' the crime. O' course, some of his enemies were pretty canny and would have thought o' that, and perhaps someone coming here just for a chat, you know, to catch up on old times, would make a pretty good distraction for Aurors still wet behind the ears." Smith sniffed disapprovingly, as if deceit was worse than murder. He reached into his pocket and withdrew a ball of fluff consisting of wiry grey hairs and stiff, black fibres.

Moody stared at them and then slowly lifted his arm to gently pluck the evidence from his friend's arthritic fingers.

"It seems to me that the visitor don't deserve the aggravation whilst a murdering piece of shite is free to gloat about his success." The old Auror leant forwards, and Moody found himself momentarily caught in an intense, green gaze. "Seems to me that someone needs to be more careful."

There was the mildest hint of concern in Smith's voice, and Moody wondered what had been unleashed in his quest for a lost witch. He nodded, gratified that his friend knew and trusted him well enough to pick up the planted evidence.

"Not more'n three hours after you say you want to go over the Ophelia Black case, and Scrimgeour comes into the office asking for all information centring on the case to be transferred to another Auror. I, o' course, asks why and gets the Glare o' Messy Death for my pains and a swift reassignment to monitoring Muggle-borns at home, in

case the little cherubs should start levitating aunts or something." He flashed Moody a grin and then sighed softly. "I gets to me office and hears that there's been an incident here involving Norwood. Well, me mind gets to thinking, and I come to take a look, and the first thing I find here is something o' yours. So, it struck me that someone's getting a bit bothered by the renewed interest in the old case."

He glanced back through the charm at the young Aurors. "I'm allowed to stay here, keeping an eye on things, because I managed to convince the Auror in charge," he grimaced once again, as if chewing something distasteful, "that I was a close personal friend of Sigmund's and wanted to help...played the dodderly old Auror desperate for some glory routine. So, on the face of it, I'd suggest you keep your head down for a while."

"Bit difficult at the moment." While his natural eye studied his friend, the other one rotated and focused on the bustling, yet incredibly unproductive, activity within the house. He cringed as the inexperienced Aurors cast spells, smothering the echoes of previously cast magic and trampling over potential sources of physical evidence, thus ruining the scene of the crime. These things needed subtlety and a gentle touch, and the in-situ Aurors possessed neither. He shifted his grip on the head of his walking stick and thoughtfully rolled the fibres between his thumb and forefinger. Smith was right; these incompetent Aurors would destroy all evidence save for a few magically-insensitive hairs and black cotton and, infused with righteous wrath at the death of a hero, seek him out. He felt a chill grip the back of his neck; someone was keen enough to watch him and smart enough to use him.

"Something I can help yer with?" Smith smiled wryly at his expression. "Come on, old man; I may have been out of action for fifteen years, but I was still quick enough to pull yer out of the shit before yer even smelt it."

Moody still held the proof of his friend's loyalty and quick wits in his fingers and nodded appreciatively. "You could do some rummagin' around and find out who recommended the files to be transferred and to whom."

"Do we have any leads?"

He glanced at the strands of grey hair catching the torchlight and frowned. "Yeah, check out anyone who has links to Death Eaters."

Smith nodded and glanced through the charm to see two Aurors saunter out of the house; one of them used his wand tip to scratch his scalp. Moody stiffened and pointed towards the offender. "Stupid boy!"

"Yes," agreed Smith, "elementary wand safety just isn't appreciated anymore. So," he said, smirking, "how *is* your left buttock cheek these days?"

Smith had been a fixture within the Magical Law Enforcement offices since many of the current senior officers were juniors, and since many of them had thought of him as a harmless relic, they now hardly thought of him at all. He could go anywhere, unnoticed and unchallenged, and to him it was better than any Disillusionment Charm or Invisibility Blanket. He had strolled down to the archives, and the Auror on duty, supposedly protecting the vaulted vaults, had released the wards unquestioningly. The guard was more content to grumble about how his superiors had once again passed over him for promotion and wholeheartedly agreeing that he was being wasted, watching over a pile of dusty and mouldering scrolls. The only attention he gave to his role was to dutifully print Smith's name in a large, tatty, leather-bound ledger before directing him graciously towards the archive.

The torches embedded in the mottled stone architrave flickered to life as the doors boomed shut behind Smith. The warm, twisting light made shadows leap over the rows of shelving that ascended and extended beyond his ability to see. To his left, a circular table of highly polished wood glistened like gold in the light, and a simple, dark, leather wing-back chair with clawed feet was angled invitingly. There were no windows, harking back to the early days when the archive was simply a room to store scrolls, and the written words had to be protected from the leeching light. Only the ends of each rack were illuminated by the flickering pre-emptive torches, but they gave enough light to imprint upon the observer the sheer cavernous nature of the room. It took his breath away each and every time.

The archive was elegantly designed and simple to use: depending upon the search criteria, the archive would present information alphabetically, chronologically or, if there was doubt, then keywords could be used. He stepped forward and casually noted that the two shelves nearest to him contained material pertaining to the latter part of the fifteen hundreds.

"Nineteen-eighty-two," he whispered respectfully. Some people felt compelled to shout, to fill the vastness of the room, but he knew that this place heard the quiet scuttling of spiders. The shelves vibrated slightly; he could feel it through the soles of his boots, and they ponderously began to slide to the left. He had groaned with futile impatience when, as a young Auror, his mentor had dragged him down here, and he had seen the shelves begin their slow march. His mentor, a grizzled and scarred Auror by the name of Jenkins, had chuckled indulgently and counted down from five, his eyes twinkling with not unkind mirth. As Jenkins silently mouthed 'one', it seemed as if the room exhaled sharply and the shelves suddenly blurred past. He likened it to the dizzying thrill he had relished when as a child he had pressed his face to the window of the Knight Bus and watched the night whiz frantically by.

Four hundred years whipped by, and with a grind of wood against stone, the shelving slowed, quivered and then stopped. The silver plate flashed golden in the torchlight, and without needing to check, he descended into the gloom between the looming stacks. No torchlight lit his way, but he had been here countless times, and he knew that light would explode like blossoms from an unseen, hovering bud. Sure enough, as he stepped from the edges of firelight, and before his foot fell into shadow, an eye-stinging light flared, bathing him and the shelves in silver light. He waited for his eyes to adjust and then stepped past the column for 1980 to its neighbouring column, barely a half a foot wide with an engraved plate bearing the year 1981...the year of Ophelia's death. When his finger brushed over the metal plaque, the rather diffuse light from the gently bobbing orb focused on the column. Underneath each niche, glowing figures appeared on the dark wood, indicating that each slot represented one day of that fateful year. He gripped the base of a niche and pushed down hard. With a soft sound, the entire illuminated section of shelving slipped freely downwards, the records of one second past midnight on 1st January 1981 disappearing into the stone floor. He repeated the motion several times until glittering numbers informed him that he had reached the required niche for his day...2nd September.

The archive had always fascinated him, the way that magic would distort space so that each row held a decade, each column held a year and each niche a day. A day's worth of opened investigations, of Ministerial debates meticulously recorded by fluttering charmed quills. A day's worth of court cases and criminal records, printed news in every Wizarding publication, and the births, deaths and marriages of every witch and wizard. The Wizarding world, from the tedious to the notorious, was stored here, trapped on vellum or paper and tied in ribbons; a wondrous gift for the curious. Of course, only scrolls that were over five years old and no longer active were stored here. The scrolls not archived were held by the relevant department of the Ministry with ferocious tenacity. However, in the archive, where secrets had long been betrayed or disclosed, the scrolls from all Ministry departments were laid to rest together and, for the most part, forgotten.

"Ophelia Black; inquest reference AM five-one-three, seven-four-two." He felt the niche vibrate, and with a faint sound of paper scratching against wood, a thick scroll popped into being. He gently removed it and untied the black ribbon from around its middle, taking a firmer hold as the restrained paper relaxed with a rasping sigh. He gripped the curling edges and unrolled it further, his eyes catching words such as 'tragedy' and 'accident'. The report was crisp in its description of the chaos and confusion facing the Aurors when they Apparated into the Muggle train station and concise in its recording of the actions taken. Moody had always been very particular and precise. According to the scroll, the investigation had been open for three days before, with an ineligious scrawl confirming the exactitude and finality of the investigation, Moody had rolled the scroll, and Ophelia was dead. He let go of the base and let the scroll curl up.

"Ophelia Black. All." Once again, the niche trembled as the archive searched its own deep recesses and spewed forth six scrolls, each one tied with a differently hued ribbon, each one from a different department within the Ministry. Somehow, and he suspected some subtle intelligence at work, the archive knew to restrict its search to the same Ophelia Black that he had originally identified, rather than trawl through its entirety; its response was always rapid and relevant. At a glance, he saw a slender scroll wrapped with a ribbon of richest twilight; golden ribbon shimmered on two other scrolls, a thicker scroll curled within bonds of emerald green, and a thin scroll sported a tie of sapphire blue. The last one lurked in shadow, marked with an ominously black ribbon.

"Follow!" he commanded, and the scrolls levitated in clumsy obedience.

As he stepped from between the racks, the dazzling light blinked off, and the torches began to burn once more. Smith walked stiffly towards the table and the comfort of the leather chair with the scrolls dipping and swaying precariously in the air behind him. He sat himself down, and the scrolls fluttered onto the table. Another feature of the archive that both astounded and comforted him was the absolute privacy it afforded its patrons. The same magic that existed within Time Turners resided in the very stone

of this room; each visitor or group had their own private slice of time to walk the shelves and read the archives, and as such, no scroll was ever unavailable. On leaving, to maintain normal time lines, the magic merely determined the length of time in the room and added it to the time you entered. The archive was no means to twist time for personal gain; if you were in it for an hour, then an hour it would be.

He slid the scrolls closer and selected one with a golden ribbon. It unfurled between his fingers to reveal an application and acceptance for guardianship. After the death of Capella Black, her brother, Alphard Black, had petitioned to be Ophelia's legal guardian. Social nurses had investigated the petition and determined that he and his wife, Elladora, were both financially and emotionally prepared to care for a four-year-old orphan, and the request was freely granted. The scroll contained the limited personal information of the young child: her age, four, and magical status, witch, the name of her mother, Capella Black, and the fact that the father was unknown. The child had been placed with Muggle Social Services after the police had been called by a concerned neighbour and discovered the daughter, exhausted and cuddling the cold corpse of her mother. Ministry officials had smoothed the way for the child to be placed with her aunt and uncle, and so she had been sucked into a world that her mother had abandoned. The second golden scroll, as expected, was the transfer of guardianship from the deceased couple to Madam Andromeda Tonks.

With a soft sigh, he allowed the scroll to curl in on itself and reached for another, avoiding the thin scroll with its purple band. The emerald green ribbon fluttered from his fingers, and he pulled open the scroll. The first article to be written about her in the *Daily Prophet* centred on her rescue from the Muggle world following the suspicious death of her mother in Cumbria. The *Daily Prophet* placed such heavy emphasis on the Ministry's decision to investigate that many readers had been convinced of some insidious plot by Muggles to hunt down solitary wizards. To quell anti-Muggle sentiments, the law enforcement officers had decided to publish the results of the investigation: Capella Black had died from the Killing Curse; no Muggle could have been responsible. Hushed whispers abounded that You-Know-Who had done it, and stifled rumours sputtered that it had been a suicide. Other articles delved into the alleged dark history of Capella and spewed out unproven opinions and unanswerable accusations. Smith sniffed and huffed in disgust at the calumny at its most tantalising and most cruel without prospect of rebuttal or response. Other articles followed her and reported when she settled with the Blacks, the obituaries of her guardians, Narcissa Black's marriage, and, of course, her own death. His eyes flicked over the text, and he resolved himself to ask for a copy to peruse at his leisure later.

The sapphire blue scroll was the last will and testament of Elladora Demeter Black, and Ophelia's name appeared on a codicil bequeathing her the contents of vault 759, deep in the bowels of Gringotts bank.

The penultimate scroll sprung open upon its release and rocked slowly on its curve, the exposed ink glistening like blood in the firelight. He knew what it was without smoothing the paper flat; he'd seen that deep shade of purple on many scrolls, sometimes well before he thought was right. He used his fingertips to pin the scroll flat and peered down his crooked nose at the elegant copperplate disguising the harsh missive: a death certificate. Death was determined and pronounced to have occurred at nineteen minutes past eight on the evening of 2nd September 1981. The cause of death was severe burns due to her involvement in the train accident and deemed accidental. Smith let go and the paper curled up. He focused on the last scroll, an Auror investigation involving a death, and suspected that it regarded Capella Black's.

The Aurors sent to the scene had been as thorough as possible, given that police, doctors and neighbours had trudged through the terrace house in Hampton Place. There had been no signs of a struggle, no broken furniture, nor the tell-tale traces of wildly cast magic clinging to the walls and bed linen. There had been no signs of forced entry, no broken glass or split, wooden window frames, and no isolated footprints on the burgundy carpet of an Apparating trespasser.

The Muggle coroners had been forced to reach an open verdict until wizards had Obliviated them and explained that the unfortunate woman had a congenital heart weakness and had died suddenly and peacefully in her sleep. The slim, tapered piece of polished hawthorn that had fallen from limp fingers and rolled under the metal framed bed had been eliminated from their records as easily as from their minds. The Aurors had forced the wand to regurgitate its most recent spells, and from its belly it had spewed green light. The Aurors had studied the gathered evidence from police files and their own findings and sadly concluded that she had cast the Killing Curse upon herself. The Auror reports and the summary were all that documented the life and death of an unremarkable witch from a notorious family. Ophelia had been prised from her mother's eternal embrace by a neighbour and collected four days later by her aunt and uncle.

He may not have acquired, through experience and natural predisposition, the level of cynicism and paranoia cultivated by Alastor Moody, but he had what he called 'feelings'. These unquantifiable and indescribable sensations had, more often than not, panned out into solid truths, and even Moody had once learnt to trust them. Smith's feelings were currently fluttering in his stomach and crawling up his spine. Even the most in-depth and finicky of investigations yielded loose ends or threw up unanswered questions, and yet this collection of scrolls neatly and comprehensively tied everything up. In a time when people craved simplicity, the incomplete reports were accepted and the unasked questions dismissed; Capella Black had committed suicide, and Ophelia Black had died in a train wreck. It was not unheard of for a wizard to end their lives with the Killing Curse, and it certainly raised no doubts as to the sincerity of the desire to die, but he could not find one good reason as to why Capella would kill herself with no provision or thought for her daughter. As to Ophelia's apparent death, he could not accept that Moody had somehow fumbled the investigation. The man was too pedantic to make simple errors; besides, forensic evidence would have been gathered and tested in one of the Ministry labs to determine the identities of the badly burnt corpses. The probability of two procedures delivering similarly erroneous results were far too infinitesimal to bother calculating and far too worrisome to ponder.

He made copies of the scrolls with a simple Duplication Charm, and after reducing them, he shoved the copies into his breast pocket and Banished the originals back to their niche. The doors opened silently as he moved to leave, and in the hallway he caught an eerie glimpse of dozens of blurred figures comprised of smoke walking back and forth and through each other before he was returned to real time. The hallway was gloomy and deserted. The dour-faced Auror was still hunched over his *Daily Prophet* and adopting the pained expression particular to those people attempting crossword puzzles slightly out of their grasp. Smith coughed delicately. The guard huffed impatiently, slowly lowered the paper and twisted in his seat to grab the thick, tattered ledger nestled under the counter. He slid the book towards Smith, who obligingly signed his name in the out column while his eyes darted surreptitiously over the page, noting the names of recent users.

"All done then?" the guard queried apathetically before picking up his abandoned newspaper and returning to agonise over Two Down.

Smith bade the engrossed guard a stiff farewell and hobbled back along the dreary corridor. He needed a place to think and a place to plan his next move.

Minerva blew over the surface of her chamomile tea and looked out of the arched and criss-crossed leaded window. Summer was rapidly slipping into autumn, and in the highlands, the decline was far more noticeable. Although the sky was a vivid blue and the early morning sun felt strong as it pierced the slim window, she could see trees twisting in a strong, bitter wind and the distant peaks that were coated with early snow. She shivered and took a sip of tea, glad that she was tucked in her office with a roaring fire and a thick shawl. Perhaps later, when the morning chill had passed, she would take a stroll by the lake to sit beneath the large beech tree and watch the sunlight filter through the autumn-tinted leaves. She had sat there once as a student, so full of promise and dreams, her life opening out before her, so dazzled by choices that it had stolen her breath. It would be nice to try to capture that energy and vigour, that undaunted expectation that life would unfurl as it should.

Her office window overlooked the inner courtyard where students would congregate, protected by the tall, grey stone of the school, and chatter like raucous birds. It was in this enclosed area that Madam Hooch introduced the first years to flying, and from this window that she had witnessed Harry Potter's breathtaking skills on a broom. She exhaled softly at the memory and shuddered; the echo of her horror at watching his plummeting dive still had the power to accelerate her heart and make her skin tingle.

She glanced at the complex Arithmancy clock charmed to the wall, its numerous golden hands rotating and jerking around the mother-of-pearl face with its concentric arrangement of runes, alchemical and astronomical symbols. At her request, Dumbledore had charmed a clock face onto the contraction in pale oyster pink, and to avoid entanglement in the workings of the clock, the numbers had been spelled to change colour to indicate the hour and the minute. It was a beautiful clock of glittering metals on a smooth pearlescent face, ensconced in a rich mahogany wooden frame. She often watched the intricate hands move in precise and delicate detail, but as their meaning eluded her, it was just a wonderful gadget, which whirred and ticked in a soothing rhythm. The numbers eight and three glowed, blue and red respectively; quarter past eight.

Without the students to fill the day and steal the time, the days seemed to drag...now more so than ever. Sighing gently, she turned to her desk and the piles of parchment and envelopes; in anticipation, the quill quivered to attention and dipped itself eagerly into the pot of green ink. It was not difficult to find some task to help pass the time and occupy her mind, and now, as she was forced to wait, she craved that distraction. The names of potential students blurred before her eyes, and several letters had been reduced to ash as her mind drifted to the stone corridors within the Ministry of Magic. The quill scratched across the rough paper, and her fingernails beat a tattoo against the table; would Harry be outside the Improper use of Magic Office? Would he have the same intense agitation swirling in his stomach and playing havoc with his heart and chest? She knew that Dumbledore would be there, and she had no doubt that Harry would derive comfort and strength from his presence. A part of her was confident that the accusations against Harry would be swiftly dropped, and the boy allowed to return to Hogwarts. But a deeper part quailed and shivered.

She remembered with painful clarity how the Dementor had swooped down upon the potion-addled Barty Crouch Jr., and how the boy had gained enough wits to scream and struggle as the mouth descended upon his own. She had turned away and had seen the rapt attention etched on Fudge's pale face. A man who could allow such an atrocity and watch it so eagerly could plot and put in motion any number of foul machinations. Her insides clenched, and she bit down on her lower lip as fear coiled up her spine; a fear that had grown recently in strength, fed by the firm assurances of Harry and the cold body of Cedric Diggory. The letter crumpled in her desperate grip; Dumbledore had that very night declared his intentions openly to Fudge, who, no doubt, had twisted the Headmaster's words into the ramblings of a seditious madman. Since then, Dumbledore's power had been leached from him, and his character and reputation torn to shreds within the pages of the *Daily Prophet*. The man himself had taken it sanguinely enough, but she had trembled with anger and anxiety. A corner began to dig painfully into her hand, and with a curse that would have distressed her students, she flung the crumpled parchment to the floor. She stared at the slowly unfurling paper while her mind narrowed down to one thought consuming truth...He was back!

The quiet pop of an elf appearing roused her from her dreadful daydreaming, and relying on a combination of pragmatism and pride, she straightened her spine and smiled at the pensive elf.

"Yes, Nimni?"

"You asked Nimni to tell you when the Headmaster is back." The house-elf squeaked in barely hidden trepidation as the bearers of ill news often do. "The Headmaster is back now, Professor McGonagall."

"Back?" she demanded sharply, her eyes focusing on the clock and blind to the elf shrinking back. "It's ten to nine. He should be leaving!"

Oblivious to the splatter of green ink across the table and the dislodged stationery fluttering to the floor, she stepped around the desk, past the cowering elf, and stormed out of her office. The anger sustained her down two flights of stairs and along the stone corridor, the sound of her rapid footfalls echoing through the deserted hallways an ominous herald of her wrath. The anger drained from her as she stood before the stone griffin, and dread settled heavily in her stomach, sapping her strength. She placed a hand on the stone architrave and waited until she had caught her breath and ordered her thoughts. At her password, the griffin spun aside to reveal the stone steps. She promptly ascended, and once again she found herself hesitating, her hand hovering an inch from the dark, wooden door. She rapped on it and the door opened smoothly. Inside, papers littered the desk and pooled on the floor, and a lantern burned, despite the light streaming in through the windows. She paused to listen and caught the faint sounds of running water from the upper level of the Headmaster's office. She glanced around, noting the stale, untouched sandwich and the silver pot of coffee Charmed to stay hot and issuing steam from its slender spout. A rumpled cloak was draped over the back of his chair, and his night cap rested on the seat. She Banished the curling sandwich and countered the charmed coffee pot before the contents boiled away. She hung up the travelling cloak and spelled the papers into neat piles.

"He's been working all night," drawled a sleepy voice. "That boy will be the death of him."

She turned quickly to see Phineas Nigellus slipping into his painted chair and twisting to plump up the cushions behind him before settling back down. Many of the portraits were empty now that the school was closed, but those few that were occupied mumbled their disapproval, flashing dark looks at the notorious wizard. Smirking back at the ruffled portraits, he stuffed his hands into the sleeves of his deep green robes, snuggled himself into the softness of the chair and closed his eyes.

"Ah, Minerva."

Her head snapped round so quickly that her glasses slipped down her nose, and she fixed the Headmaster with a perplexed stare. She noted with concern the shadows under his eyes and his rounded shoulders.

"What's happened? Were you excluded from the hearing?"

"No, Minerva. Nothing so obviously obstructive." Dumbledore gripped the wooden handrail and slowly moved down the curved stairs, his midnight blue robes shimmering in the sunlight. He glanced around his tidied office and wrinkled his nose at the smell of burnt coffee. "Minister Fudge decided that it was in the best public interests to rouse the full court and, therefore, felt obliged to alter the time and setting for the trial."

"He what?" Minerva stumbled towards the nearest chair, clutching the fabric above her frantic heart, and tried to divine from the lines on the Headmaster's face the mysteries of Fudge's motives. "Harry faced the Wizengamot!" Her horror intensified, and she felt the room spin as she fought for breath.

"Have no fear, Minerva," he spoke swiftly, concerned at her sudden pallor and rapid breathing. He quickly moved forward to place a hand on her elbow to ease her down onto the chair. "I was alerted of the alteration, albeit almost too late, and was able to appear as Harry's defence. The Wizengamot voted in favour of dropping the charges, and Harry was released. As Phineas has returned, I expect that Harry is safe at Grimmauld Place and enjoying the exuberant company of his friends."

She sighed as the crushing weight evaporated, and feeling giddy with relief, she slumped in the chair. "Sweet Merlin!"

"Indeed."

Apprehension sliced through the fog of sheer relief, and she felt her spine stiffen at the inflection in his voice. His voice lacked fervour and energy, hinting that worse lay ahead. She studied Dumbledore more closely and noticed that the lines on his face were more deeply etched and his skin dull and grey. Phineas' mild chastisement of Dumbledore's pains took on a deeper meaning.

"When did you last sleep?"

She thought she caught a flash of irritation in his eyes, but whatever she saw was quickly replaced with a fondness that plucked at her heart. "The mirror was quite effusive on my behalf as well...almost to the point where I felt forced to threaten it with a Silencing Charm before I dared to trim my moustache." His smile slipped, and he quickly glanced away from Minerva's piercing gaze. "He has attacked me with little effect and, therefore, has turned his attention to the only other with the power to sway public opinion. I could not afford to rest when such a threat loomed over Harry."

She thought to argue, but thought better of it; she herself had had her fair share of sleepless nights and had suffered them as she thought right...silently and without interference.

"Minister Fudge's attempts to undermine me by stripping me of my positions within the Wizengamot and the International Confederation of Wizards were not unexpected. He clings to power solely because no threat exists powerful enough to cause wizards to rethink their current policies. He has, over the years, diverted monies from those departments necessary to maintain a defence against such insurgents and has used it to make his office comfortable." Scorn dripped from every word and his face twisted in disgust. "His position, achieved due to the euphoria after defeating a terrible Dark Lord, cannot stand the wrath of a disillusioned and terrified population. He will be forced to stand down to make way for another Barty Crouch Sr. He is, therefore, weaving a complex tapestry of lies and deceptions to turn our warnings into the deranged ramblings of an old man and a mad boy. He will discover that it will rapidly become his shroud." He was breathing hard, and his eyes blazed such as they had the night he confronted Fudge in the infirmary and first gave the Minister his dire warnings. "We are fortunate," he continued more calmly, "that he lacks any imagination and was therefore forced to use the Ministry to try to upset matters further."

"Lacks imagination! The man sent Dementors to attack a boy, Albus."

"I'm not so sure that he did." He smiled as he watched her face darken and her lungs expand, ready to unleash a verbal volley. "He seemed quite agitated about the presence of Dementors in Little Whinging, more so than due to my presence at the hearing, which, in itself, must have put quite a crimp in his morning." Minerva expelled the held air and sagged as the weight of another unseen enemy bore down. "I fear that others are at work in our downfall."

"Well, at least Harry stays in school; here he is safe." She frowned and scowled. "Well, safer at least."

He chuckled and settled back in the chair, content that for the time being he could risk relaxing. "I doubt that Cornelius will leave us alone quite so readily; rumours abound

that should we fail to find a replacement teacher for the position of Defence Against the Dark Arts, the Ministry will appoint one for us."

She looked horrified as she grappled with the concept. "They will appoint one for us!" she repeated incredulously. "A Ministry-approved teacher! Here at Hogwarts! Someone to scurry back to Fudge, you mean," she added darkly.

"We still have two weeks to find a replacement, but I can predict with some accuracy that our endeavours will prove fruitless; therefore, I think our time will be better spent warning the faculty of the Ministry's impending beneficence."

Chapter Four

Chapter 4 of 36

The mystery surrounding Ophelia deepens, and the consequences of her decision twenty years ago comes to a terrible head.

"And this, of course, is the classroom, with your office adjoining it just up those stairs." Minerva stepped aside to let Dolores Umbridge saunter into the classroom and watched with reined-in dislike as the stumpy woman surveyed the room. "Please feel free to alter the room as you see fit, just as all the other professors have before you."

"Oh, I shall," Umbridge responded breathlessly, her face splitting into an officious smile. "I so want the students to know that things are changing for the better."

Minerva bristled at the insinuation, but managed to summon a gracious smile. "I'm sure that the Ministry wants nothing more than to demonstrate that to the students." She smirked as she noted Umbridge's wide smile falter and her large eyes narrow. "Shall I show you the staffroom now, or would you prefer to settle in first?"

"The students will be arriving in just under an hour, so I shall set to work preparing the classroom and repairing the office."

"Very well." Minerva grabbed the handle and started to back out, but was stopped by a curious delicate sound.

"Hem hem."

"Yes, Professor Umbridge?"

"I would very much like to speak with all the teachers at some point during the evening."

"I don't see a problem with that; I'm sure the rest of the staff will be equally delighted to meet you."

"Thank you, Professor McGonagall. I think it's important that we all know where we stand with each other from the offset."

"Of course; I'm sure that the sentiment will be appreciated and duly reciprocated. Good evening, Professor Umbridge."

With the door shut behind her, Minerva exhaled slowly and eased the throbbing joints in her hand. She noted with some annoyance the groove on her palm where the door handle had bitten into the skin from her ever tightening grip in response to her rising anger. She had been shocked and dismayed when Dolores Jane Umbridge had walked into her office and presented herself as the Ministry's approved teacher. She recalled that Umbridge had been the Senior Undersecretary for the Minister, and had been one of those wizards present at Harry Potter's mockery of a trial who had sought a conviction. The few words of pleasantries shared between them had done nothing to ease Minerva's appalled disgust, but Dumbledore had insisted that the woman be treated cordially, and, therefore, Minerva would be nothing less than polite. The effort had left her with aching jaw muscles, a throbbing headache and lancing pains through her wrist. She grimaced at the prospect of working with Dolores Umbridge, wondering if Madam Pomfrey had sufficient supplies of Headease Potion, and was only mildly comforted by the fact that no Defence teacher had lasted more than a year in nearly two decades.

"I must pass on my respects to Onesiphorus for his foresight and quick actions," Dumbledore said solemnly.

"I've got Smith lookin' into things at the Ministry; no one better suited to go pokin' around."

Dumbledore nodded slowly and tapped his forefinger against his lips. "I wonder what is in her head, lost in the chaos, which could be so important as to cause such consternation. The paperwork alone should be enough to put off even the most stalwart keeper of secrets."

"Norwood was telling the truth about extractin' Ophelia Black on Ministry orders, and all the other Aurors involved in the abduction are now dead, so I can't check with 'em." He gave the tea a once-over and then took a large gulp. "He got little from her, even under Veritaserum and the Imperius Curse. He cast a Memory Modification Charm an' put her back on the train. All neat an' without fuss. Accordin' to him, the train was intact and even runnin' on time."

"What do you suspect?"

"It's a little too early to go guessin'." Moody glowered and drummed his fingers on the chair arm. "I checked out ol' Norwood and he was clean, no sign of memory tamperin' at all." He leant forward, and the firelight caught his eye. "I suggest someone being there when Ophelia wakes up...just in case."

"I'm thinking of asking Remus to assist Minerva."

"Lupin's no good for this," he scoffed gently. "You need someone who'll look for wrongness." He sat back and scratched idly at his chin. "Don't think I ain't takin' this pers'nal. It's my name on those reports sayin' she's dead, and it seems a bit too coincidental that my hairs should be placed at the murder of the only person around who may have been able to shed some light on the matter." He glared at Dumbledore, both eyes equally terrible as they blazed with indignant fury. "Someone used my good name to cover somethin' up back then and is using my bad reputation to incriminate me now."

He knew better than to mock his friend; indeed, it was wiser to listen to him. "Come now, Alastor; they would have to have known a fair bit about your reasons for visiting Norwood in the first place to be able to successfully implicate you in his murder on the grounds of reasonable motive."

Moody shrugged indifferently and took another gulp of tea.

"And who would feel obliged to hold on to clippings of your hair for nearly twenty years on the off chance that you would visit with a prospective and propitious murder victim?" Dumbledore ignored Moody's scowl and smoothed down his beard. "However, as absurd as it sounds, I am inclined to believe you; too many other incidents have taken place over the last few months for me to comfortably dismiss anything at the moment."

"Smith says that things are happenin' within the Ministry as well, reassignments and old scrolls being shuffled around. Of course," he said slowly, "could be just them clearin' house in light of what you've said."

"Well, it is nice to think that my words have had some impact upon the Ministry," Dumbledore said with a wry smile.

Moody dragged his hand down his face and grimaced at the stubble scratching his palm; he needed to rest, but he sensed that clouds were gathering and that Ophelia Black was some desperate conductor to that ever-increasing power. His investigations had yielded little and what he had was contradictory. He had resigned himself to just finding her and leaving the pesky details until later... after she was suitably restrained and her possible threat diminished.

"Smith has a lead," he said quietly. "A wizard by the name of Smethwyck."

"Walter?" Dumbledore asked with some caution.

"The very same," Moody answered, nodding and studying the blank face before him. "Apparently, he was involved in some scheme to influence and blackmail high ranking wizards. Of course, most of that is well known if not now forgotten, but Smith seems to think that he may have more information about Ophelia." He sat back and winced as both the chair and his spine creaked.

"Let us hope that the trail, as they say, does not dry up; we have so little to go on." Dumbledore dropped the hairs and fibres onto his saucer and waved a hand over them; the silver and black strands curled up, smoked a little, and then turned to barely visible ash. "How is your Muggle friend progressing?"

"He's sortin' through her past addresses." Moody gave a sudden harsh bark of a laugh and grinned bitterly. "She's moved round quite a bit, hasn't settled... flighty little thing. Anyone would think that she was either runnin' or been made to move on." He inhaled and grunted unhappily. "The proverbial needle wasn't as hard to find!" He leaned forward over the table and fixed Dumbledore with an intense glare. "There are other things that he's findin' an' all," he added firmly. He shook his head and grimaced. "A fair mystery is Ophelia!"

"We must solve this puzzle quickly," Dumbledore responded firmly. "Things are moving too quickly for this to be drawn out much longer."

"What he's found so far is pretty good, in a way. Apparently, she was put in isolation for attackin' another patient. She said that she was keepin' him safe from these demons that swept through the hospital."

"Now, that *is* interesting," Dumbledore said softly, his eyebrows shooting up in surprise. "Are you suggesting that she fought Dementors?"

"Accordin' to the doctor's report, she was screamin' and tryin' to drag the man off the bed. The nurse who witnessed it all said that it looked as if she were battlin' with somethin' at the side of the bed. O' course, the poor devil didn't add anythin' on account of him havin' been Kissed."

"How could she have withstood being that close to a Dementor?"

Moody shrugged his shoulders. "You can gain some tolerance to them if you have to and they aren't focused on you. She did spend a few weeks in the infirmary, however, recoverin' from the ordeal; had to be heavily sedated." Moody frowned and scratched the side of his nose thoughtfully. "In fact, that incident seemed to spark a spate of attacks and aggressive behaviour."

"It's not unrealistic to think that the presence of Dementors feeding off the other patients would have impacted upon her." Dumbledore shuddered slightly and wondered if Ophelia had been in such proximity to gorging Dementors that she had managed to tolerate them.

Dumbledore had devoted quite a large proportion of his free time to finding out about Ophelia Black. He had collated all her school reports and coursework and had pored over the treasured parchments. He had literally sifted through his memories, trying to build a picture of a rather demure and unremarkable witch. He was aggrieved to realise that although she had been in the school for five years, very little was known about her. It was just like a puzzle; he had pieces here and there, some were scattered across the table, and the rest were still in the box. It was made worse by the fact that he had no picture to follow... no real clues as to how they fitted together. What would the puzzle reveal? Would it be an accurate representation of the woman that she had become? Would it bolster his flagging hopes and reveal a woman ready to aid them, or crush him with an image of a viper?

"O' course not," Moody readily agreed. "I was just ponderin' her desire to protect the others. Don't really smack of being a vicious Muggle-hatin' Death Eater."

"No," Dumbledore said with a smile. "It doesn't."

"Now, don't go grinnin' on me!" warned Moody grimly. "Just because I may be thinkin' that she could be more than she seems don't mean that I believe it!"

Dumbledore chuckled amiably. "Alastor, have no fear; I still know that you're a cynic through and through."

Despite the humour between them and the faint hope of an ally, they were aware that this was only a lull in the storm. They sat in silence save for the tap dripping into the deep ceramic sink and the creaks and groans of the house settling. From upstairs came the muffled sound of hooves and claws scrabbling on the wooden floor as Buckbeak paced his attic prison. Lost in their thoughts, time carelessly moved on, measured by the regular drips and their own breaths, unceasingly leading them to an uncertain future.

His appetite had long withered. He ate because he knew that he had to. Sitting opposite, his wife chattered away about how the day had gone and would he mind if she went and had her hair done? He mumbled his approval while moving a piece of potato round his plate. When did this start? When did his life become so swamped and smothered? When did he start to doubt his own mind?

"What is it, dear?" she asked gently. She had watched him idly pushing food around and then eating with apparent gusto, only to look queasy and return to his playing. Her unease and concern had increased in intensity over the last week, and she had blamed the Ministry for his lacklustre outlook and diminished appetite. He was quiet and subdued, yet mumbled and muttered under his breath when he thought her out of ear-shot.

He looked up from his plate and into her concerned blue eyes. He was about to answer, to do as he always did and confide in her the woes of his job and the weight of his position. But tonight, he felt a vice round his throat and a stifling pressure in his head. It seemed that a thousand voices were screaming and shouting in his ears. He felt bowed and battered beneath the mental barrage. He wondered why she sat there, so quiet and still, while he trembled and struggled for breath. Couldn't she see that he was straining, that he was suffering, that each breath was a labour and each thought an agony?

"Nothing, dear," he finally managed to mutter. Run, my love, some deep part of him screamed. Get away! Get away before I do that terrible, disgusting thing to you again...oh ... not again ... Who are you that do this to me?

She pursed her lips in annoyance; he was so listless and withdrawn lately. He sat morosely at the dinner table whenever he managed to come home in time to eat with her and seemed to stay seated out of politeness rather than desire. His simple yet staggering signs of affection that still stole her breath after twenty years of marriage had become more a thing of habit than need. She was at a loss for what to do. He was slipping away from her and she had no idea why, or more importantly, how to stop it.

He saw a flicker of pain and confusion cross her features, and then she smiled. He felt his lips twitch in weak mimicry and tried to eat a few more mouthfuls under her concerned scrutiny. The clock chimed and their cutlery clattered against crockery. He was aware of her curious glances, and was surprised at the rising wave of irritation he felt. To distract himself, he gathered up the dishes and carried them into the kitchen. In the solitude, he could hear the whispers that were now such a part of him that he couldn't remember what silence was.

She knows! She suspects! She is a threat to us!

We cannot allow her to interfere. She must not divert us. She must not stop us!

She daintily dabbed the corner of her mouth with a napkin and tried not to succumb to her nascent dread. She had never known him to be so closed, so reticent, and if his work meant that he had to be so withdrawn, he had always made it clear that he *couldn't* tell her. She disliked this wall, this barrier that had descended between them. She decided to wait; Brian always told her what was bothering him, and she would be there when he was ready.

He placed the plates in the sink and turned on the tap to rinse the gravy and remains of potato away. He frowned and tried to block out the thoughts that had pestered and plagued him since he had heard a name that he had hoped would never be uttered by a wizard. He felt bile rush up, burning as it did; he realised that he had done everything that those whispered voices had asked.

You need to do these things; you know that they are important. One curse! One life! These are nothing to what will result, should you fail.

He turned off the tap and watched the last dirty dregs of water slip down the plughole. He swallowed as a wave of nausea rolled up, and he had to take a steadying breath to control the burgeoning desperation. He had done what he had had to do; he derived little comfort from the fact that fate had allowed him to walk away, knowing that he wasn't a killer. He shuddered and squeezed his eyes shut until the orbs hurt under the pressure.

He had held his wand against Norwood's temple, and the words had leapt to his lips. A frantic part of him had raged and screamed, while another smothered and made him carry out his grim duty. He had barely uttered the first syllable of the Killing Curse when Norwood had jerked and spluttered in his chair, his red eyes bulging as he clutched at his heart and reached out beseechingly. Ashen faced and pleading, Norwood had managed to stand and lunge towards him, his potential murderer now his only hope as he fought and struggled to live.

Stepping back, he had left the old man to fall heavily onto the rug. He had watched dispassionately as the dying man choked and gasped, shuddered and jerked. The little, frantic movements slowed, and then as Norwood gave his last sigh, his last rattling gasp, movement ceased. Viscous drool ran from the grotesque, gaping mouth and pooled by the flaccid and grey cheek. Breathing hard, he had cast the Killing Curse upon the still warm corpse and then had arranged the room to suit his purpose.

He knew that his efforts had not yielded everything that he had intended, but it was no matter, as he was in a position to have a great many things arranged. He smiled grimly and looked up and out of the window; his smile slipped when he saw his reflection in the glass. Who was it that looked back? Who was it that could do these things? He shivered and turned away; whoever it was, they were needed. For what dread purpose and till what end, he had no idea, and he found some comfort in the fact that he didn't have to look them in the eyes.

"Shall I wash, Brian?" Evelyn asked softly, almost tentatively, as if she feared her question would cause concern.

"Evelyn, my dear," Brian crooned gently, smiling and opening up his arms to her. He felt disgust and fear clash with triumph and glee as she smiled and stepped into his duplicitous embrace. "I have to do this!"

Evelyn stiffened in his arms at the tone he used; she inhaled slowly and her mouth went dry. The arms around her no longer seemed loving, but restricting. She tried to pull away, to look her husband in the eye.

"If there were any other way, I would take it, but I have no choice," he continued in the same light-hearted voice, so viciously paradoxical to the way he gripped and held her.

She sobbed, and for the first time in her life, she felt panicked in her husband's presence; the strength that once supported her now smothered her. "Please, Brian," she whispered breathlessly. "Whatever it is, we can fix it."

"No, my love," he responded firmly and without any trace of remorse or regret. "This is the only way."

Evelyn felt him shift his stance and his right arm slide away from her body. With a shriek, she felt the tip of something press into her ribs, and as she used all her strength to push him away, she saw a mad fire in his eyes as he smiled softly at her. Her wide, fear-stricken eyes searched his for any clue to his delusion and madness, and then to the steady wand aimed at her heart.

"Imperio!"

Chapter Five

Chapter 5 of 36

Dumbledore experiences dread as he discovers more about Ophelia, and Sirius slips deeper into the despair that threatens his sanity and soul.

"To say that the staff aren't happy is an understatement!" Minerva stopped pacing and rubbed her aching temples. "Half of them have demanded that she be summarily dismissed on the grounds of being an interfering Ministerial busybody, some of the others want a pay rise as an incentive to resist the temptation to hex her, and all of them want another staffroom secretly arranged so as to be able to avoid her during their breaks."

"I need something more damning than nosiness to terminate her contract, and although they deserve an increased salary for their tolerance, I cannot accede to that, either."

In the throes of anger, she failed to detect the cold edge to Dumbledore's voice, or the fact that his eyes had not left the piece of parchment held tightly in his fingers. Had her mind not been revolving around the recent staff meeting and the angry and bitter teachers protesting about each and every one of Umbridge's transgressions, she may have seen his eyes burning and his face set into grim lines.

"Did you know that some of the staff are running a sweepstake on exactly what will happen to Umbridge at the end of the year?" She sighed in exasperation and slipped into a chair. "If the students find out about it, we'll never be able to discipline them again!"

Exhausted and empty, she dropped her head into her hands and stared blankly at the intricate patterns on the rug beneath her feet. After a few moments of silence, a certain dread crept over her. Those things she had seen and heard, but not processed, clamoured for attention, and she risked a peek at the Headmaster. She swallowed hard and gripped the chair arms. "Albus?" she queried tremulously.

He forced his eyes from the words scrawled on the letter and focused on the witch sitting pensively in front of him. "Yes, Minerva?"

"What in heaven's name is wrong?"

"The Ministry have passed Educational Decree Number Twenty-Three." He lifted the letter and then, in an unaccustomed display of anger, he slammed it down onto the table, his splayed fingers trembling over the thick parchment. "It proposes a new role within the Ministry of Magic in which it will have the power to assess the level and standard of education offered and maintained by this school. As of today, the professors will be inspected to determine their suitability in their chosen role; anyone falling short of the Ministry's targets for educational excellence will be placed on probation with the view that they will be discharged if there is no significant improvement." He released the piece of paper and flexed his fingers. "I'm sure that you recall a prior Educational Decree obliging the Ministry to find replacement teachers, should the school fail to do so."

She barely managed a nod; the sheer weight of knowledge was pressing painfully on the top of her skull, pushing out all other thoughts and threatening to crush the fragile hold on her composure.

"The newly formed role is rather aptly dubbed the Hogwarts High Inquisitor and will be filled by none other than Dolores Jane Umbridge."

"What shall we do?" she managed to croak out past a dry throat and quivering lips.

"Nothing."

"Nothing?"

"You will inform the staff to continue as they normally would. I have every confidence that they will provide Professor Umbridge with nothing less than examples of exemplary teaching. They are moving faster and more rigorously than I would have anticipated."

"What of Potter?"

"I'm afraid that it falls to you, Minerva, to protect him as best you can and to impress upon him the danger of the situation."

She nodded and straightened in the chair; her duty was clear, and it gave her purpose and strength.

"What will you do?"

"With regards to the Hogwarts High Inquisitor," he responded brightly, "there is very little I can do. No," he added more firmly, "I shall turn my attentions to securing our allies, as it seems that we are, so they say, on our own."

"Speaking of securing allies, have you made any progress in finding Ophelia Black?"

He stared at her blankly for a moment and then sighed softly. "We only have her history while the Muggle world only has her name, and it is proving problematic to bring the two into alignment. Alastor's friend has assured him that it should hopefully only be a matter of searching through the Muggle electoral register."

"Sounds simple enough, so long as she has a home, is in a fit state to vote, or is, in fact, still alive." She bit her lip, shocked and appalled at her bitter observation, and rubbed her fingers over her aching and furrowed brow. "I'm sorry, Albus."

"These are trying times, Minerva, but one should never lose hope."

"Since you mentioned finding her, I've found myself thinking about her quite frequently." She settled back on the chair and absentmindedly traced patterns on the velour chair arm with her forefinger. "I remember the day she was Sorted; so odd that I should, but I can see her sitting on the stool, holding the Sorting Hat so it wouldn't slip past her ears and staring resolutely at the Slytherin table." Her whimsical smile faltered, and a hint of fearful desperation clouded her pale features. "It's so hard sometimes to remember them like that, and then when you do, it hurts." When she looked up at him, he was chilled by the hopelessness and despair in her eyes and the solitary tear clinging to her lashes.

He thought to bolster her with strong words of comfort, but the faces of former students that had died flashed before him: the ones who had died standing against him, and those who had died by his side. He sighed and passed a weary hand over his eyes as if to blot out the world, if only for a moment. Perhaps it was enough for Minerva to know that someone else felt the same pain and faced the same battles, because when he lifted his eyes she was sitting primly, as if she had never felt the weight of the war bear down upon her and, for a moment, stumbled.

"I'll inform the staff of your decisions regarding their demands and your advice with regards to Professor Umbridge's new position." She stood and smoothed out the wrinkles in her deep green velvet skirts and flashed him a sympathetic smile. "I'm sure that Professor Sprout wouldn't mind clearing out Greenhouse Number Eight; with some comfy chairs, it'll probably make a fairly decent staffroom. So long as Professor Vector remembers to take her Allergease Potion and Severus promises not to blast the violets apart, it should be quite pleasant."

"Violets?" The flower triggered a memory, and Sirius' concerned and haggard face coalesced into view.

"Yes. She grows them for Poppy, who insists that the fresher the plant the better the potion. As far as I know, Severus uses them in a variety of potions when he has the time; otherwise, Poppy makes her own decoctions."

"Sirius mentioned that Ophelia was holding a bouquet of violets."

"Wouldn't surprise me; she had a fondness for flowers, especially violets. As I recall, she was always in the greenhouses, helping Pomona tend to the less homicidal plants; even helped her make those special flower arrangements. Pomona used to be rather keen of the language of flowers," she explained, seeing Dumbledore's politely bemused expression, "and she was always making little bouquets for close friends, with their subtle meanings and sentiments. If I recall correctly, violets represent modesty, humility and watchfulness." She tilted her head slightly as she dredged her memory and then nodded firmly. "Yes, that's right. Of course, they work much like those cards that Sybil carries around with her; invert the flowers, and they mean quite the opposite."

Dumbledore stiffened in his chair and recalled the image extracted from Sirius' mind of an outraged and distressed Ophelia, thrusting a tattered, inverted bouquet into Sirius' chest. As dread rolled in his gut and blood thundered through his ears, he pondered the young girl's intentions. With a dry mouth and trembling fingers, the icy realisation crystallised that perhaps Ophelia had been a willing ally of the Dark Lord's, even then.

"Are you alright, Albus? You've gone quite pale."

Sirius inhaled slowly, battling the rising anger. He could hear Kreacher, thumping and stomping upstairs as he cleaned and dusted. Outside, the rain was falling hard, hammering against the ground and window. He had never felt so trapped, so caged, and the fact that he was alone, babysitting a hippogriff and dealing with a recalcitrant and vile elf only fuelled his growing sense of discontent and anger. This whole house was drawing out his memories as effectively as the Dementors had; there was nowhere to hide, nowhere to escape. Even the refuge that spared him while in Azkaban was useless here; his Animagus form just added a heightened sense of smell to increase his misery. The house stank! It reeked of neglect, age, and all the vile twisted ideologies that had been born and nurtured within its walls.

He had watched the others leave the house, moaning about the weather as they slipped free from the house and into the sweet air. He had smiled and wished them luck in their endeavours, even as he seethed and died inside. Lupin going on some secret mission had been the worst knife in his back...the deepest cut. He had embraced him and wished him well and safe return, and Lupin had patted him on the shoulder; Sirius had never felt so useless... so pointless.

He had filled the emptiness with tasks, hoping to work off his doldrums, but it had only emphasised his role as housekeeper. He had thrown Buckbeak his dinner of dead ferrets and ordered Kreacher to replace the straw in the attic. Sirius stormed off to the lounge and stared at the cold, empty fireplace. He glanced up at the clock, and a

thought pierced through his increasing sense of worthlessness. The letter that Harry had sent, the one that had spoken of his scar hurting, was still on the mantelpiece, fluttering temptingly in a draft. Sirius had mentioned it to Dumbledore and had been dismayed at the Headmaster's apparent disinterest. Well, it seemed that he could change that. He could help Harry. He felt energised and alive; he could do something. While everyone else was chasing shadows and trying to catch smoke, he could be doing something vital.

He aimed his wand at the hearth and watched as his spell created fire. He grabbed a handful of Floo Powder and scattered it into the flickering flames. There was a small chance that Harry would be there. Kneeling on the threadbare rug, he leant forwards and peered into what lay beyond. The sight of the Gryffindor common room revived his flagging spirits as fond memories sprang to mind. He was mildly disappointed that the room was empty, but he knew that he was relying heavily upon fate, so he resolved himself to be patient. Hour after hour, he repeated his efforts; he had a thrill when a first-year had espied him and had revelled in the adrenaline rush; so long since he had felt alive.

Just when he thought that he had missed his chance and was withdrawing from the fire, he saw Harry and his friends. His heart leapt, and he plunged back into the fire to hear Hermione's surprised squeal. He had studied Harry closely as they talked about the terrible things that were happening both in school and out. He noted that some of the youthfulness had gone, to be replaced with some simmering wrath at the futility and unfairness of it all. He had thought to be inspiring and supportive, but he found that the longer they had talked, the more unsettled and confined he, himself, became. Frustration had flared viciously through him when his suggestion to join them had been doused so emphatically. His joy had withered.

He couldn't contain the bitterness that was rising up like burning bile, and he had said something regrettable to Harry. He should not have compared the boy to his father; times were so different, and James had not had the same terror looming over him. Angry and ashamed, he had made his excuses, cutting Harry short and leaving his godson bewildered and worried. Still kneeling before the now empty fireplace, he had cursed himself for being too brash and immature...for thinking that he could have helped.

The house creaked around him, a slow, mocking sigh; here he was to stay... no escape, no hope. The very room seemed to press in on him; the sheer weight of the house crushed him into the rug. How he hated! How he seethed with rage! Trapped and down at heel, no better than a guard dog. He knew a way to make it stop.

Standing, he made his way to the corner and the drinks cabinet. It was just this once, just to calm him, as there was little point in allowing this state of affairs to grind him down. He poured himself a healthy measure and sat down on the leather chair.

Chapter Six

Chapter 6 of 36

Moody and Dumbledore continue to plan and postulate in the face of new and disturbing information. Smith finds that the roots of the mystery delve deeply into the bowels of the Ministry, the leeching tendrils drawing sustenance from a powerful source.

Moody watched in horrid fascination as Mundungus Fletcher cleaned out the blackened remains from his pipe. It wasn't so much the fierce concentration on the man's face or the fact that he was idly flicking the charred debris onto the clean kitchen floor that held his attention so raptly. No, it was his method of excavating the remains.

"For Merlin's sake," Moody bellowed when he could stand it no longer. "Use Evanesco rather than the wand tip!"

Mundungus jumped and then slowly lowered his wand and pipe. "Yeah, course!" he said apologetically. "Sort of a 'abit is that."

Moody sneered and shook his head. He had known Mundungus for longer than he cared, arrested him a fair few times and turned a blind eye when necessary. He was one of those people that you valued, but disliked. Moody saw him sheepishly cast the spell over the bowl and then slip the pipe inside his voluminous robes.

"Best clean it up off the floor, too, before Molly sees."

Mundungus paled, and a look of panic flittered across his face. "Oh," he said nervously. "She ain't 'ere is 'er?"

Moody nodded grimly and suppressed a grin as the wizard hastily removed all signs of his bad habit before Molly and her wrath descended.

"Well," Mundungus said jovially, "there's no real need for me to be 'ere. Done me bit as it were; told ya about 'Arry an' his plans to teach Defence to the other kiddies." The wizard stood and stretched. "Really should be goin'; got things to do an' people to meet."

"I'll do yer a favour an' not ask," said Moody darkly.

"Yeah." He laughed nervously and sidled past Moody towards the door.

Moody sighed as the door clicked shut behind the retreating wizard. He understood and agreed with what Potter was doing, he applauded the boy's efforts, but he knew that the decision would make it dangerous for him, his fellow students and Dumbledore. He was frustrated and angry that every step was a hardship and led them deeper into uncertainty. He had made little headway in the search for Ophelia, and the information that he had unearthed was confusing, contradictory and chilling. He would meet with his Muggle friend in the week, and Smith was due to see him soon; he would have to be content to wait. Waiting was a game that he had never liked playing; he could not shift the idea that while they twiddled their thumbs, Voldemort was a frenzy of vicious activity.

The days passed quietly enough, and it was with some relish that he made his way to his meet his Muggle friend. The pub was small, nestled in a row of terraced housing, and was aptly named The Robert Peel. He had failed to grasp the humour until his friend had given him a brief history of the police force. It had been patronised by the local constabulary and retired police officers for as long as anyone could remember.

A few elderly men played dominoes and, out of instinct, glanced up as he entered the lounge. He nodded, and they nodded back; professionals recognising and acknowledging each other. The landlady gave him a shrewd look and then continued polishing the pint glasses. Moody glanced round and saw his friend sitting in the far corner from where he could see who entered without it being obvious or awkward. Their acquaintance had started on very shaky ground when, as young cadets in their professions, they had stumbled across each other as they tried to apprehend the same criminal. It would have been an easy matter to have Obliviated the young police officer and take the wizard without fuss, but he had shown a remarkable resistance to the charm.

Confused and hassled, Moody had resorted to reason, and as the curses flew overhead the young officer had agreed; Moody would take the criminal. Out of courtesy, Moody had tracked down the young man after the wizard's trial and informed him of the result. The Muggle had seemed appreciative of Moody's efforts, and a tentative friendship had developed as they worked together in similar situations where the crimes of a wizard impacted upon the Muggle world.

"Good day," said Chief Inspector Bailey amiably.

"Good day," replied Moody.

"Did you perhaps know of the trouble that this simple favour of yours would cause?" Bailey asked with a smile.

"I had an inklin' that it wouldn' be easy."

The man chuckled and shook his head. "It has been quite challenging...and quite time-consuming."

"Aye, well," mumbled Moody apologetically. "It had to be done."

"Oh, no matter," he responded soothingly. "I got some of the new recruits on the case, gave them some hands-on experience in this kind of investigation, and I can say that it has honed their skills admirably." He lifted up an A4 brown envelope and placed it on the table. "There is quite a lot of information on her, but it really suggests very little about her. There are a few conclusions that can be drawn from the file, but I wouldn't risk basing any opinion of her on it." He inhaled slowly and leant forwards, his brown eyes radiating concern. "I will say that my instinct tells me to be careful, but open-minded."

"As have quite a few before yer," he grumbled.

"Ah," Bailey said softly with a smile. "Preaching to the choir?"

"Not so much the choir as the preacher," said Moody with a chuckle. "The thing is," he continued soberly, "that I'm beginnin' to wonder meself."

Moody had left Bailey sitting in the pub, his mind swirling and clashing as he pondered Ophelia. He knew where he would go next: the only logical place after reading the file.

Smethwyck had plummeted from the near pinnacle of Wizarding society to its pits. Rumours had eroded his character, and a wayward son had caused his fortune to bleed away drip by drip until he had been forced to consider his son or his fortune. He had sealed his doom after excising the parasite rather than face pauperism. The decision had not been favourably met by his son, and the boy had divulged secrets to the Aurors and the press that, although never proven, had nonetheless damaged him irreparably. He had quickly and quietly departed the Wizarding world and was reported to have settled in Italy, but no one had seen fit to confirm his location. Eventually, the press' interest was diverted elsewhere, and Walter Smethwyck slipped from people's minds and memories. And now, after decades and a few frantic months of searching and looking under rocks on Smith's part, he was once more in a certain person's mind.

Smith glanced at the terraced houses lining the streets like glowering sentries and, in the weak light, tried to discern a house number on the peeling doors. His breath misted in the cold air, and the pavement was slick with a thin layer of ice. In the narrow strip of sky above the rooftops, the clouds roiled threateningly, and a chill wind whistled past the chimney pots. Starlings chattered from their perches on the TV aerials and the phone lines, and early morning traffic rumbled past the junction behind him. Save for those sounds, the street was dead. The clouds reflected themselves in the windscreens of the parked cars and oily puddles gathered in the gutter, oddly attractive against the grey tarmac and pavestones. A cat paused in its fastidious ear washing to stare at him from its precarious position on a windowsill, and a scrawny dog sniffed at his ankles before a gentle leg swipe encouraged it to move on.

He eventually found a tarnished metal door number and determined that the house he sought was five houses down, past an alleyway leading to the backs of the houses. A sweet, sickly stench emanated from the alley, and he saw rubbish bags piled upon each other, their contents spilling obscenely from pest-incurred rips in the black plastic.

The door before him was equally as tatty, and by the looks of it a dog had repeatedly scratched at it. He casually slipped his hand into a breast pocket and removed his wand to cast a quick series of charms over the door. He frowned and noted with some alarm that the property was not warded. Had Smethwyck changed addresses? Ignoring the weight in his gut, he rapped sharply against the door. No answer. He thumped a little louder, conscious of arousing the neighbour's suspicions; again no answer. He cast another charm, and the door clicked open; he slipped into the shadowed room and pushed the door closed softly. Another smell hit him: stale alcohol and tobacco. The living room held a small coffee table strewn with magazines, letters and other bits and pieces, and two ripped and stained arm chairs. A sideboard dominated the opposite wall, and it was also covered in letters and books and bits of paper. The walls were bare plaster streaked with dirt, and from the ceiling, an exposed light bulb dangled pathetically. The carpet felt sticky beneath his feet, and the floorboards peeked through bare patches in the dingy fabric.

He moved through an archway into a small area at the bottom of the stairs and peered into another room, a dining room of sorts, and beyond that, he could see a portion of the kitchen. He took to the stairs and carefully walked up the steep narrow staircase. Bedrooms were to his left and right, and he could hear snores coming from the one on his left. He carefully pushed open the door and stepped into the room. It was dark, due to heavy, thick curtains, and shadowed objects lurked in every corner. On the bed lay a man wrapped in twisted bed linen and curled into a tight ball; a few cans rested alongside him, and on a bedside table lay a collection of empty bottles.

Smith grimaced and stepped between the detritus on the floor and approached the bed. While the occupant was insensate, he looked at the flushed face. The hair was thinner and grey, the face slightly fatter with a reddened and enlarged nose and a scraggly beard, but Smith recognised Smethwyck, slumbering with mouth agape and eyelids only half closed. He cast a simple and important Summoning Charm and moved to the shadows beside the large window. He grinned mirthlessly to himself and placed a Full Body Bind on the sleeping wizard. The arms and legs stiffened and straightened, and once the hung-over man began to realise that something was happening, Smith charmed the curtains open.

Moody ground his teeth together and flexed his fingers around his hip flask; he opened his mouth to speak and then quickly decided to take a deep drink from the silver flask. He pulled a face as the whiskey burned a path to his stomach and then relaxed when a warm wave rolled out from his gullet across his chest. He inhaled slowly and slipped the flask somewhere within his robes. Dumbledore had told him of his doubts based on what Sirius had divulged and Minerva's disclosure about the language of violets.

"Well now," he finally ground out, "that does change things a bit, don't it?" His scowl deepened when Dumbledore merely nodded sanguinely while biting into his shortbread. "What had you in mind when you first realised that she was still alive?"

"I must confess," Dumbledore said slowly while wiping sugary crumbs from his beard, "that I had hoped she was distancing herself from her peers and certain principles; that she would, like Sirius, choose to walk another path." He sighed gently and tapped a fingernail against the delicate handle on his bone china cup.

"Well she bloody well didn't, did she?"

Dumbledore glanced up sharply and then smiled depreciatively. "I went over her school reports; in fact, I've learnt more about her in these last few days than I ever did while she was a student and have noticed a few interesting facts. She was a fairly unremarkable student, neither the top nor the bottom of her class, and yet the curses she used with a great degree of finesse were advanced and well beyond a student of her usually observed ability. Also, there were a number of unresolved incidents against certain Slytherins involving rather obscure hexes and rare potions; I remember Horace being rather put out that he couldn't invite the perpetrator to join his club." He took another bite from the crumbly, golden biscuit and watched Moody over the rim of his glasses.

"The fact is we don't know much about her, and what we do know isn't encouragin'," Moody said gloomily. "And now we don't know whether or not she was usin' Sirius as we hoped he would use her."

"Quite so, and Severus' account of her does lead us to the uncomfortable conclusion that she was a devout and loving follower of Tom."

Moody frowned and carefully studied Dumbledore. "You sound unconvinced."

"Let's just say that until we have her and have restored her memories to her, I will be happy to give her the benefit of the doubt; however," he inserted quickly before his friend could scold him, "I will take every precaution, should my generosity be misplaced."

Moody relaxed and nodded approvingly. "Are ye still thinking of havin' Lupin oversee the procedure?"

"Yes, although now he will have assistance. I was hoping that you would be there to notice any, as you said, wrongness."

"My pleasure, Dumbledore," he said cheerfully. "What other precautions are you considering?"

"She left the Wizarding world assured of Severus' loyalty to Voldemort; I wish that belief to remain unchanged for the time being. I have been considering allowing her to escape from our clutches and return to those with whom she felt safe; if her relationship with Tom should rekindle, then she may be a source of information."

"Well, I'll give Snape this; he's a better spy than Sirius Black. If anyone can get information out of someone, it's him."

"Precisely, Alastor."

"You know that I don't like any of this?"

"I know, Alastor; that is why I have decided to let you handle the security arrangements. You may do whatever you consider necessary to keep the Order safe and secure. I will be calling a meeting in a few days for those who will be made aware of our intentions regarding Ophelia Black; I will expect your requirements to be made known then."

Moody nodded, his mind already awash with protocols and security charms, and bade Dumbledore a distracted goodbye, barely hearing the old man's hearty chuckle before he disappeared.

"Arrgh! Bastard!" he screamed as the counter-curse freed him. He wrenched his body to the side, flinging an arm over his tortured eyes and trying to crawl away. His breathing was heavy from his futile struggling against the curse, and the bed squeaked and groaned under his quaking body. Smith stood to the side of the window, lost in the glare. When Smethwyck slowly turned to face him, he was just another indistinguishable shape in the shadows. Still shielding his sensitive eyes, Smethwyck slowly shifted up the bed against the headrest.

"Who are you?" he asked gruffly while peering into the shadowed corner.

"Now, Walter, that don't really matter, does it?"

At the mention of his long abandoned name, Smethwyck's face fell, and his lips began to tremble. He glanced slyly over towards the bedside table and then gave a shaky laugh. "Well, that changes things a bit." He slowly lowered his hand and moved to free his legs from the twisted sheets, some purpose directing his moves. "You must be surprised to see me, of all people, living in this Muggle mire?" He chuckled and slowly slid his feet to the edge of the bed next to the bedside table; from the shadows, Smith grinned darkly at the wizard's futile furtiveness. "Have you come to gloat? You must have because I have nothing left for you to take; my pride has long gone, and my dignity slipped away drip by drip and drop by drop." He laughed again and waved a pale hand towards the collection of bottles. "I must say that after all these years, well decades really," he continued breathlessly, "I'm surprised that anyone would still be interested in me." His feet dropped onto the carpet, and he placed his hands on the edge of the worn mattress. "Tell me what business you have with me and have done with it." One hand came to rest on his thigh while the other remained hidden from view, the fingers no doubt reaching for what he had secreted there.

In the shadows, Smith's smile became more predatory, and he threw the discovered wand onto the bed. Smethwyck followed it with his eyes, and a frantic hand slipped between the mattress and the bedside cabinet; for a second, his face was a twisted, desperate rictus before crumbling into fear and grief. Sobbing, he slid from the bed into a heap on the floor and slowly rocked himself. "Haven't I suffered enough? Haven't I lost enough?"

"You have one more thing to give, Walter, and then I'll leave you to your life."

"I have nothing," he wailed.

"Nothing about Sigmund Norwood?" Smith queried mildly.

"That treacherous turncoat!" he spat viciously, glaring up at Smith with venomous eyes before returning to his sniffing. "He did this to me!" he sobbed out. "And do you know what I find intolerable? That the fool didn't even realise what he'd done! He said the wrong thing to the right wizard, and just like that I'm quietly expelled from the Wizengamot and my life begins its rapid decline."

"We have reason to believe that Norwood may have been involved in some less than legal activities whilst employed as an Auror," Smith said carefully after he gathered his thoughts, almost cajolingly. "Activities that, should they be proven, would greatly damage Norwood's reputation."

Smethwyck stopped sniffing and rocking as the remains of his mind processed Smith's words. "Really?" he asked hopefully.

Half an hour and a few charms later, enough of the living room was clean for Smith to feel comfortable sitting in the dingy, decrepit room. A steaming cup of strong coffee rested, ignored, on the table while Smethwyck casually sipped his own. The curtains were closed, and Smith had permitted no light; his face remained shadowed and inscrutable. Disappointment after disappointment had twisted Smethwyck's mind, and drink had corrupted the rest. Although Smethwyck still had his smooth voice and sharp wit, he had deteriorated into a spiteful child.

"You were saying that dear Sigmund is in some kind of trouble?"

"Yes," Smith lied smoothly. "As you may be aware, Madam Amelia Bones became the Head of Magical Law Enforcement and has recently called for all unrolled scrolls to be re-evaluated, and in the course of following her directives, we have come to a disturbing conclusion."

"Yes?" he hissed eagerly, his eyes glittering with glee.

"It seems that Norwood was abusing his position as Head of the Elite Aurors..." He saw Smethwyck's face spilt into a feral grin; for a moment he feared he had gone too far, but finished, "...and used dubious techniques to acquire information."

"Yes! Oh yes!" Smethwyck hissed triumphantly. "He had the backing of the public back then, didn't he? A hero, wasn't he? But now? What now?" Hot coffee splashed over the side of the mug and over his fingers, but in his glee the pain failed to register. "I was cast aside because I had stepped on more toes to do what was right, to do what was needed," he spoke quickly and breathlessly, "but he was lifted up as the hero renegade, doing a tough job in a tough time."

Smith kept quiet and allowed Smethwyck's twisted recollections to fuel his fervour. He had no doubt that eventually Smethwyck would divulge everything as he strove to bring down the man he deemed responsible for his own downfall and pitiful existence.

"I made it possible for him... Me! I saw him for what he was: a small-minded thug with a natural talent for intimidation, and I showed him his path, his vocation! Without me, he would have stayed another unremarkable Auror and died at the hands of an equally unremarkable Dark Wizard. Oh, I know what you're thinking! He faced Grindelwald...stared the mad bastard in the face and laughed. Bah! It was absolute terror, not fearlessness! Norwood was a fraud!" His explosive rant ended in a coughing fit, and he hastily put the coffee mug on the table to grab a handkerchief and cram it against his mouth. "Sorry," he mumbled, wiping something dark from the corner of his mouth. "Not been well lately."

"The evidence we have so far is purely conjectural and..."

"Oh yes!" he laughed merrily. "Don't think I was daft enough to leave stuff just lying around ready to be found; no need to look so dejected, my friend. What you seek is nice and safe." A shrewd gleam came into his bloodshot eyes, and he smiled slowly. "Not so daft as to just give it to you either."

"Of course," Smith responded courteously, "certain provisions can be made in payment for the information provided by any civic-minded individual."

Smethwyck's smile faltered, and he studied Smith carefully. After a few moments, he began to talk softly and surely, spilling his secrets and regrets.

The new department for the Elite Aurors had been legitimately created by a colleague of Smethwyck's and registered with the archive five days before the unfortunate wizard's murder. In the ensuing panic and confusion, the department was left untended and forgotten.

Some months later, Sigmund Norwood was selected to lead the neglected department, and Smethwyck saw his opportunity. He re-registered the new department under a new name without dissolving the existing one, and thus he had created a place to store information. Only those individuals aware of the forgotten department would ever think of looking for information within it, and if the scrolls were never rolled, then they would never go to the archive; the scrolls, for all intents and purposes, just disappeared.

Smith was impressed despite his disgust and resolved himself to accept that the pathetic wizard in front of him had, at one time, being a great strategist and formidable thinker. No amount of searching would have yielded the scrolls; it was difficult at the best of times to get unrolled scrolls from a department, much less one that technically did not exist. It was the perfect hiding place: a place where no one would even think to look.

"When Norwood investigated a certain someone that we didn't want others to know about, he would leave the scroll unrolled and divert it to the dummy departmental archive, and there it would stay unless we had need of it." He smiled dreamily and rested his head against the back of his chair. "It was elegant."

He sighed happily and closed his eyes. "We gathered information and siphoned off the more interesting snippets for our own purposes." His eyes snapped open, and he shuddered violently. "And then, it started to go wrong. Norwood began to get greedy. He was no longer content with small changes here and there; he wanted to sink to blackmail. No longer were we influencing policy-making and plucking Ministerial strings; now, we were mere thieves. To make matters worse, he began to include his friends in the arrangement: fellow Elite Aurors to benefit financially from my beautiful scheme. I found out about it when that Bones woman complained about mismanaging timesheets, and I realised that he was taking them on certain investigations with him." He sighed wearily and shook his head.

"We keep referring to 'certain' investigations; could we be more specific? Unless we find a suitably injured party, the case may be dismissed as not being in the public interests."

"Of course," Smethwyck agreed politely and then furrowed his brow in thought.

"A few already have made claims against Norwood personally," he offered suggestively. "Madam Malkin and Narcissa Malfoy for instance."

"Malfoy?"

"Yes, Narcissa Malfoy on behalf of her cousin Ophelia Black."

"No, we never went after either the Blacks or the Malfoys; any interaction between those families and the Ministry was in a purely official capacity. Even Norwood wouldn't have been foolish enough to attempt his little trick against the likes of them."

Smith felt his stomach churn unpleasantly as his hopes guttered and died. His last link in the chain proved weak, and he was left floundering once more. But one little hope fluttered up from the ashes like an errant cinder. "He may have accumulated information about them, nonetheless?"

"I dare say he did. I know he was busy for someone else towards the end."

"What do you mean?"

"I washed my hands of it and of him. He didn't have the wit to carry it on, and yet he succeeded; I can only conclude that he found another brain to suffer his brawn."

Inwardly, Smith groaned. Yet another thread. Outwardly, he merely looked displeased. Smethwyck must have seen the tension in his shoulders because he suddenly licked his lips nervously and fidgeted with the handkerchief in his hand.

"I asked around at the time, out of mild personal curiosity you understand, and believe that one of the Elite Aurors he invited to join him finally took over: a young but fairly decent Auror by the name of Brian Topliss."

Chapter Seven

Chapter 7 of 36

We learn a little more about the little, lost witch, and Moody's zeal rekindles while Dumbledore feels increasingly uncomfortable as the search continues.

Chapter Seven.

A fine drizzle bullied by a strong wind speckled his spectacles with distorting moisture and stung the exposed skin on his cheek and forehead. His beard glistened with ensnared droplets. He flicked up the collar on his raincoat, pulled down the brim of his fedora, and glanced along the street for his rendezvous...a glass fronted building with *Milly's Café* glued on the window in peeling letters. He had agreed to meet Moody there, a greasy spoon in a neglected part of Whitehaven. Wind-tossed plastic bags twirled and skittered down the pavement while sodden newspapers floundered weakly in the flooded gutter. A stray dog snatched a morsel of soggy food from a few fat pigeons, and starlings chattered shrilly as they pecked at some spill chips littering the pavement.

Most of the buildings were industrial and derelict with smashed out windows and boarded up doorways, surrounded by twisted and rusted fences. Milly's Café and the newsagents next to it with their peeling paint and dull security glass seemed to be the only buildings in use. Here was a part of the city dying slowly, the industry already dead and the dilapidated housing erected during its heyday choking as vitality was drawn into the sleeker and healthier parts of the city. This place was home for those too weak, too poor or too stubborn to leave, the opportunistic scavenger and the ever-vigilant carrion eater. The place made him uncomfortable; so different from his school, which bustled and throbbed with frenetic and palpable energy, this was a place to die.

Milly's Café, however, lifted his spirits and shattered his vision of a depressed suburb in its dying throes. The smell of bacon and fresh coffee hit his nose, ridding him of the stench of urine-soaked doorways, and each surface glistened with a fastidious cleanliness to sting his eyes after the washed-out greys and browns of the outside. He quickly removed his hat and flashed a smile at the wizened and apron-clad lady behind the counter. He glanced around the long, rectangular room and saw a familiar

grizzled face in the far corner watching him with a piercing blue eye and a ragged fringe of grey hair covering a black eye-patch.

Moody fidgeted and held a menu with the resolve and fervour a knight would employ to clutch his shield. Dumbledore made his way past the sparkling chairs, the pristine tables and the young mother feeding a baby in a high chair, who was too busy trying to grab the spoon to eat. Past an elderly woman in a tweed coat and paisley headscarf, sipping tea whilst holding her handbag on her lap and staring into times gone by. A young toddler watched his progress from the opposite side of the long room, but his awed study was interrupted by his mother's assurances that staring was impolite, whether it was at Gandalf or not. He smiled and winked over at the little boy with butter and toast crumbs clinging to his chin and cheek and gave his blushing mother a respectful and appreciative nod.

"Thank Merlin you're here," whispered Moody. "I almost had to order somethin'."

Dumbledore chuckled and plucked the torturous list of foods and drinks from his friend's fingers. "I think that the very worst thing that could happen here is a bout of indigestion from overindulgence." He subjected the menu to a thorough perusal until a shadow fell across the table and a young woman with short black hair and a collection of rings along the shell of her ear politely asked them if they were ready to order. Dumbledore smiled and ordered a pot of tea for two and a teacake.

A radio played somewhere just out of view, and faint strains of gentle music could be heard above the clatter of cutlery, the chink of crockery and the merry gurgles of children. Dumbledore relaxed into the sounds and thanked the waitress as she placed his order on the table. Once she had returned to the counter, Moody lifted a portfolio file from beneath the table and slid it across to him, and some of his tension returned; not the kind that had weighted him down, but the thrilling sensation one has before embarking on a challenge.

"Your friend discovered all this in a few weeks?"

"I'll say one thing for the Muggles; they know how to keep track of people."

"Remarkable." Dumbledore opened up the file and quickly scanned the first page. "I see that she was given the name Veronica Speedwell, approximate age as sixteen, height, weight, et cetera. Her details were put onto the missing persons database, but it yielded nothing."

"Hardly surprisin'," Moody mumbled tetchily. "No one actually knew her, and all those who did thought she was dead." His friend, armed with significant resources, had worked wonders on the computer, pulling up information about her employment history, her places of residence and the benefits she had claimed since coming of age in the Muggle world. By a few days later, every scrap of information held on a computer and attached to a phone line had been siphoned and printed off: medical history, police records and her file with the social services. On a collection of pages, he had the map of her life.

Dumbledore traced a finger down a list of addresses and frowned. "She didn't seem to settle well."

"I think," Moody responded neutrally, "that she didn't have any choice in that. It appears that several neighbours made complaints about her, and those responsible for her housing moved her to other areas."

"She was a troublemaker?"

"No." Moody shook his head and sighed softly. "Accordin' to the Housin' Offices, she was a model tenant. It seems that when her neighbours discovered that she had spent some time in a mental hospital, they panicked and reported her over the smallest infraction."

Due to her constant relocation, her employment record was just as erratic and consisted mainly of light industrial work and waiting tables. He remembered her Head of House extolling her intellect, and although the Muggle examinations she had undertaken had reflected her keen mind, she had been unable to make much of it. She had no police record, as such, other than a cautioning several years ago following an assault on a hiker. On reflection, a lonely woman living a life far short of the one she was inherently entitled to. He scratched the side of his nose and sucked thoughtfully on his teeth; would the wonders of the Wizarding world justify plucking her from such an ordinary and safe life, and would they outweigh the horrors of it?

Dumbledore flicked over several more pages and studied her medical history with solemnity. A total of five months spent in the hospital recovering from the injuries supposedly sustained in the train accident with an additional three months as an outpatient receiving physiotherapy. Shortly afterwards, she was readmitted as an outpatient to the psychiatric department, and thus began a spiral leading to her internment at a secure facility in Cumbria. He frowned and gently shook his head; there was no information regarding her stay in the institute, but he knew that such places were often a hunting ground for those Dementors that had slipped through Ministry control. He shuddered and swallowed rising bile at the thought of a child dealing with the horrors they inspired. His only hope was that her charm-addled mind was no lure to them in a place where they could glut themselves on the deranged.

Moody poured himself a cup of tea and ripped open two sachets of sugar. He stirred the sweet mixture while casting his trained eye over the café and its occupants. He wished that he could have charmed his magical eye invisible; the eye-patch was uncomfortable, but as the thing had a tendency to fall out, he opted that while in the Muggle world, some discomfort was preferable to hunting on hands and knees for something he could not see.

The baby had finished her yoghurt and was resisting, with surprising strength and determination, her mother's attempts to clean the excess from her face. The old lady still sat facing the window, and the other mother was crouched in front of her toddler, buttoning his coat and muttering softly to him as his pink face portrayed a picture of rapt and devoted attention beneath his blue bobble hat. Since his release from his wretched trunk, Moody had allowed himself to relax, lulled by the quiet and simple sounds of life.

"Have you been to her current address?" asked Dumbledore.

"Yes, but just to look." He watched Dumbledore take a bite from his teacake, butter glistening on his top lip and moustache. "It's a flat not far from here. An elderly woman lives in the downstairs flat, and Ophelia has the upstairs one. There are faint traces of structured magic around the property, but nothin' distinguishable as a specific charm. I cast a Location Charm, and the flat was empty."

Dumbledore wiped his mouth on a napkin and took a sip of tea. "Do you think that she's utilising immature wandless magic?"

"Yes, it has that feel."

"Astounding!" He popped the last of the teacake in his mouth and wiped crumbs from his fingers on a paper napkin. "Shall we go take a look?"

Dumbledore paid for his breakfast at the counter and joined Moody outside the door. The walk was brisk and dismal as the rain gathered momentum and fell in large, fat droplets. Soon, the large warehouses gave way to row upon row of terraced housing before they petered out into collections of shops, semi-detached houses and grand, aloof, detached houses. The streets became cleaner and broader, and traffic rumbled along them with increasing frequency.

They negotiated the steady stream of bustling shoppers, Moody leading him towards the end of the high street and into one of the side streets branching from the arterial main road. They walked past a cluster of bungalows with thick, white handrails running along their paths to the pristine white doors, and past an infant's school where young children squealed and played in the concrete playground. Eventually, they reached a series of houses split into two flats, and Moody paused at the gate of an innocuous, brown, bricked building.

Dumbledore could feel tendrils of magic flickering over his exposed skin and burrowing into his beard so gently that it could be dismissed as the wind. He glanced up at the white voile hanging in the windows and then at the netting in the downstairs windows, seeing a flicker of movement from within.

"Have you spoken with the neighbour?"

"No, but she saw me earlier."

Dumbledore saw the netting twitch ever so slightly and reached over to lift the catch on the gate. Moody followed him up the path and into a narrow passageway from the front garden to the back and between the concrete sheds and the doors to the flats. Dumbledore rapped his knuckles against the blue door to the upstairs flat and waited for the neighbour's door to open.

"What do you want?" The neighbour, a petite woman with tightly curled, grey hair and a powdery, wrinkled face, stepped from her doorway, wrapped her shawl tightly around her shoulders and glared at them suspiciously. "I saw you snooping around earlier." She indicated Moody with a dignified nod of the head and sniffed disdainfully. "If you're here to cause trouble for her, then you can go to the council, and they can deal with you. People like you have given her enough of a hard time in the past." She stretched to her full height and glared up at Dumbledore, unimpressed as he towered over her. "I'm not standing for it: pestering her and whatnot. It shouldn't be allowed, you..." She paused in mid-flow as Dumbledore held up his hands.

"My dear lady," he affirmed gently, "we're not here to cause trouble; quite the contrary in fact."

"How's that then?"

"It's quite difficult to explain," he muttered softly. "It seems that I may have once been her headmaster, and when I came across her picture, the face of a young woman I had thought dead, it inspired me to find her." He reached into his jacket and withdrew two folded pictures; one was a copy of Ophelia's self-portrait, and the other was an old photograph of Ophelia with her cousins. The woman took them with deep distrust etched into her features and squinted at the images. "I came here to determine if she is the little girl we lost some twenty years ago before I involved her family." As he spoke and her eyes were focused on the pictures, he pulled out his wand and cast the Confundus charm.

---X---

Moody and Dumbledore sat together on the floral patterned sofa while Mrs Mathieson busied herself with the tea things. After a few moments, the table was laden with cups, saucers and biscuits. She smiled at the arrangement and, with a soft sigh, muttered about the milk jug and rapidly disappeared into the kitchen.

"Overdid the Confundus a bit, didn't we?" Moody muttered without rancour. "This rate, she'll be too busy playin' the hostess to answer any questions."

"Some things," Dumbledore countered calmly, "cannot be rushed."

Moody was about to retort when the door into the sitting room opened and the elderly lady backed into the room.

"I must say," she began breathlessly while pouring the tea, "that I have often hoped that someday someone would come forward and claim her. She's such a lovely girl." Her brow furrowed, and her wrinkled lips worked mutely.

"But she has a few faults?" Dumbledore supplied helpfully and without accusation.

She smiled gratefully, and her shoulders slumped with relief. "Yes," she said simply and handed him his tea. "She has a bad reputation around here; undeserved," she added quickly and fiercely, fixing them both with a glare daring them to contradict her.

"I'm sure that that is the case," Dumbledore said encouragingly.

She nodded once and filled a second cup. "Of course, she don't help herself," she admitted after some thought while pouring milk into her tea. "She don't make friends; that's not to say she's unfriendly..." Once again, her brow wrinkled. "She's willing enough to help if you ask for it, but she don't offer much of herself."

Mrs Mathieson settled herself in her chair and took a sip of tea, seemingly unaware of the tension coiling within her guests. "She is very private, but comes out when she's needed; not long ago, she helped me with some nuisance when all the council would do was say that they'd look into it. Veronica went out and, well..." She shrugged nonchalantly. "... that was that!" She paused to sip again and nibble the edge of a biscuit. "I don't know what I would have done all these years without her," she mumbled softly, her eyes focused on some distant and troubling time. "Yes," she added quietly. "She's a loyal and caring girl, but..." She swallowed and her lips twitched. "... she sometimes gives me the idea that the whole of my life, with all its woes, has been nothing compared to hers and her suffering." She hastily gulped a mouthful of tea, the saucer quivering in her trembling hand. The crockery grated together, and she was obliged to lower the cup and saucer onto her lap. She turned her head and looked into Dumbledore's eyes, her face a picture of fearful and desperate concern. "You will look after her, won't you? You won't let whatever haunts her get her, will you?"

Dumbledore felt his heart clench, and his breath caught in his throat. For the first time in quite a while, he was speechless; Dark Lords, Ministerial officials and the Minister of Magic had failed to do what this generous lady had done. She had slipped under his armour, past his reasoning and strategy and crushed his heart and resolve. In that moment, he was tempted to stand and leave...to lose this advantage in order to maintain some sense that in a terrified world, the right thing could still be done as a matter of choice. He would have done it had not the pale face of an equally haunted boy drifted into his thoughts; it was a sad fact that in this conflict, no one was free to be protected from their ghosts until the battle was over.

"Where is Miss Speedwell at the moment?" Dumbledore asked gently.

She felt the ridiculous urge to refuse to answer, but quickly smothered it. These two kind gentlemen were here to help Veronica; it was so wonderfully obvious.

"She's on holiday," she said brightly. "She goes away once a year; I think that she's looking for her past, the poor dear." She lowered her cup and stared thoughtfully into the middle distance. "I have a postcard somewhere." She bustled off and disappeared through the door; they could hear her muttering to herself from the hallway.

"This has to be done," Moody said softly. Beside him, Dumbledore sagged and slowly placed his untouched tea on the table.

"I know," he replied firmly.

"Here it is," she cried out triumphantly and padded over to them, offering them the postcard with a beaming smile.

"Ah!" Dumbledore exclaimed appreciatively, removing the card from the woman's fingers. He read the card dispassionately; there was no return address, and the picture on the front, a glorious sunset reflected in a lake, was remarkably unspecific. He checked the postmark on the stamp and noted that it was from the northwest, the Peak District, and that it had been posted three days ago. "Do you happen to know where she is staying?"

He watched with some concern as her features hardened and her frame stiffened, and then the charm took over once more and she relaxed into it. "She's staying in a rented cottage in Kendall," she said quickly. "I think the address is in my notebook; she always tells me where she's going in case I need her." She balanced the cup and saucer on the chair arm and moved to fetch the address book.

"And when will she return here?" Dumbledore asked quietly, watching her rummage through her handbag and trying to ignore the uneasiness in his stomach.

"Oh, not till the end of next week," she said consolingly, unaware that they would not be waiting. "Ah, here it is!" She pushed her glasses further up her nose and opened the small book, carefully turning the small pages. "Number 12, Holbourne Lane."

---X---

Dumbledore cleaned and banished the tea things back to their places while the old lady slept in her chair. Moody replaced the postcard amongst the rest of the post on the small table in the hallway and slid the address book in amongst the other objects within the woman's purse.

Dumbledore had cast the Obliviate curse as soon as she divulged Ophelia Black's location and negated any inquiries by using a Soporific charm to encourage her to nap in her chair. When she woke, they would be gone, and she would have no recollection of her unwitting betrayal. They gave the room one last look and saw themselves out.

Dumbledore slowed his pace when he felt a hand grab his elbow and turned enquiringly to the wizard next to him.

"I'll go and check out the cottage; if it's secluded enough, we could do it there."

Dumbledore nodded and turned his head slightly to avoid the worst of the rain. "It would nullify some of the problems if it could be so." Dumbledore tapped Moody lightly on the arm and pointed to a shadowed gap leading to a narrow footpath. They crossed the road and eased their way past drooping, waterlogged nettles and onto the path. Concealed by large overhanging trees and burgeoning shrubs, they Disapparated back to Grimmauld Place and began to plan.

Chapter Eight

Chapter 8 of 36

Snape takes the time to dwell upon his recollections of Ophelia, and to his growing discontentment, he wonders whether he really knew her at all... the girl who sat at the Dark Lord's right hand.

He was surprised that Granger and Weasley had not scurried off after their departed friend; instead, they shared a dark look and muttered together. Granger looked distressed, and Weasley flashed him a bitter look before they left the classroom. A few Slytherins loitered, chatting, before a scowl prompted them to also pack away their things and leave for lunch. Snape heard Draco Malfoy's voice from the hallway, muttering something about Potter's Invigoration Draught; his milling followers laughed obligingly, and then those sounds drifted away, and Snape was left in the silence. Flicking his wand, the gathered phials on his desk smartly lined themselves up, tinkling merrily and glinting in the meagre sunlight, and with the merest huff of despair at the prospect of examining the dubious offerings before him, he settled down to marking the class work.

A large ledger rested upon his desk, and he pulled it carefully into its customary place before him. Thoughtfully drumming his fingers on its abused spine and running his other hand over the rough, leather cover, he stared at the cracked and pitted book. His mind was pulled back twenty years to another time when he had banished a worthless potion, and although he had been generous and sympathetic with the unsuccessful brewer, he had still been on the receiving end of a venomous glare equal to that of Potter's.

--X--

He had been perturbed to see a young girl in Malfoy's basement and equally annoyed that she was messing with what he had grown to consider his potion equipment and supplies. Intending to interpose and end her little game, he hesitated when something about her movements caught his eye: the gentle and precise motions as she chopped, diced and measured the ingredients and the graceful way she added them to the cauldron. She had dispensed with the chandelier, instead placing three lamps on the table, one to each side and one across from her, a perfect arrangement to prevent her shadow falling across her workspace. The cauldron was slightly to her left so she could easily and efficiently drop ingredients into it without fear of knocking it, and his lips quirked at the sight of a single-burner camping stove underneath it.

Gathering up his cloak, so as the hem would not drag against the stone floor, he descended the last few steps, utilising the shadows to sneak closer to the girl and the table where she worked so diligently. A variety of ingredients lay neatly ordered on the desk, each within easy reach, and he noted with some interest that she had no book to follow. Her thin, pale face was a picture of contentment as her fingers danced assuredly over the prepared materials and her cauldron.

Recognising her immediately as Narcissa Black's younger cousin from his earlier visits to Malfoy Manor as his friend's guest, he took the opportunity to study her at his leisure. She was young, not yet at Hogwarts, and yet she managed herself with a grace and skill that many of his fellow fourth-year students had failed to acquire.

Impressed, but still annoyed at the intrusion into what he considered to be his domain, he scowled... Lucius had not told him that his father allowed the girl down here... but in spite of that irritation, intrigue found his mind working with her, trying to deduce the nature of the potion. His eyebrows twitched in surprise when a possibility blossomed, and he idly wondered if the potion was for herself, although she seemed too young to have problems with her menses, or merely as a personal challenge. Despite his efforts, he could not fault her attempts to brew the Balancing Potion until she added a handful of finely chopped sweetflag leaves. The method required that the leaves be coarsely chopped and rinsed in pure water before being added to the cauldron. The potion had few ingredients, but they had to be prepared in a specific and detailed way, as the potion was incredibly fragile at every stage, and a slight error would result in total failure.

"The sweetflag must be roughly chopped and added after the cauldron has been sufficiently stirred; otherwise, it will react with the yarrow and the potion will thicken."

Jolting at his voice, she whipped around sharply to see him step from the shadows. She glared at him, her dark eyes flashing dangerously and her cheeks reddening with anger and embarrassment. He moved closer to the table and peered into the cauldron; sure enough, a honey-coloured mixture speckled with green slivers of sweetflag rapidly acquired the viscosity of egg custard. He prodded the congealing mass with the tip of his wand, huffed in disappointment, and then cast *Evanescio*; her eyes narrowed, and her expression became quite poisonous as she watched him.

"The potion was worthless; I suggest that next time, you refer to a book before making such elementary mistakes."

"Who are you?" she demanded hotly.

"I'm Severus Snape."

"Really?" Her fierce expression dissolved into one of interest, and he found himself growing anxious in the unaccustomed attention.

"Up to the point where you added the sweetflag, the potion was flawless," he said quickly, trying to draw her focused attention from himself and back to the potion. She blushed violently and nervously tucked a strand of loose hair behind her ear. "Out of curiosity, did you know about the proper way to prepare the sweetflag?"

"Yes," she said softly, gently tugging on the ends of her long hair and watching him intently.

"So," he asked with some confusion. "Why add it?"

Her face split into a delighted grin, and she launched into a fascinating and breathless explanation. Thrumming in sympathetic resonance as they discussed a shared passion, he sloughed off his anger and forgot his wounds. The child's knowledge of potions was impressive, but she adamantly refused to share anything else with him, although she asked frequently about him and seemed quite affronted when he reciprocated her reticence. He did discover that she was visiting with her Aunt Elladora Black and would be staying with the Malfoys over Christmas. As time wore on and his level of respect increased, he asked her if she would like to brew some potions with him, but before she could respond, a noise distracted her, and she turned to look at the stairs; he followed her gaze and saw Lucius Malfoy standing on the bottom step, peering distastefully into the gloom.

"I thought I'd find you here, Severus," he drawled while fastidiously lifting his elegant verdant robes so as not to dirty them. "Father wants all the guests upstairs." He looked over at Ophelia, and his grimace deepened. "I suggest that you wash for dinner and change into the robes Narcissa brought for you." The blond-haired youth strode over to the table and glanced at the gathered ingredients and the empty cauldron.

"Five more minutes please, Lucius; we were discussing Pemberton-Smythe's second law and how it ..." She saw his expression and ground to a disappointed halt. "I'll go and wash." She turned off the gas to the stove and used a damp cloth to wipe the table clean; her attention to detail meant that there was very little in the way of wasted ingredients. Once everything was neatly cleaned and stowed, she trudged up the stairs and exited the basement.

"Father allows her down here," Lucius said dismissively. "He likes that she's out from underfoot."

Severus watched him poke his wand at the camping stove with an expression of intense dislike twisting his features. "She may as well be a Muggle," he spat venomously. "Still, she does brew excellent potions." His mouth quirked as he spoke in a conspiratorial tone, and his eyes glittered merrily. "Her sleeping potions have allowed Narcissa and I some leisurely quality time together while she's been here." His smile widened, and he winked at his friend. Snape smiled back politely, and then his grin expanded when the implication struck home. Lucius chuckled and draped his arm over the younger boy's shoulders.

"Father was telling Madam Black that he has never felt so rested; the child, Muggle brat that she is, has her... charms." He laughed blithely and took a deep sip of champagne.

"Who is she?"

Lucius sighed and let his hand fall from Snape's shoulder. "She is Aunt Capella's daughter, a bastard child rescued by Aunt Elladora from a pack of Muggles." His lip curled back in disgust, and he shook his head slowly. "She is spoiled...damaged goods. She can barely hold a wand much less cast spells; it's a wonder that she is so adept at potion-making." Lucius drained his glass and placed the flute on the workbench; turning to his friend, he gripped the dark man's shoulders. "I will tell you this though," he murmured before he licked his lips and swallowed...nervously, Snape thought. "Tread carefully around her, my friend."

Snape thought to laugh at the idea that he should be wary of an eight-year-old who seemed more Squib than witch, but something in the fixed expression and the flash of worry in his friend's eyes stopped him.

--X--

The meal had been exquisite, although neither Snape nor Ophelia had tasted much. They had surreptitiously chatted about potions and their more interesting effects around mouthfuls of duchess potatoes and tender goose with vegetables of julienne. Ophelia may have been distracted by her slice of luxury Yule log with whipped cream, but over coffee and petit-fours, she came back with a vengeance.

He listened to her and found himself pondering the girl's status: who was she that a Malfoy should feel deferential to her? She was inquisitive, perceptive and possessed a sometimes vicious wit that appealed to his own dark humour. Nothing about her suggested anything disturbing; despite her awesome knowledge of potions and her keen wit, even at such a young age, she was a normal, awkward child. The dollop of cream on the tip of her nose hastily wiped away had evidenced that, and she had seemed to take no offence at his chortle, even if she had blushed.

Aunt Elladora had sequestered Ophelia's attentions in the early evening, and Snape had sought out Lucius, concerned that his lack of attention had offended him. He was waylaid in his task by a stay in the Malfoy family library and then later by Bellatrix, who seemed to be talking to him out of politeness rather than necessity or interest. After an hour, he finally found his friend on the terrace, chatting intimately with Narcissa. Their fur coats and hats were speckled with fine snow, and their hair shone like silver in the brief moonlight. The clouds shifted, and the terrace was plunged into shadow; only their outlines were visible against the crisp, snowy backdrop. He had the impression of the shadows merging together and then caught the sound of a sigh. Knowing that he was not missed and uncomfortable with the scene before him, Snape moved back into the house and returned to the drawing room.

A late guest had arrived and had seated himself in one of the large, brown, leather chairs by the hearth. The household had gathered around him, listening with rapt attention to his tales. Abraxus Malfoy was smiling with an odd mix of apprehension and pleasure, and the Blacks...Elladora, Alphard and Bellatrix...were sitting and drinking him in, lapping up every word. It wasn't until Snape moved further into the room that he saw Ophelia sitting at the man's feet with her back resting against the visitor's shins, playing with a snake. The stranger caught sight of him and smiled warmly.

"This must be the young man you were telling me about, Opella." His voice was pleasant and cultured, and his eyes were almost greedy as they looked upon him.

Ophelia grinned up at Snape. The snake coiled around her arms and hissed playfully in her ear. The others looked at him strangely, Bellatrix looked positively jealous and Abraxus' worried smile became more pronounced. Snape sensed a power shift...no longer was he merely the guest of a school friend. Now he was the focus of a formidable wizard. Snape, however, felt more like a butterfly frantically fluttering its wings as a pin poised over its body, ready to fix it to a display. He was sure that this moment was one of those that Slughorn kept referring to as life-defining. Snape swallowed nervously; he was well aware who this guest was and wondered what he could say when Ophelia rendered him speechless.

"Yes, Uncle Tom."

--X--

Coming back to himself with a shudder and breathing heavily, he could still remember the appalled dread that had crept over him when the realisation struck home that the girl he had spent the best part of the day with...and probably offended at least once...was close to the Dark Lord. He had stifled a nervous laugh at her words, his heart racing as he had then found himself the sole recipient of the Dark Lord's attentions for the rest of the evening, all the while wondering when the hammer would fall. Even now, twenty years on, the memory still had the power to leave him with a dry mouth and clammy palms. And he had been right, he thought bitterly; it *had* been a life-defining moment.

Dragging his attention back from his dreadful daydreaming to the ledger and the grading of the potions, a sudden thought sparked, scattering his morbid musings; frowning, he went further back into the book than necessary, back twenty years in fact. He looked down the list of names until he found, in the neat handwriting of Professor Slughorn, the name 'Ophelia Black'. The first term of her first year had been exemplary: Outstandings for every potion and every piece of homework. The whole of her first year had been the same; the second year followed suit with only a few marks for absenteeism and a few Exceeds Expectations. He continued until part way through her third year where her average grade dropped. No longer were there a series of perfect 'O's, but 'EE's, and then that dropped to Acceptable; throughout her latter years at school, her grade in Potions had been pitiful. His frown deepened, and he thought back on Sirius' revelation in the kitchen at Grimmauld Place. Was there some connection? Regulus' death may have caused a sudden drop in results and attentiveness, but not the sustained decline that he saw in the neat columns before him. What had precipitated such a catastrophic slip in a subject that she had an intuitive grasp of and a natural talent for?

Chapter Nine

Ophelia is almost within their grasp, and Lupin is asked to assist in the final stages of the plan, but as the time nears, their consciences become more troubled, and the risks more fearsome.

"I don't quite understand, Headmaster," Lupin said uncertainly.

To his left, Sirius glowered and sat sullenly with his arms folded stiffly across his chest, and to his right, Minerva nervously played with her handkerchief. Moody sat across from him, both his eyes fixed resolutely and worryingly upon him, and Dumbledore sat directly opposite. He had been surprised when he had arrived to note that so few members were present and slightly cowed by the fact that it seemed to be for his benefit. Listening carefully to the headmaster's words while Sirius muttered under his breath and Minerva's discomposure increased, his own trepidation had spiralled from his gut, but as far as he was aware, nothing that the old man had said up to this point warranted such a negative reaction.

Dumbledore smiled fondly at Lupin and sighed deeply. "The procedure we intend to perform can only work under certain circumstances; in other words, the intended recipient must possess the ability to access those lost memories. Also, there are risks."

Minerva twisted the cloth in her hands, and Sirius hugged his chest more firmly; Lupin thought he could hear the man grinding his teeth.

"There is a possibility that the procedure will make her condition more untenable," Dumbledore said solemnly. "In the few attempts of using the Mnemosyne potion, the outcome has been catastrophic for some of the recipients."

"The potion is poisonous?"

"Hah!" Sirius blurted out, causing Lupin and Minerva to jump in their seats. "Should the Ministry decide to rid themselves of the Dementors," he said resentfully, "then they can always administer Mnemosyne to the residents of Azkaban."

"The potion is as effective as the Dementor's Kiss at destroying a person," Dumbledore explained quietly. "It has been used six times to cure individuals in the same position as Gilderoy Lockhart, and in three cases, the wizards were reduced to mindless shells. As with all things, there were those who corrupted it to a darker purpose, and the Office of Potion Accreditation classified it as a Dark potion, formulating heavy penalties for those who brewed it and those who administered it."

"But we aren't going to let the mere illegality of it stop us, are we?" Sirius whispered nastily.

Lupin had never seen or heard Sirius so angry, and it was creeping over him that the situation was more dreadful than he had originally thought.

"Whom do we intend to administer the potion to?"

"Ophelia Black," Dumbledore supplied softly.

"Ophelia Black?" Lupin repeated incredulously.

"Yes! Dear, sweet, Cousin Ophelia." Sirius said in a sickly sweet, sing-song voice.

"That will do, Sirius," Dumbledore warned softly. "I must impress upon you, Remus, the severity of our request and the importance of it; in accepting to aid us in this procedure, you will be using a potion and a procedure deemed Dark and, therefore, worthy of censure. If it should fail, the mind of a young woman will be destroyed; however, should we succeed, we will have a weapon against Voldemort that will turn the tide of this war."

"The decision to follow this course of action," Dumbledore continued, "is out of your hands; after much deliberation, I have agreed to allow the procedure to go ahead and will bear the full responsibility for it. All I am asking of you, Remus, is to help Alastor and Minerva care for Ophelia while she responds to the potion."

Lupin frowned and turned enquiringly to Sirius; his friend was glowering at the Headmaster, but at the unspoken question, Sirius smiled wryly and turned to look at him for the first time that evening.

"My presence," he said quite bitterly, "may be detrimental to the procedure," he sneered, "as Ophelia is close to me."

"Certain safety measures need to be observed," Dumbledore said almost impatiently while studying Sirius over the rim of his half-moon glasses. "Only six of us will know about this endeavour, and it is imperative that it remains so."

Lupin gave the matter some thought and quickly realised that the anonymous sixth wizard would have to be Severus Snape; who else would brew the potion? He gave Sirius another look and noticed that the broiling anger that had infused him moments ago now seemed to have deserted him and he sat rather limply, looking at the wood grain pattern in the table top.

Dumbledore waited for Lupin to turn back to him, and with weariness etched into every line of his face, he fixed Lupin with a sombre stare. "The procedure is unpleasant, both for the recipient and those witnessing it. The recovery of the memories is an emotionally painful event; she will relive the worst and best moments of her life in a very short period of time, and so I warn you that her experiences may be distressing to observe. There is the risk of defensive magic being unleashed as she suffers, and her reactions towards you and your companions may be threatening and vicious; as such, you will maintain protective wards at all times even and especially when she seems to have overcome her ordeal."

Sirius' earlier vehemence took on another dimension for Lupin after Dumbledore outlined the danger; the child that Sirius had loved may have been a devoted servant of Voldemort. The realisation slithered down his spine and coiled in his gut; those days in the sun for Sirius may have burnt him deeper than his skin. His heart clenched in sympathy; Sirius had lost his closest friend, his surrogate brother, betrayed by another and left to rot in a demon-infested prison by the last. The happy thoughts that he had protected behind his righteous anger, those precious memories that had warmed him while his body shivered in his squalid cell must be shrivelling faster now that he was hearing the truth than when he was food for Dementors. He could understand Sirius' anger at the constant crumbling of his world, the repeated disillusionments and the dashed hopes. He could empathise with Sirius' wish for one facet of his world to have remained untainted and wished that the dream of being loved by a loving child could have been it. The temptation to refuse Dumbledore's request on Sirius' behalf was strong in his mind, but it would help nothing; it would not ease the sting or heal the wound.

"I understand, Headmaster. I will do what is necessary."

Across from him, Dumbledore blinked slowly and then nodded gratefully; he was, Lupin mused, aware of his dilemma of choosing the Order over Sirius. "Thank you, Remus."

Beside him, Sirius shifted in his seat and made an attempt to speak, decided better of it and slowly, dejectedly, stood. "I'll go and leave you to it." He gave Lupin a weak smile and reached out to give his shoulder a gentle squeeze; without waiting, he left the basement kitchen. Lupin twisted in his chair and watched his friend pull the door closed behind him.

The silence lay heavily between them, each lost in their own thoughts and battling their own reservations; Lupin noted that even Dumbledore was uneasy.

"Alastor and I will visit with Veronica Speedwell this coming Friday and disclose to her the potential to recover her memories."

Lupin's eyes narrowed shrewdly, and he tried not to feel anger and disappointment at Dumbledore's duplicity. "And leave the rest up to her after she becomes Ophelia once again?"

Dumbledore pursed his lips, and a rare flash of anger glittered in his blue eyes. "There is hope," he said sternly, "that all is not as dire as it seems and our caution unwarranted."

Moody harrumphed sceptically and scratched at his scrubby beard. "Although it is highly unlikely. Be warned, Lupin, that Ophelia Black may be a devout and clever follower of Voldemort." His blue eye burned with fervour and his magical one was fixed on some point beyond the walls. "It would do yer well to remember that and not be befuddled like some others."

"We shall see what we shall see," Dumbledore finally interrupted Moody's scepticism. "We hope to start the process on Friday, Remus; I hope that gives you sufficient time to recover?"

Lupin swallowed rapidly to moisten his dry throat and smiled weakly in the face of Dumbledore's gentle concern. "Yes, Headmaster; I'll be perfectly fine by then."

Moody had then spent the rest of the evening outlining his security proposals, which were simple and direct and revolved around the principles that communication with the woman should be kept to a minimum and that she should not, under any circumstances, be allowed to acquire a wand. They had decided not to use Grimmauld Place due to the number of meetings and people traipsing through the place; Hogwarts was also eliminated as a choice due to the students and the presence of the Hogwarts High Inquisitor.

In the end, they decided to use her rented cottage and heavily ward it against noise, magical discharges and any surprise visitors. The next crisis point in the plans was the meeting with Veronica Speedwell; Dumbledore was desperate for her to see the appeal of his plan and to willingly take the potion, as it would prevent the alternative and leave his conscience merely troubled.

"Alastor and I will visit with her this Friday and present our proposal." His voice trembled minutely. "We will summon you both, Minerva and Remus, when we are ready to administer the Mnemosyne potion."

Minerva straightened in her chair, and while Lupin processed the headmaster's words, he heard her agree with ferocious directness: obviously, Veronica would have little choice to become Ophelia. "Yes, Headmaster," he said quietly.

Sirius heard them talking in the hallway and then the front door snapping closed. He heard the soft shuffle of footsteps across the carpet and the creak of a floorboard just outside the door to the drawing room. He could almost hear Lupin deliberating before there was a tentative knock against the wood and the creak of hinges.

"Sirius," Lupin began and then sighed as his resolve floundered. He hesitated in the doorway and then moved to slip into the leather chair next to his friend's.

From the corner of his eye, Sirius saw Lupin sitting on the edge of the chair, staring at the cold hearth and nervously rubbing the back of his knuckles. The heavy shadows made Lupin's face appear more gaunt and sickly than ever, and exhaustion still rested heavily across his slumped shoulders. Sirius had forgotten how much his friend suffered and felt annoyed and selfish with himself for not noticing until now.

"I'm not angry with you, Moony."

Lupin started at the croaky voice and then smiled awkwardly.

"Let's just say," Sirius continued, "that my life is turning out to be less than I imagined it would be, and..." He laughed humourlessly. "I'm not adjusting to it very well." He rested his head against the back of the chair and stared up at the mottled ceiling. "I had all these grand ideas and high hopes when I first realised that I was really free. I remember sitting in your kitchen, drinking tea, wondering how something so basic could taste so wonderful and looking out of the window, watching the wheat ripple in the wind and birds swooping in the air." He stopped as a lump formed in his throat, and he blinked rapidly until his emotions quietened. "I had hoped to be right in the heart of it, to be right there with Harry and to...well, to have it just like it was in the old days."

Lupin remained silent; in the gloom, it was difficult to discern the expression on Sirius' upturned face, but his pale, bony hands hung limply over the chair, and his legs were flung out in front of him...a picture of dejection.

"From what I understand, if the potion is successful, her current personality will still have influence over her." Lupin spoke carefully, as if broaching his own tentative hopes rather than building another's.

"And see the error of her ways?" snorted Sirius.

"Possibly."

Sirius suddenly lunged forward, his fingers digging into the chair arms and his eyes burning with rekindled anger. "No," he snarled. "What is it with you?" he demanded. "You seem to have a blind spot when it comes to certain Death Eaters; you all think that deep down, they're just misunderstood and, with a little guidance, could redeem themselves and be better people." Spittle flew from his mouth, and Lupin sat frozen and aghast at the power of his friend's wrath. "She was instrumental in Regulus' death; she told the Dark Lord where he could be found and then completely destroyed his remains. No Death Eater was more loyal or devout. No matter who or what she becomes after the Mnemosyne potion, I don't want anything to do with *it!*"

In the ringing silence, Sirius was breathing hard, and Lupin could hear his own heartbeat.

"Don't look like that, Moony," Sirius said gently as he settled back into the chair. "You have to do what you think best, and getting the information from her is the best thing that we can do; don't think that I don't appreciate that. But," he continued, his voice tinged with bitter anger, "she's not, and never has been, my dear little cousin. She's a Death Eater through and through, and you would do well to remember it."

Punctuating his disclaimer and warning with a vicious stabbing of his forefinger into the air, he glared at Lupin, but then the fire was doused, and Lupin watched him slump back in the chair.

"Sorry, Moony," he whispered, screwing his eyes closed.

Lupin forced himself to move and stepped over to stand next to Sirius' chair. He reached out and placed his hand on the bony shoulder and squeezed firmly. Sirius' eyes opened and flickered up to settle on Lupin's face.

"I just can't see her," he pled, his eyes glistening and his lower lip trembling almost imperceptibly. "I just can't."

--X--

Smith strode from the decrepit house and into the stinking alley that had disgusted him only a few hours before. Now, his stomach clenched and churned for a different reason. It had taken a few moments for the name and then the significance to sink in, and when it had, it went straight to the bottom of his stomach. Topliss had been one of the trainee Aurors at the crash scene during Moody's initial investigation. The same Auror was now in charge of assigning scrolls, of organising surveillance missions and various other little tasks. With only starlings and a stray dog as witnesses, he cast the Patronus Charm; a silver raven burst from the tip of his wand, flapped its shimmering wings and landed on his shoulder.

"Go find Moody!" he ordered in a harsh whisper. "Tell him to meet me at mine as soon as possible...I have news."

The raven blinked, launched from its perch and flew high up into the air. Smith watched the bird as it seemed to gather its bearings and then, in a flurry of flapping wings, fly away.

Chapter Ten

Chapter 10 of 36

The debate continues, and Dumbledore is reassured to discover that he has gained support for his decisions, but in the process, his callous tactics are revealed and a friend is forced to come to terms with it.

Minerva McGonagall sniffed dismissively and took a sip of tea.

"I don't know why you always sound so happy when you say, 'checkmate'. It's not as if I win that frequently."

Dumbledore chuckled and watched the damaged pieces pull themselves together and scurry back into the box. The surviving pieces either strode or limped across the board, depending upon their status.

"I never seem to have the chance to play very often." He waited until his victorious king had finished bowing pompously to the other pieces and then closed the lid. He heard Minerva's cup rattle against the saucer, and the logs popped and crackled in the fire while behind him, Fawkes whistled softly in his sleep. The simple sounds comforted him, and he closed his eyes, but he knew Minerva and, therefore, knew that the quiet would not last. Cracking open an eye, he studied her as she appeared to find the flower pattern on her saucer quite fascinating, and he could see her lips thin as she fought her doubts.

He sighed, accurately gauging the cause of her consternation, and Summoned his own drink.

"Do you think I made an error in judgement in wishing to approach Ophelia?"

Pursing her lips and frowning, she placed her cup on the table between them and rested her elbows on her knees; clasping her hands tightly and resting them against her chin, she peered at him over the gold rim of her glasses.

"At first, I agreed with Alastor; the risk of involving her overwhelmed any benefits and, therefore, she should be left well enough alone." The frown fluctuated into a look of pained concern, and her eyes closed momentarily as some thought disturbed her. "Then, Poppy told me about Walter Scrope."

Dumbledore nodded, indicating that he knew the name and the story.

Her fingers fluttering and drumming against the back of her hand were the only outward sign of her discomfiture with the Ministry's methods of maintaining secrecy. "The Ministry found him living as a Muggle who could do nothing more than clever parlour tricks, and yet, they took him from his wife and children. They tried to 'cure him' and ended up destroying him as effectively as any Dementor could. Poppy said he spent twenty-seven years in the Permanent Spell Damage ward at St. Mungo's before he died. As I understand it, they will treat Ophelia in the same fashion."

"Walter Scrope was practically a Squib when he was discovered living outside Ministry control; Ophelia is powerful, if limited, and therefore, much more of a threat to maintaining the secrecy regarding our world; I doubt that they would concern themselves too deeply with her rehabilitation."

Minerva nodded and relaxed back into the plush, crimson velvet chair. "I cannot say that helping her regain her memories and her power is anything less than the right thing to do. But I believe you may be giving her too much credit to assume that her gratitude will secure her as a member of the Order."

"Ophelia is a determined, resourceful, loyal and, above all, intelligent young woman. I believe she will see her role in this war and accept it gracefully, and despite your concerns, the benefits will overwhelm the risks."

"I wish I had your confidence," she said softly. "Merlin knows we need more help; everything seems much worse now and..." She placed her trembling fingers over her lips as if to dam the words.

"Everything is much worse now, Minerva, and there is no shame in fearing it," he whispered. "Our courage is not measured in our lack of fear, but in our ability to face it."

"Very trite." Despite herself, she laughed.

Dumbledore shrugged magnanimously and took another sip of tea. "As I said before, she is an intelligent woman and will see her role clearly."

Minerva sobered instantly and scrutinised the serene man in front of her and wished, not for the first time, that she were a Legilimens. He had been Sorted into Gryffindor, and no truer representative could exist, but she sometimes felt that Slytherin had lost a champion when the Hat had finally placed him.

"What do you mean?"

"Alastor was the Auror in charge of the investigation into the accident," he responded, mindful of Minerva's impatience. "It was rumoured that Death Eaters had been in some way responsible, and it was deemed imperative that the rumour be quickly nipped. He and his colleagues were dispatched to the site within minutes of the accident and quickly determined the cause to be non-magical. They searched for wizards, as is their priority in such matters, and found two amongst the devastation. An analysis of the wand remains indicated that one belonged to her, and with no evidence to suggest anything sinister, it was decided that one of the unfortunates was Ophelia Black, and the investigation ended."

"In hindsight, rather presumptive, but I fail to see how someone's oversight two decades ago could possibly help us now."

"You are quick to suggest an error, but Alastor was quicker to suggest conspiracy."

He smiled at Minerva's dismissive snort and continued as if she were deeply intrigued.

"He spent the best part of eight months determining the truth of the matter, and his constant vigilance has yielded surprising and disturbing evidence."

"Eight months?"

"Yes. I agonised over what should be done for the best; should I leave her and hope that her abilities remained inconspicuous, or should I attempt to heal her and reinstate

her in our world? Meanwhile, Alastor scoured the records pertaining to the accident to discover how she survived and how it came about that she was left in a Muggle hospital."

"Alastor is not infallible."

"No," he conceded, "but it seemed strange that the local police found, quite by accident, what seven Aurors were trained to find and yet had somehow missed." He settled into his own chair, drained the teacup and Banished it to the table next to Minerva's. "The Ministry reports were beyond reproach, and he contacted those who were involved and still available to compare memories, and again, there was nothing suggestive of underhandedness. Dissatisfied, he... shall we say... *borrowed* police reports and compared those with his own notes. Again, there were no discrepancies, no fallacious recollections and no evidence to support any theory other than amazing good luck or improbable incompetence." He forestalled Minerva before she suggested which one seemed the most plausible. "I do and have always had the utmost faith in Alastor's abilities as an Auror, and despite his excessive tendency to dramatise, I believed that he was right."

"A conspiracy then? To what end?" Impatience and tension made her tone harsh and demanding. She disliked the way that he constantly drew out the moment, revelling in his listener's fascination and curiosity.

"Ophelia Black, you may be aware, is the illegitimate daughter of Capella Black, and when her mother died, guardianship passed to Elladora Black. There, Ophelia lived with her aunt...quite happily, I understand, and far more comfortably than in the small house on the Cumbrian coast. Little is known of those four years with her mother, and it is only through Andromeda Tonks that we know anything at all about her life before attending Hogwarts. Alas, there is very little in Madam Tonks' recollections, but one thing stands out: the first time Ophelia performed spontaneous magic within the Black household, Andromeda recalls that the poor child panicked. It appears that Capella had taken great pains to instil dread into Ophelia about her abilities and to pre-empt any situations that would encourage them from developing." He frowned as he spoke; it was that one fact disclosed by Andromeda that had interested him above all others, and he wished he knew more about Capella Black to determine what prompted her to smother her daughter's nascent magical abilities.

Minerva shook her head sadly; it was not unknown for families to repress what they considered odd behaviour in their children, but it was usually only true in Muggle families where they were ignorant of the Wizarding world. Other incidences of repression tended to be causes of concern.

"It took considerable effort on the part of the family to encourage her to explore her abilities. Soon afterwards, Andromeda left to marry Ted and was subsequently excised from the family, and after that, we catch up with her when she joins the school."

"I remember her Sorting; the Hat seemed to have had difficulty placing her," she said while plucking breadcrumbs from her skirt and placing them on the saucer, feigning contented tolerance as he unwound his story. She knew from long experience that he never responded favourably to impatience, and it was better for her nerves if she just allowed herself to be swept along with the story. "She was certainly pleased to be sorted into Slytherin."

"Yes, Andromeda mentioned that Ophelia wanted to be close to Narcissa; their relationship was very strong, and the Hat placed her where she most needed to be. Indeed, the bond between them was strong enough to compel Narcissa to offer her husband's home to Ophelia when the school broke for the holidays. We only have a few accounts relating to her stays at Malfoy Manor, but they seem to suggest that the arrangement was a pleasant one. Of course, in time, Mr. Malfoy's allegiances began to affect the home, and I believe that Narcissa arranged for Ophelia to live with Andromeda to protect her from Voldemort's influence, but unwittingly precipitated the awful destiny awaiting the young girl. In her short life, you see, she was in the very hearts of the Malfoy and Black families, privy to their words and deeds. As a result, someone may have considered her ideally placed to gather information about those families and their ties to Voldemort. Alastor believed that because of that, she was somehow intercepted between Andromeda's home and the terrible derailment."

"Intercepted? By the Ministry?"

"Alastor believed so," he said solemnly. "The pressure on the Ministry to apprehend Death Eaters was immense, and sadly, many strategies were employed to achieve results. I remember several complaints being levied against Minister Crouch and his Elite Aurors, involving unlawful arrests and dubious questioning techniques. In search of answers, Alastor located and spoke with Sigmund Norwood, who had been in charge of the Elite Aurors and who had been discharged from service shortly after Minister Crouch resigned, and persuaded him to divulge any information regarding Ophelia.

Sigmund was an old man riddled with regrets and readily eased his conscience, such as it was, by confessing to Alastor that he did oversee the abduction and interrogation of Ophelia. They removed her from the train via Portkey and questioned her under Veritaserum, subjecting her to a most gruelling ordeal. They returned her to the train and cast a Memory Modifying Curse, their crime hidden and unknown. We both know only too well the devastating consequences of a badly applied Obliviate charm. The carnage of the train wreck may have enhanced the degree of memory loss and confusion, and so the remnants of her mind would have been almost irreparably damaged." In the dimming light, he saw Minerva's expression darken and her knuckles whiten as she gripped the chair arms. "Alastor and his team had already completed their search and left the scene as the Muggle emergency services arrived, and in the chaos, her body was simply slipped out with the survivors."

"But to use a child! The poor girl must have been terrified." She covered her mouth once more and closed her eyes as if it could stop the images playing in her head. "It was unfortunate that she travelled by Muggle rail that day."

"Andromeda was looking after Nymphadora at the time so the duty fell willingly to her husband, Ted, and as he was unable to use the Floo-network or Disapparate, they had little choice in the mode of transport. He was injured in the accident and spent several days unconscious, ironically, in the same hospital. When he regained his senses, he was questioned by the Muggle police and Alastor, but his statement, again, indicated no foul play, and the investigation was closed with the tragic determination that Ophelia had perished." He shook his head sadly, and behind him, Fawkes trilled sympathetically.

Minerva dispersed the outrage and tried to think dispassionately. A young girl had been taken and persecuted by Ministry officials; in so doing, they had been forced to hurt her and steal her memories, and now, all that was going to be restored. She could easily determine that Ophelia would have no respect or admiration for the Ministry, but she failed to see why she would willingly join the Order rather than return directly to her family. Watching Dumbledore as she pondered, she noticed that his gaze had drifted off into the fireplace; the flames danced in his half moons, and his expression was weary and strained.

"There's something else, isn't there?" She saw his eyes close and his lips draw back as if her words had wounded him. "Did you think her ideally placed, Albus?"

His slow nod was almost imperceptible. She allowed herself a moment to be shocked and then forced herself to think as a leader responsible for those who fought and died. She shuddered and felt the burden's weight descend unpleasantly. It was easy to adopt the moral high ground, free from responsibility and blame. It was easy to forget that information had been the most desperately sought resource in a time when the Death Eaters seemed to have had every advantage. She had gratefully devoured each nugget the spies served and had used it remorselessly. Wartime allowed no scruples, and times of peace suffocated in recriminations. She would not diminish Dumbledore's efforts with reprimands or deny her own culpability with her subordination.

"Did the Ministry suspect that Ophelia was assisting us?" She kept her voice steady and bland.

"It did occur to me."

"And?" She queried gently.

"Sigmund did indeed take Ophelia from the train on Ministry orders, but I doubt that they made the decision based on any connection to us; I suspect that her family was enough of a reason to intercept her."

"Did Ophelia know she was assisting us?"

"I thought it best that she should remain as innocent of her involvement as possible."

"Should someone wish to question her?" She responded more spitefully than she had intended and instantly felt ashamed when he winced. However, he bowed his head,

acknowledging and accepting her dagger gracefully.

"I'm sorry; that was uncalled for."

"Minerva, my dear, a conscience is a luxury unwisely indulged in during a war; I was forced, occasionally, to treat it as a vice. I can hardly expect you to accept that now any more easily than I could then." He continued, interrupting another more heartfelt apology, "I suffer for some of my decisions but have learnt to accept them as necessary and, therefore, do not regret them; too many people have died to allow me that."

"I understand."

He studied her fondly with a mix of amusement and disbelief until her temper flared.

"I am not so young or naïve, Albus, that I have not lived to wonder at some of the decisions I have made."

"Of course; forgive me."

"So, Albus, how did she manage to help us?"

"A go-between from the Order, someone she trusted, would visit with her."

"The only person who springs to mind is... Sirius."

"Yes. His connections to his family were tenuous but extant and, therefore, he was granted access to Ophelia. It was a simple matter for him to listen to her as they played. The arrangement lasted until she left the care of Narcissa and Lucius Malfoy to live with Andromeda; Sirius, of course, continued with the visits as soon as the move occurred. I daresay she was a joy to him. More tea, Minerva?"

"What? Oh, yes, please." They watched as the empty cups blinked out of existence and two fresh ones, billowing steam and complete with milk and sugar, appeared with barely a rattle of china. The house-elves had also generously sent up a platter of sandwiches and cakes. Minerva Summoned her teacup and a sandwich, checking the filling before plucking it from the air and taking a delicate bite. How would Ophelia, a grown woman, view those memories without the benefit of time's buffering to smooth the edges and shadow the tension? Would a different perspective turn those treasured moments into agonising betrayals?

"We cannot assume that the Ophelia we knew is somehow going to emerge and continue from where she left off?"

"No," he said wearily, "but I believe that Sirius' impact on her was great enough to make her see what was right and wrong with the Wizarding world. There were hints of her dawning realisation during the latter months of her stay at Hogwarts; incidents suggested that she was struggling with the notion that her family was not what she thought or hoped it to be. Her Head of House was increasingly concerned with her behaviour towards her housemates and felt obliged to pay more attention to her than he felt necessary for one so young."

Sometimes he felt much older than he was and never more so than now as she sat primly on her chair, dismissing his callousness as good strategising. "Failing that, it will strike her that the only ones left who have any claim on her are those very same people she was growing to distrust; people who had embroiled themselves deeply in the philosophies and ranks of Voldemort." He watched the cup slowly descend back to her lap and the fingers tighten around its delicate handle; above the crackling fire, he heard her breath catch and the teacup rattling against its saucer. "She will remember the despicable treatment she received at the hands of the Ministry and discover the loyalties of her family to be repellent."

"And run willingly into our arms?" She scoffed.

"She will find it difficult to live unprotected in our world."

He had hinted at it, and she was prepared for the subtle implication in the simple declaration, but it still surprised her. "You're going to use blackmail," she stated as despondently as she could.

"Minerva, my dear," he soothed, "when the time comes, I will do nothing."

Chapter Eleven

Chapter 11 of 36

The threat posed by the Ministry is eliminated when two abused wizards are released from a terrible curse.

On Apparating, Moody was struck by the brine-scented wind as it whipped around him; he staggered for a moment at the intensity of it and then glanced around. The furze seemed to go on forever, vibrating stiffly as the air rushed over it; only the occasional scrawny tree lancing upwards broke the monotony of the scene. Seagulls screeched and soared overhead, and he could hear the heavy, dull pounding of waves against rock.

The house he sought was perched on the very edge of the cliff, silhouetted against the heavy, bruised sky. Had it not belonged to a wizard, it would have surely succumbed to gravity and fallen. Tall and slender with numerous chimneys sprouting from the sharply angled roof, it suggested great melancholy; the very building seemed to lean over so that it could watch the waves bite and grind at the cliff, as if wishing that it could tumble into the ocean's uncaring maw. The shingles had been painted black, but over time, sea-spray and rain had bleached most of it. It now looked like a solitary, partially rotten tooth, jutting up from a gangrenous jaw. Moody shuddered and wound his way through the resisting furze. Smith was expecting him.

The door opened without so much as a creak, and Moody felt slightly disappointed at the anti-climax before the thin and pale face of Smith appeared in the thin gap between door and frame.

"Come in, Moody," he said quickly while stepping aside and pulling the door open further. With a sense of urgency, he helped Moody to remove his thick travelling cloak before hanging it up alongside his own coat.

Moody followed Smith along a narrow hallway, which was contradictorily light and cheering, and into a small kitchen. Smith ushered him into a chair, finished making his tea and then slid into the chair opposite.

"I went and saw Smethwyck today," Smith said curtly. "We had a nice chat about the good ol' days."

"Get much from him?"

Smith frowned and took a sip of tea. "He gave me the name of someone who may be able to help us further."

"This is turnin' into a right melodrama, Smith."

"Well, I think we're in the closing chapters, my friend."

"The suspense is killin' me," groused Moody.

Smith chuckled and told the Auror what Smethwyck had divulged, watching the grizzled face before him darken as the tale unfolded.

"Topliss!" Moody exclaimed. "I wouldn't have thought it."

"I tried to get in touch with him at the Ministry, but he hasn't been in work for months; apparently, he's been transferred to an isolation ward in St Mungo's." He took another deep gulp of tea and then sighed softly. "Could just be another dead end." Despite his careful and consoling tone, Smith thrummed deep inside; it was like he'd woken after a long sleep and was shaking with that raw power of sudden understanding and purpose. The challenge of the investigation had given him a new lease, a new joy and fervour that had been absent since the death of his wife. He knew that the search had to end soon, but some secret, deep-down part wanted it to last, wanted to savour it; knowing that this would be his last meal before he died, he wanted to glut.

"If it ain't, then that lad has some explainin' to do!" snarled Moody. Going back to those memories that the damned Pensieve had stirred up all those months ago, he tried to see how Topliss could have been involved...if the boy had done anything that in hindsight had been suspicious...and there was nothing! Topliss had been the model of proficiency and professionalism. His mood worsened as he tried to connect the cadet to the apparent death of the young witch. "Don't make sense though," he muttered. "What would he have to gain by makin' it look like she'd died?" Both his eyes fixed on Smith's carefully blank face. "What would have been the point?"

Smith shook his head slowly. His mind had been whirling and spinning with various ideas and theories, but none of them made much sense. He had even pondered that Ophelia had been abducted for ransom, but so many years and knowing that she had been released into the care of the Muggle emergency services rendered it unreasonable. Darker and more evil suggestions had crawled up from the blackest corner of his imaginings, but he doubted that Ophelia would have been allowed to live if she had suffered that nightmare. And if she had been taken for extra, less official questioning, then why not do it all under the guise of the Ministry acting in everyone's best interests? She would have been unaware if the questions were unnecessary or unethical.

"Nothin' else has been goin' on," said Smith dejectedly after his thoughts had spiralled back into doubts and confusion. "In fact, a remarkable amount of nothin' has been goin' on. It seems that what Dumbledore and young Potter have been sayin' has been put down to either high spirits, madness or scaremongerin'."

Moody snorted at the stupidity of it all, at the sheer bloody-mindedness of them all that they could have such warnings and yet ignore them. He shook his head and sighed loudly.

"Spouse we'd best check out Topliss, as he is our only lead," grumbled Moody.

--X--

She had walked this road many times before; some sign of her should be imprinted upon the pavement, some testament to her many footsteps, but all that existed were cracks, litter and other, less pleasant, adornments. She had, at one time, walked briskly and eagerly to St Mungo's where she worked as a Healer. With time, however, her enthusiasm had been dented and bruised by the constancy of it all, all the injuries and accidents, all the tears and fears. There had been a time, a terrible time, when her feet had pounded upon it after Death Eaters had attacked a Muggle school and her fiancé had been injured, caught between two vile hexes.

Now, her feet scuffed against the uneven, cracked slabs, as if of their own will, while she stared ahead with unfocused and sunken eyes. Rain pummelled the ground, and water rushed and gurgled along the gutters. The pavement was slick, and cars went past in a hiss of spray. She failed to notice the two men standing in the bus shelter and the silver tabby crouched under the hedgerow, but it was no matter as Evelyn Topliss had not noticed anything for quite some time.

Continuing past the bus stop and ambling along the pavement, unaware of her concerned and determined entourage, her feet took her to the end of the street and then turned her right. The wind was fierce, channelled between two tall rows of flats; her breath was snatched away, tears plucked from her eyes, and her hat blew from her head to roll on its rim, bouncing and darting up the road. But still her feet marched her forward.

Pushing open the gate, she strode on, not bothering that she did not hear the gate close behind her, and neither did she jerk or scream when a gentle hand caught her elbow.

--X--

Various emotions warred across her face; fear, confusion, despair, anger, sorrow, grief, disgust and disbelief. Her fingers mindlessly entwined and writhed in her lap, and her eyes flicked from one face to another, trying to see the cruel joke or some chance of error. But some part of her knew that what they said, what deceit and horror they had suggested, was indeed true; she could recall the moment he had fixed his wand upon her and how his eyes had burned with some strange zeal as he cast the curse.

"Why?"

It was such a small word, one that could be a mere exhalation rather than a question. She tried to answer it for herself, tried to see the reason for such a thing because there had to be, and when her shattered and exhausted mind had turned from the task, she had begged to know from those around her.

Moody sighed softly, such a gentle demonstration of grief and sorrow that Minerva had reached out to grip his shoulder on instinct.

"Can yer remember what he asked yer to do?" Moody asked gently.

Evelyn shook her head and stared at Moody as he knelt near her feet; her eyes scrutinised his face, and then she tentatively reached out a hand to gently catch a few strands of his wispy, grey hair between her fingers. Moody held his breath as she rolled the strands between thumb and forefinger; an idea began to crystallize in his skull, lancing through his brain and thundering down his spine.

"He asked me to get some of your hair," she whispered, her horrified expression belying the soft wonder of her voice. "He said that he was going to get you to go to St Mungo's for a health check with one of the healers." Her eyes lost their focus as she trawled through her memories.

Moody nodded and remembered how the team of Aurors investigating his ordeal had asked that he return to St Mungo's. He had balked at the idea, but had finally agreed, constant nightmares and exhaustion giving him little recourse.

"A while back, Brian came home all flustered and bothered." She licked her lips and frowned. "He said something about an old scroll and how it mustn't be reopened. It seemed to weigh heavily on him, and he seemed to get even worse as time wore on; I was so worried." Her voice was getting softer and softer, as if she dared not vocalise her fears. "We'd just finished dinner, and he'd gone to do the dishes; I followed him to help." Her face twisted as a painful memory made itself known. "I saw him open up his arms, and I thought ... I thought that he'd found some peace with it all. I rushed to hold him, my husband." She held her head and trembled. "He whispered in my ear that he was sorry and that if there was another way, then he would take it." She sobbed into her thin hands. "He pulled his wand and cast that hideous curse." She collapsed in on herself, curling up on the chair; they could hear soft sobs and moans coming from the tight mass of misery.

Dumbledore stood by the mantelpiece; he had maintained a silent vigil on the empty, dark, wind-ravaged street while Moody had cast the counter-curse and started questioning the woman. He had sensed Minerva's eyes upon him several times, and he had felt an irrational anger and resentment bubbling up inside. Couldn't he be

allowed to keep himself separate from one painful act? He was being gracious after all. This was no atrocity or necessary evil; this was the liberation of a woman from a terrible curse.

Closing his eyes and listening to the barely audible grief that still somehow managed to drown out the ticking of the clock, the fire crackling in the hearth and his blood rushing through his ears, he tried to keep his frustration from escalating. The search for Ophelia Black was unearthing skeletons in the closets of some very powerful wizards, and he feared that the more they searched, the greater the risk of Ophelia being discovered by Voldemort. It was a terrible dilemma, and as the weeks wore on, he found himself regretting his decision. A particularly violent surge of anger made him wince; he did not have that luxury, and he knew that whatever the outcome, the information that he suspected lurked in her addled brain was worth Ophelia's death.

He opened his eyes and turned to study the tableau before him...it was quite stunning. Evelyn was a tight bundle of grief wrapped up in a floral print chair with Moody on his knees, his hands on the ends of the chair arms. Minerva stood to the side, her body bent at the waist as she studied the poor creature with blatant sympathy, her hands clenched above her own breaking heart.

"Where is Brian now, Evelyn?" asked Dumbledore.

Minerva blinked and turned her head to glance at Dumbledore; his tone had been sharp and unsympathetic. Evelyn stopped and slowly lifted her head to peer at the man through her stick-thin fingers. An answer sprang to mind, but she knew that it was false; she felt compelled to answer nonetheless.

"He's at St. Mungo's." Her tremulous voice conveyed her forced dishonesty, and she whimpered as the last vestige of the curse worked its evil magic. She clutched her head as if in pain and then sagged back. "I don't know where he is." She moistened her lips nervously and fixed Dumbledore with a beseeching stare. "I believe him when he said that he had no choice; whatever made him do this, I have to believe that he had no choice. Please, when you find him, please remember that."

Dumbledore studied the pale woman, trembling and fearful, and he wished that he could think as she. However, he smiled and nodded; he could afford her this. She visibly sagged with relief.

"How did he pass on his instructions?" Moody enquired gently.

"He talked to me via the Floo," she admitted quietly.

"On a daily basis?" Moody asked.

"No, but I knew to sit by the fire at eleven every night in case he needed me." She would have thought that she would be feeling something: anger, hate, disgust, betrayal; and yet, she now felt eerily calm. Her thoughts were ordered and precise, they all focused upon one thing: why? Without the curse crushing her mind, she wondered why these people had been her rescuers and not the Ministry of Magic; why were these people not calling the Aurors? In those questions, she saw some benefit to her husband, and she clung to it. She recognised them all; McGonagall had been her teacher, Moody had been an important figure in her husband's early career, and Dumbledore was, obviously, just well known.

"I cannot impress upon you, my dear, how important it is that we speak with your husband," Dumbledore said firmly.

Evelyn felt a flash of irritation, her first unfettered and honest emotion in many months, and she pursed her lips. "I managed to deduce that for myself, sir! When I said the time, I was already thinking that you would wish to be here."

Dumbledore smiled and bowed...the woman had returned! The strength that had supported her husband, only to be stolen by him, was flooding back; her cheeks were flushed, and her eyes now blazed with a fierce determination.

"Very well," Dumbledore said decisively. "We shall, in a few hours, seek the truth in this matter."

Chapter Twelve

Chapter 12 of 36

The depth of Ophelia's desperation is revealed along with the lengths that she went to in ensuring her success.

Brian Topless sat staring into the cold hearth; he had never felt so weary, and the very air felt a crushing weight upon his bowed shoulders. Beyond that fireplace sat a woman he loved, a woman he had cursed in a vile way, and a woman that he longed to be at peace with. He felt a wave of rebellious and frantic emotions bubble up from his gut, and he was tempted to allow them to erupt, to scream and rage, but he swallowed them... now was not the time. He glanced at the clock ticking on the mantelpiece and noted with a mix of dread, fear and guilt that it was very nearly eleven. He ran his tongue over his dry lips and dragged a trembling hand through his thinning hair.

"This has to be," he mumbled to quieten some inner turmoil. "There is no choice."

His red-rimmed eyes darted from the hearth to the dirt-encrusted window where the harsh wind had blown some grit against the glass. Heart pounding and his breath catching in his throat, he paused and waited for any other sound to suggest that his place was no longer safe. Content that he was alone, he settled back to combat that inner struggle that had twisted and terrified him for as long as he could remember: that inner desperate compulsion that made him do these awful things.

He let a sob escape his throat and dropped his heavy head into his hands. He had no choice; some all-consuming thought told him that, and he felt it resonate through his bones: he had no choice. He whimpered and felt those emotions crashing and colliding deep within, and he wondered where it had all started and what was so important about Ophelia Black that he would risk not only his soul but those of the people he loved. He sobbed again, not caring as the sound echoed in the small, darkened and dirty room, and he gently rocked in time to the ticking clock that callously counted down the seconds to his next crime.

She sat on the chair and counted her breaths... in, out, in and out, pause to swallow and then in. The fire crackled and popped in the hearth and although the heat of it caught her shins, she derived no comfort from it. Standing either side of the fireplace, like two prison guards, were Dumbledore and Moody; they stood serenely enough, and she wondered if their hearts beat as frantically or if they felt the weight of it all crushing their minds and chests. The clock began its charming and delicate tune on the mantle, and nausea welled up like storm surge. The first chime of the eleventh hour snatched her breath, and her eyes felt large as she peered into the flames. The second chime drew a whimper from her throat, and at the third, she gripped the chair arms. She knew that she had to be still; she knew that she was meant to be that mindless automaton he was expecting. But after all those months and knowing that her feelings were now going to be resolved, the fear, hope, dread and intensity of it all rushed through her veins and thrummed her nerves; she could barely keep herself still. With a panic, she realised that she had lost count, but some tension in her guards suggested that the eleventh chime was close.

The fire erupted in the hearth, and from somewhere, she drummed up the strength she needed to sit limply and listlessly in the chair while her husband's haggard face appeared in the flames.

His compulsion bested him again, and he knelt on the cold stone to push his face into the green, flickering flames. Through the distorting heat haze, he saw her sitting as she always did, and he was tempted to dive through, remove the curse and hold her close. Yearning to beg for her forgiveness, not caring if she did, but wishing some peace in knowing that his sin was ended if not cleansed, but instead, that obsession stayed him, and he merely wished.

"Evelyn," he called out softly.

She turned to him, and he stared into her eyes; those eyes reflected despair and hope, anger and love. He shuddered in ecstasy as some part of him roared in triumph that somehow, his terrible curse had been rendered moot, and another part screeched that he do what he must. He sensed movement, and then, exerting his own will in a way that had failed countless times before, he made himself stay still and waited for that seeking hand to close around him.

Moody pulled his hand out of the fire, and a shabbily-clothed, gaunt wizard fell heavily onto the hearth rug. Evelyn sat stunned in the chair, not quite recognising the man she knew to be her husband. The ex-Auror quickly disarmed the wizard and bound him.

Topliss lay there, sobbing and laughing until they couldn't distinguish one from the other. Evelyn slipped from the chair onto her knees and leant over the wreck of a wizard.

"Brian?" she whispered. "Oh, Brian!"

"Evelyn," he whispered harshly, "you must release me."

Evelyn reared back, looking horrified, her hand covering her mouth; she had looked into his eyes and seen such madness and chaos. The wide and mad eyes had burned with some fire that terrified her; had it scorched him and rendered the man she knew down to nothing but ash?

"Evelyn," he repeated more firmly, almost angrily. "You must help me."

Evelyn stood and backed away until Minerva's comforting hands gripped her shoulders. She watched in silent terror as the man she loved began to writhe and scream, struggle and curse on the carpet. Moody ended the man's wails with a Stunner, and in the silence, they looked at the man with the answers, lying insensate.

Evelyn had watched as they levitated her husband into the kitchen and sat him in a chair. Without protest, she saw them cast a Partial Body-Bind and place a vial of clear liquid on the table. Quietly, she sat on a chair in the corner and observed Dumbledore cast a series of complex charms over her unconscious husband. The reviled, enforced lethargy induced by the curse was now a soothing balm to her.

"He is cursed," Dumbledore said with some puzzlement. "But what that curse is, I have no idea." He stroked down his beard and studied the quiet, pale man; had this wizard been the victim of a curse as vicious and evil as the one he had cast upon his wife? The spells that he had cast seemed to suggest that Topliss was suffering some curse of coercion and depression of will.

Trying a standard counter-charm, Dumbledore was dismayed to discover that the spell had little effect. Together, he and Moody cast a complex array of spells and charms until they were content that whatever malignancy had gripped him had been purged. The strains of such were evident in the sweat beading on their brows and the trembling wands as they stood over Brian.

Moody took a shaky breath and sank into a nearby chair; Dumbledore slipped his wand into his inner breast pocket and patted the sleeping man tenderly on the shoulder.

"That should do," he offered gently, glancing over at the pale and visibly shaking woman. She slowly forced herself to look away from the man slumped in the chair and managed a weak smile of gratitude before having to bite her lower lip to stem the flood of emotion. "Alastor, would you administer the Veritaserum?"

Evelyn watched in morbid fascination as Dumbledore carefully lifted her husband's chin so that Moody could pour three glistening drops from the clear vial onto the exposed tongue. Still gently cradling his chin, Dumbledore cast Rennervate, and with a splutter and a shudder, Topliss woke, a new man.

"Brian?" Evelyn queried hopefully, tentatively, as she approached the table.

Brian turned his chocolate brown eyes to her and smiled lopsidedly.

"That's me," he answered jovially.

Evelyn let a burst of hysterical laughter pass her lips and sank into the chair next to him.

"Oh, Brian," she crooned while brushing some errant strands of greying hair from his forehead.

"Do yer know who we are, Brian?" asked Moody gruffly.

"O' course I do," he said. "Alastor Moody and Albus Dumbledore." He looked past his wife and bowed his head. "And Professor McGonagall."

Finally, he smiled, and his eyes flickered over Evelyn's face, drinking her in. "And my wife: my Evelyn."

"Brian," Moody repeated more firmly, "we need to ask yer some questions, lad."

Topliss sobered; with a sigh, his smile slipped, and he faced his inquisitors. "I thought as much; ask away."

"Did yer have anythin' to do with the disappearance of Ophelia Black?"

He frowned, and his eyes slipped out of focus as he trawled back through his confused and disjointed memories; the potion demanded a truthful answer, and he was struggling to bring together his recollections.

"Yes," he admitted quietly.

--X--

She had started at the sight of him, and for a moment, stood dazzled before whipping her wand round and casting a Full Body-Bind; shocked, angry and confused, he fell to the floor with arms and legs stiff at his side. The fall had been fortunate, and he could see her and the people on the carriage floor. Her face was dotted with tiny cuts and her left eye was swollen and red. The jeans and jumper were scorched and bloodied, and a tear in the denim suggested that her left thigh had been lacerated.

Unable to move or speak, he watched in futile desperation as the witch rolled a moaning girl onto her back and knelt down. With terrifying deftness, the young woman pulled out a dark, glass vial and began to pour the equally dark, viscous contents down the barely conscious Muggle's throat. Within a few moments, the teenager began to thrash around, and then, he watched in horrid fascination as her features and hair morphed into that of the witch; even the wounds were the same.

The young witch wetted her lips nervously and stood, wincing as her weight shifted onto her left leg. Topliss tried to fight the curse; his every instinct was screaming at him, every muscle worked frantically, but the curse held him fast. Small, muted sobs burst past his paralysed throat, and blood thundered past his ears. Screaming at her to stop, trying to shout at her, he saw the terrifying witch stand and aim her wand at the now insensate girl. How was this happening? Why was she doing this?

"Avada Kedavra!"

A stream of green light burst from the tip of her wand, but they could both see that the curse lacked intent; he heard her scream in anger, despair and frustration; how her hands clutched and tugged at her hair. He tried to scream again, feeling the tendons in his neck burn with the effort.

"Avada Kedavra!" she screamed out again, her voice pitched with pain and desperation.

He could feel the curse slipping; he could move his hands and feet. With wide eyes and desperate movements, he prayed that the curse would fail before this witch completed the deed that she saw as so necessary. Watching as best he could while she searched the carriage, looking for a weapon, he felt the curse weakening further as the more distracted she became. Between sobs and grunts, he inched his way across metal floor to where his wand had fallen...mere feet away, but in his condition, it could have been miles. From the corner of his eye, he saw the impossibly dedicated witch pick up a shard of metal that had burst from the carriage wall. She knelt by her prone doppelganger and pressed the sharp edge against the girl's throat.

Perhaps she heard his heavy breaths or the sound of him picking his way through the debris, but she turned on him. He saw the dreadful desperation in those dark brown depths before she uttered a curse that crushed him.

"Imperio!"

Slipping into the soft and welcome grip of the curse, he felt all the fear and pain evaporate; somewhere, a voice screeched and demanded, but the lack of responsibility, the lack of effort after facing the enormity of what he was trying to combat was too tempting. He saw her press the sharp, glittering edge of the shard against the Muggle's throat; watched as her lips curled back and her arm trembled at the enormity of what she planned. Her grip on the wicked shard of metal shifted several times, and her breath came in short gasps. Tears mingled with the clotting blood on her face, and then she jolted back in alarm as the teenager suddenly went into spasm. Flopping weakly, the Muggle girl gave several glutinous gasps and then a violent shudder before collapsing; her head fell to the side and viscous blood trickled from her open mouth.

He studied the corpse for a few seconds, but the dead girl was no longer his concern, and he looked across at the pale and shocked witch sitting on her haunches. After a few moments, she flung the piece of metal away as if it disgusted her and crawled towards her twin. Reaching out with a quaking hand, she gently stroked the dead girl's cheek, and he heard several pained squeaks burst from her compressed lips.

Whatever had inspired her to try to murder the Muggle resurfaced, and she seemed to suffocate her feelings of remorse. With eyes glittering and her body trembling with rage, she stood and looked at him.

"Help me!" she demanded, waiting for him to stand before continuing. "Get the girl...don't use magic!" she commanded. "They'll detect that; pick her up and take her to the front of the train."

He nodded, and despite the fact that the fire was the fiercest at the front, he carried the girl over his shoulder. Quick footsteps behind him heralded her approach as he entered the thickest part of the smoke and then, thanks to the charms, he walked calmly through it. The doorway to the carriage was twisted and narrowed so he was forced to throw the now cooling corpse through the gap while he squeezed through after. A sharp prod in the small of his back made him step further in. The stench of burnt flesh would have over-powered him had he not some higher purpose to set his resolve. A soft gagging sound made him turn, and through the thick smoke, he saw her bent over and spitting bile onto the floor.

"Where do you want it?" he shouted.

She pointed vaguely towards two upturned seats close to where a fire raged. The charms were just able to cope with the intense heat, and he dropped the girl almost in the flames. He watched with detached interest as her dark hair began to singe before igniting to swathe her head in fire and how her fingers blackened. The flames licked across the back of her hand as if it were some creature tasting its prey until satisfied, and then those small tentative flames suddenly erupted into a devouring conflagration. His macabre vigil was interrupted when she grabbed his arm and pulled him away.

"Listen to me," she said quickly. "I have three potions; this" she said, holding up a small bottle, "you will drink now." He took the offered bottle and quickly gulped down the contents. The taste was unfamiliar. "This potion, I will drink soon." Her eyes were now wide, and he saw her terror and fear. "It will make me look as though I am dead, and after I drink it, you will take me to a safe place and complete your duties as though nothing has happened other than this crash."

She inhaled and seemed to battle a wave of nausea, and he could sense that she was only a breath away from hysteria. His heart leapt for her; he would do all that he could do to protect her. "When you are free, and it causes no suspicion, you will come and find me and give me this last potion to drink."

He studied the clear, pear-shaped, glass bottle and the silvery liquid inside and nodded quickly. He knew that he had to defend this girl, protect her at all costs; nothing was more important than her life and words.

Studying him intently, she suddenly seemed satisfied and then lifted the potion to her lips; he watched her throat work as the liquid slid down. Silent sobs wracked her body, and with a look of intense grief, she removed her wand from her pocket, gave it one last, longing look and hurled it into the ravaging fire. Since she had drunk the potion, he had watched her carefully and saw her shivering until her body gave a sudden, huge shudder; her head fell back and her chest heaved as though the lungs struggled. With one long exhale ending in a disturbing rattling sound, her body collapsed, and he stepped forward to catch her, and then he was out of the train and carrying her away.

After Moody and the other senior Aurors had finished collecting their evidence and casting their charms and his duty was done, he made his way back to her hiding place, carrying a bag of things that he thought would be of use. As the hours had dragged, his heart had hammered in his ribs, and only the notion that all must be as it should had kept him from screaming in frustration and running from the Ministry. His training and the potion warred with his needs and instincts. Once he was free, he had rushed to her, his heart in his throat and desperation strumming his stretched nerves. He found her as he had left her, lying in a disused culvert; the Disillusionment Charm had worn off, and only the conjured blanket protected her.

Kneeling beside her in the rain water, he searched her pockets for the last potion, his frantic fingers fumbling until, with a sigh, his hand closed around that precious phial. He slid his arm under her shoulders and lifted her so that her head fell back and her mouth opened. The contents of the pear-shaped bottle slipped down her dry throat, and he noted with concern, her cold, limp body and her pale skin... had he been too long? He counted his breaths while he waited; after sixteen, he felt fear coiling in his belly, after thirty, he slapped her colourless cheeks, and when he shakily inhaled his sixtieth breath, fat tears slid from his eyes and onto her forehead. He stopped counting when she suddenly convulsed in his lap, her hands reaching out to grip his clothes, drawing in a deep, desperate breath, her eyes wide and frantic. He pulled her up into his arms and held her as she shivered against him. After casting a Warming Charm, he rubbed her icy arms and back until the charm suffused her trembling body and cast out the cold. He pulled his bag closer and withdrew a thick, heavy coat, a scarf, hat and some gloves; while she recovered from the after-effects of the potion, he gently dressed her.

"I had no choice," she whispered quickly. "It had to be done." She sobbed quietly as he buttoned her coat.

"I know," he said soothingly. He looked up and straight into her bewildered and frantic gaze. Her eyes were dark, like bitter chocolate, and he saw such despair and fear in

them that it snatched his breath.

"I can't do this," she suddenly cried out. "He asked me to, and I can't do it! I just want to forget." She was openly weeping, her flushed cheeks slick with tears. "I tried and I couldn't, and I can't carry on."

He listened as she mumbled her pleas and fears, wishing that he knew what she was referring to, what things she was mentioning. Her suffering was cutting into him like knives, and he felt useless as each sob and stifled wail slashed. Falling back into his embrace, she wept against his chest, and despite the urge to hold and comfort her, he knew that she had to be protected. He pushed her away, gripped her shoulders and looked at her.

"We need somewhere to go; you need to be safe!"

She stared blankly at him and then swallowed her grief and sorrow to become that tower of strength that had terrified him when he first saw her.

"You will keep me safe!"

He nodded eagerly and without hesitation; he would kill and die for her.

"Keep me safe. Make the Wizarding world think me dead and never come looking for me!" She licked her lips, and what colour she had drained from her face. "Cast the Obliviate Charm and then hurt me as if I were in that train crash; then, make sure that no one ever finds me. Do whatever you must; whatever you can."

Brian Topliss nodded and stroked her wet cheek. "I will keep you safe, Ophelia Black."

With that promise and vow, he pointed the wand at her temple while she closed her eyes and smiled as if in rapture.

"Obliviate!"

--X--

They sat in stunned silence, each lost in their own thoughts while Topliss sat panting from the effort of talking. His mind was clear of the curse and potion that had directed and manipulated his will for two decades, and yet thinking freely was exhausting him. He was aware of his wife sitting quietly, but supportively, next to him, her hand still gripping his own, and he could feel the mounting tension emanating from his guests. For the first time in quite a while, he was concerned for himself and his wife.

"I used various curses to injure her and then made a call to the Muggle emergency services; they came and took her away. She had planned everything quite nicely; the Polyjuice confused the magical tests to determine the identity of the corpse, and the Draught of Living Death was in some way enhanced to make her magical aura fade, mimicking death, during the initial search. It was perfect. I then used my influence within the Ministry to keep her well hidden and, until just under a year ago, I was convinced that I had done my duty."

Dumbledore nodded while his mind worked frantically. "A young girl was left to die to keep her safe, Brian."

Here, Topliss bowed his head, and his breath became shallow and erratic. "I saw that girl, sir, and she wouldn't have lived long enough to receive aid; her life would have been only minutes longer, and I believe, even with that curse and potion gone, that the girl's death, at that time, served something."

"What do yer mean?" growled out Moody.

The Auror's head snapped up and he looked at Moody, his face set with grim determination. "The curse made me protect her, and in that, there was a loophole. It didn't prevent me from learning about her and meeting with her, to do what I considered best to comply with her request. I spent the best part of her recuperation talking with her teachers and doctors, studying her and learning about her."

Dumbledore's eyebrows shot up, and he leant forward in his chair, focusing his attention upon the man who now had more pieces to the puzzle than anyone else.

"I am a proficient wizard, but I have always lacked skill with Memory Modifying Spells; the Obliviate was flawed. She was still aware of the Wizarding world, but in an abstract fashion; she was putting images onto paper that to her were dreams or nightmares, not realising that they were images from her own memory. The doctors encouraged these artistic outlets and I, of course, was privy to them too. As her pictures became more revealing and intense, so her behaviour and temper disintegrated." He shook his head sadly and gave a soft sigh. "I was at a loss as to how to help her, and I relied upon the Muggle doctors to heal her. In hindsight, that was an error in judgement." He swallowed and ran a trembling hand through his hair. "The things she drew and the nightmares she discussed were instrumental in a number of cases levied against wizards and, albeit unknowingly, she helped to incarcerate a number of Dark wizards. They also displayed how deeply she was caught up in that world, and I could understand why she wanted to leave it and forget everything. I suspect that she was escaping in the only way she knew how."

He looked up at Dumbledore, his eyes suddenly ablaze and alive. "It has long been thought that Lord Voldemort created Horcruxes, and I think that Ophelia knows what they are; it has always been imperative to keep her safe." He suddenly groaned and clutched at his hair. "Even if that curse hadn't made me, I would have protected her with my life, but I suffered; it pained me daily to know that I had the solution to our nightmare and my duty prevented me from using it. The things I've done over the years to keep her safe."

"And Norwood?" Moody encouraged.

"He died of a heart attack!" he said hastily. "I had nothing to do with it." He let out a whimper as the memories of what he had done over the years collided into one giant mass of guilt and despair. Amongst the milling throng of thoughts and questions, there was the overriding and insistent demand that he discover exactly why Ophelia Black had thought fit to manipulate and distort his mind. Was her reasoning worth his anguish?

"I think I can understand why she planned it all, why she fervently desired to get away from ~~him~~ and the others, but I can't forgive her for what she's put me and those I love through." Brian wept, his cheeks glistened and his lips trembled. Next to him, Evelyn stood and pulled him against her, stroking his hair and muttering words in his ear, her tears falling to mingle with his.

"Ye weren't in yer own mind," said Moody smoothly, trying to ease the distressed wizard. "She has a mind and will for such things."

Sniffing, Brian pulled away from his wife's loving embrace, and his red, swollen eyes fixed on Moody. "Oh, you misunderstood me," he said softly. "She doesn't have it in her; that's why I can't forgive. She hated what she had done...her art and stories reflected as much...she must have hated it back then, and yet she still did it!" His face reddened with anger and his voice increased in strength. "Of all the options she had, and she chose to do that! She's no Death Eater; she's..." he hesitated as he tried to find the right description. "She's dedicated!" He smiled wryly and gave a short, angry laugh. "Thank Merlin that she had no intention to follow the Dark Lord!" He sobered and shook his head sadly. "I don't hate her; I am just so *angry* that it happened. We could have protected her. Hell! I would have protected her."

"It is no longer solely your responsibility," said Dumbledore. "There are those who can protect her in such a way that we can end this nightmare."

Topliss sagged with relief and gave a small smile of gratitude. "I want this to end," he whispered. "I want to carry on as though it were a nightmare; I haven't the strength, after all this time, to fight it." His head lolled to the side and rested against Evelyn's side, his eyes closed, and he sagged as one would after a gruelling battle. "It all could have been so different," he mumbled sadly.

Something occurred to him; his eyes snapped open and he looked upon Moody, sitting resolutely in the chair opposite. "The investigation into Norwood's death will be stopped; I will..." he said firmly, only to suddenly stop, looking pained. "I will tell the Aurors what I've done, and any suspicions regarding your involvement will be nullified."

Topliss hastily moistened his lips, and his hands gripped desperately and fearfully at his wife's hands.

Moody nodded and waved a hand almost dismissively, as if it were a mere misunderstanding and not the precursor to a stay in Azkaban. Moody knew that the new Aurors would be hard-pressed to generate a scroll against him without the hairs and fibres that had been destroyed months ago. Brian nodded gratefully at Moody, his breath hitching and stuttering as he realised that it was finally over for him.

"I know where she lives," he continued firmly. "I've been moving her around from place to place so as to keep her hidden."

"We know," Moody chuckled darkly.

The Auror blinked several times. "What do you mean?"

"We've been trying to find her for the best part of a year, lad, and if I'd have known that yer knew, I'd have come visitin' sooner with some grapes and well wishes."

Chapter Thirteen

Chapter 13 of 36

They have her! However, new problems and mysteries arise just as the search climaxes and ends.

The wind tugged on his coat, slid through the gaps and wound itself around his body. He shivered violently and pushed his hands deeper into the pockets, hissing as the bitter chill stung his cheeks and nose. Next to him, Moody stood motionless and intent upon the whitewashed cottage before them. Lupin felt his spirits sink as the mournful wind howled through the twisted trees and whistled through the furze.

He still ached from his recent transformation, and his mind kept slipping uncomfortably over what he had become involved in; the idea of a greater good seemed less potent now that he was here, being buffeted by cold sea winds and a troubled conscience. Dumbledore and Moody's startling news that the plans would change in light of recent evidence, and recalling their faces, lined with concern as they faced the dread of Ophelia being a loving servant of Voldemort, did nothing for his crumbling resolve.

Moody had looked grimmer than ever, his lips pulled back and his frequent sips from his hipflask a sure indicator of some deep inner turmoil. Dumbledore had looked equally uneasy, and finally, it had emerged that Veronica Speedwell would be treated as potentially hostile. He had sat there and listened to the two men argue gently about what would be the new plan of action. After a hasty conversation...and a few ruffled feathers...he had found himself agreeing to join Moody as he went to watch and study the lost witch before any definitive action would be taken. And so it was that on this gloomy and mournful Thursday morning, he was crouching in a spinney, feeling just as gloomy.

"She's here!"

The gruff whisper penetrated his despair, and his heart leapt. His eyes scanned the path leading from the cliff edge to the cottage, and he caught sight of a distant, lonely figure clad in a hooded, charcoal-grey jogging suit. He didn't question Moody on how he was sure that the barely discernable shape was Veronica Speedwell, nor did he feel relieved that the wait was over.

The figure ran strongly along the cliff edge, the head turning frequently to look out over the dark, grey, stormy sea, and soon, she was close enough that they could hear her footfalls and see her heavy, rapid breaths blossom into clouds as they burst from her mouth. Lupin watched carefully as she reached the edge of the fencing round the cottage and stopped, bending and placing her gloved hands on her knees while she steadied her breathing. Her tracksuit was tight-fitting and highlighted the slightness of her frame, and the hood kept her face hidden from view; he only managed to catch a glimpse of reddened cheeks and stray, dark hair that had escaped the confines of the hood. She straightened and walked towards the gate, pausing as if to sniff the air; her shadowed face turned towards them, and Lupin held his breath. It seemed that she was somehow looking for them. He was sure that her eyes lingered on him, and he was caught in her gaze; he was amazed at its intensity. The moment passed, and she turned sharply to push open the gate and enter the small, rented cottage. Lupin relaxed, surprised by the sudden tension, and turned to see Moody, scowling fiercely and grinding his teeth.

"That was unexpected!"

Lupin frowned and shivered as the wind redoubled its efforts. "What was?"

Moody turned and fixed Lupin with a penetrating, thoughtful stare. Lupin felt that the old ex-Auror was reining in any number of unpleasant responses, but then, the man sighed and shook his head.

"This gets worse and worse, lad." He turned to look into the cottage and then grumbled something that was snatched away by the wind.

Moody sucked on his teeth and drummed his fingers against his thigh; he hadn't expected this. He wondered what other tricks the little, lost witch knew and then wondered if his plans were sufficient to deal with this development. He looked back at the young man who was older than he should be and took in the exhaustion and concern lining his face and pressing down on his slumped shoulders. The young-man-made-old studied him expectantly and politely.

"Come on, lad; let's go back and get some food and get warm." Without waiting, he turned on his heel and followed the path away from the cottage and cliffs.

Perplexed by the turn of events, Lupin gave the cottage one last scrutiny, with its darkened windows and eerie sense of emptiness despite the knowledge that it was now occupied, and followed the grizzled wizard.

Moody lumbered ahead of him, and it seemed the further Lupin walked, the higher his spirits rose and the less dour the landscape became; the wind was no longer piercing and moaning as it sped over the land. So wrapped up in his musings was he that he almost walked into a very angry-looking Moody.

"D'ya feel it?" he snarled, prodding Lupin in his chest. "She's not just a lost, little witch! She's using advanced magics!"

A cold dread slithered down Lupin's spine and pooled unpleasantly in his gut; he pondered the significance of the glance in his direction and the sudden lifting of his mood.

"You think that she's faking her memory loss?"

Moody seemed to drag his mind back from some deep and dark thoughts and then shook his head slowly.

"I dunno, lad," he said dejectedly, "but she certainly knows that she can do these things. The charms were sophisticated, but not easily recognisable, which means that

she's made 'em herself."

Lupin frowned and tried to clear his head, to order his thoughts, but the wind was getting harsher and colder, and the sensations of cold prickling his fingers and stinging his face were becoming almost impossible to ignore, demanding his attention. In front of him, he saw Moody's face slacken in surprise, and then the Auror began to stumble and clutch his head. Lupin tried to reach out to steady Moody, but the wind weighted his arm; he was left, shocked, to see the ex-Auror fall to his knees.

Seeing the futility in fighting against the wind, he let himself fall and crawled towards his companion; he was staggered at how strong the wind was and struggled to breathe as it forced its way down his throat and into his lungs, burning his chest and preventing the necessary exhalation. He wrapped his tattered scarf over his mouth and nose, but the material seemed no barrier to the penetrating wind. Muscles straining as the ferocious gale battered him, he looked up, the wind whipping away his tears, and he saw Moody's face twist in anger. The old man was reaching out to him, shouting, but the words were lost to the wind; he seemed frantic, and then to Lupin's horror, Moody pulled out his wand and aimed it between his eyes. Lupin fumbled for his own wand, and while his numb fingers closed around the freezing wood, the tip erupted.

"Come on, lad," Moody roared. He saw Lupin, shivering and kneeling, reaching out with arms that trembled and seemed tugged upon by invisible hands. He berated himself for not seeing it earlier, and with an effort that had surprised him, he had fought off the curse. His heart pounded and blood thundered, his limbs trembled and blue spots danced in front of his eyes. Groaning as he watched Lupin cover his mouth with his scarf and then cram the material against his face, he tried desperately to reach out to him to break the curse and remove the scarf...the man was clearly suffocating and struggling to breathe through the thick material. He reached out for the young man, shouting, but Lupin seemed unable to hear him, his advice on how to beat the curse went unheeded, and he watched with rising horror as Lupin's skin changed from red to grey and the man's hazel eyes began to roll in their sockets.

"I'm sorry, lad, but yer will thank me later!" Moody had pulled out his wand, saw a moment of sheer panic in the young man's hazel eyes as he fumbled for his own wand, and then cast his spell.

"*Stupefy!*"

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He could hear voices muttering, and cracking open an eye, he saw Dumbledore watching him with a concerned smile and behind him, Moody looking awkward with his good eye watching him while the magical eye was turned to peer out the back of his skull. He was surprised to see that he was back in the rented room of the local bed and breakfast; the floral wallpaper couldn't possibly be up in anyone else's house.

"How are you, Remus?" Dumbledore asked gently.

"A little confused, but fine."

"Huh!" scoffed Moody, but without much venom. "Yer damn near suffocated yerself, lad!"

Lupin shook his head and tried to take his mind back to earlier, but all he could remember was the cottage and then the feeling that some great pressure or weight had trapped him and he was struggling under it.

"I don't seem to remember much," he admitted quietly.

"It seems," Dumbledore began softly, "that you were the victim of an elaborate curse which seemed to amplify your concerns; Alastor was convinced that he could not deal with the situation and was encouraged to end his task."

Grimacing, Lupin rubbed at the back of his neck; the muscles were sore and tense. "I was thinking about the weather...how cold and windy it was." He shuddered as the memories swept over him: the force of the wind battering at him and the burning cold as it sliced past and through him.

"It was a fairly hefty curse," Dumbledore uttered firmly, giving Lupin's shoulder a gentle squeeze. "Now we know that we're dealing with a witch in possession of her gifts then we shall tread more carefully. Using the rented cottage is no longer feasible; she will have to be taken to Grimmauld Place." He stood, towering over Lupin, and then turned to Moody. "Shall we strike tomorrow, as planned, or sooner?"

Moody glanced over at Lupin. "How are you feeling, lad?"

Lupin shook off the vestiges of his recollections and stood. "Fine!"

He was surprised and heartened to see a flicker of a smile cross Moody's face.

"We do it now then!" declared Moody.

Dumbledore nodded gravely and waved his hands over his richly coloured robes, which promptly morphed into grey, dull, Muggle clothes. "Now, it is then!"

Lupin followed them out of the small Bed and Breakfast and into the murky street; it had rained since, and the pavement was slick. Streetlamps hummed and plinked, turning the street into a mix of greys and pools of orange. He was disorientated by how much time had elapsed; morning had directly shifted into evening... how long had he been asleep? The air was still laden with moisture, but the wind had died down considerably, and it was oddly warmer than earlier. They walked along the high street past dark, empty shops and past a rowdy pub until they came to a small, wooden post indicating a public footpath. Turning off the main road and walking along it in the dark, Moody stopped them just before the cottage came into view and cast a series of complicated spells. Lupin recognised a few protection charms, but the others were unknown to him; Dumbledore seemed unfazed by it all.

"The plan," Moody said quickly and quietly, "is to get in and curse her as quickly as possible; no explainin', no apologies for arrivin' without an invite and no chats on how the weather is...got it?" His blue eye moved from one to the other while the magic eye was fixed firmly on the cottage and its occupant. "I'll cast Malleus on her, and then we'll take her back to headquarters."

"Malleus?"

"It's a very old spell, Remus, and one considered by many to be Dark." He sighed and stroked down the length of his beard. "The things we must do."

Dumbledore spoke softly, so softly that Lupin almost missed the Headmaster's admission and remorse.

The spells tingled around him as he stepped round the bend and saw the cottage. He was surprised at how pretty and charming it looked, rather than the squat, unwelcoming place only a few hours before. The wind was chill, but not the fierce, biting thing it had been earlier. The downstairs was lit, and through the thin curtains, in what he considered to be the sitting room, he could make out shifting shadows.

"We Apparate into the front room," Moody said softly. "On three! One ... Two ... Three!"

They all stood in a frozen tableau for a mere fraction of a second. Three wizards faced a tall, slender woman dressed in a cream, long-sleeved top and hip-hugging jeans. She held a steaming cup, her slick, wet hair dripped onto her shoulders, and she wore a stunned expression. In that instant, Lupin saw her pale, oval face, her dark eyes, her soft pale lips, her delicately arched eyebrows and her slender nose; she was the darker image of Narcissa. Her dark, intense gaze once again fell upon him, and Lupin thought that he saw recognition in those depths, some complex mix of emotions stirred up by his face. Then, that face twisted in anger and fear. The cup was hurled at them, the hot contents turning into scalding droplets; she turned on her heel and attempted to dive through the doorway into the hallway.

While Lupin had been caught up in that odd moment of connection, Moody and Dumbledore had cast their spells; Dumbledore maintained a protective shield, and Moody

cast the Malleus. Lupin watched as an amber streak of light erupted from the tip of Moody's wand and curled around the retreating woman. He saw her flail as one might batter flames and her anger dissolve into absolute horror as the magic licked and wrapped around her. She twisted and overbalanced, crashing into the doorframe rather than escaping through it and then slid down onto the floor. Past the blood whistling in his ears, he heard her whimpers and moans and the thuds and thumps as she frantically writhed and squirmed to free herself. The tendrils of magic weaved a cocoon around her, tightening and swathing her in amber light until she could no longer move, and then, even her whimpers stopped. Through the shimmering magic prison, Lupin saw her panic-filled eyes slowly glaze over and then flutter closed.

So many questions had blasted through her mind, and that had been her downfall.

While some deep part of her mind had screamed that she run, other parts had stopped to admire the view. The tall, elderly, bearded man with piercing blue eyes had triggered a tumultuous torrent of memories that had paralysed her. In her wonder, she had taken the time to look at the others, and her eyes had latched onto a much younger man with greying hair. She had allowed herself to dwell upon the new memories that bubbled up from the deepest and darkest recesses of her fractured recollections. She was struck with an immense feeling of loss. So much she had lost, surrendered and squandered for this security that was as false and as futile as her hopes. Decades of wandering with only the occasional backward glance, and it should all be for nothing because she was lost in a glance.

Confused by the sudden barrage of emotions, instincts and memories, she hesitated...too late had her body and mind decided to act as one. She could feel the horrible pressure of magic building up even before she had thrown the mug, and as she flung herself towards the door, some spell had caught and wound itself around her. She instinctively summoned and directed her magic, but it was somehow stolen from her like an illness that saps strength; she could feel her desperate efforts and see how little was the result. Anger evaporated and fear condensed. She did as all panicked creatures do and resorted to blind and mindless effort as she struggled and fought against the constricting and smothering bands of magic. Finally, her strength gave out, and with her magic severed or stoppered, she lay there, panting and wild-eyed.

Through the coruscating magic, she saw the three men slowly converging on her, and then her vision closed in and all became dark. Her last thoughts were of a fat, lazy snake coiling around her legs and a tall, handsome man with red eyes, welcoming her home.

Chapter Fourteen

Chapter 14 of 36

Despite her obvious terror, Dumbledore puts his plan into motion, and both have to face their own demons as an individual is destroyed to resurrect another.

"Ah," crooned a teasingly familiar voice, "you're awake."

Her eyes, after much coercion, focused on a bearded face with twinkling, piercing blue eyes and a concerned expression. Grimacing as bile rose up into her mouth, she tried to swallow, but her mouth was painfully dry. The acid burnt, and with it came rolling, growing waves of nausea. She knew that face! The details eluded her, just as the face of that haggard-looking man had paralysed her while some instinct had demanded that she run. She moaned softly and closed her eyes. Tears threatened, but she'd learnt a long time ago that they were a waste, and all that occurred to indicate her distress was the almost painful sting in her eyes and one stifled, dry sob. Despising feeling weak, she tried to summon the anger, the hate that had fuelled her for so long, but it was gone. She opened her eyes and looked up at the cracked, stained ceiling.

"We restrained you with the Malleus." Dumbledore saw her eyes widen slightly. "Ah, I see that you are familiar with the curse."

She wanted to shake her head in denial, becoming increasingly terrified that she couldn't summon the disbelief and ignorance that she would have expected. Somehow, she knew what he had meant; understood the unfamiliar word. Who was this man? Why did she thrum with terror and yet yearn to cleave to him as if he were some long-sought saviour?

"As you will know, then, the curse is debilitating, but will dissipate with time." He stood and loomed over her. "Time that you should spend considering your position, Ophelia."

That name! Ophelia. She felt her eyes bulge and her breath catch in her throat. It was like an answer to a question she hadn't known she was asking. Part panicking and part jubilant, she looked deeply into the man's eyes. Something flickered in those glistening blue depths only to evaporate too quickly to define, and she found that it heightened her dread and desperation just as it crushed her rising joy. In turn, he seemed to bore into her mind; his gaze was startlingly intense, and under his scrutiny, she felt exposed and raw.

"I can understand that this is a terrifying ordeal for you." His deep voice cracked with the effort of restraining some emotion. "I can only offer you the comfort that what we do will benefit many, yourself included."

Upon his soft words that surely hid his evil intent, she found that her mind was flooded with scraps of tattered memories, of dreams and nightmares that she had thought long buried. His face was there in amongst the carnage of wrecked thoughts. She shuddered and felt herself heave, at which point the bizarre mental cascade ceased, and all she had to focus on were the sounds of their breathing. He had averted his gaze and was staring blankly at the dark, stained duvet. Any sounds or words she wanted to make struggled and died in her reluctant throat. After what felt like an age, he turned back to her, smiling sadly, and his eyes seemingly less penetrating but glistening all the more.

"We have something for you to drink." His face contorted at the fear flaring in her eyes. "I have sat many a night, wondering if there was another way, wondering if this vile act is absolutely necessary, and I have to say that I cannot find an argument potent enough to stay my hand."

Inside, she screamed and writhed; inside, she begged and pleaded; inside, she withered and died.

"I can promise you that you will be released; you will find peace with yourself."

I'm going to die, her mind screamed. This man is going to kill me! No! No! Please... no! Please! Help me! Someone! No!

The bearded man, who looked so serene and gentle as he sat on the edge of the bed, pulled out what looked like a black bulb vase from his inner breast pocket. He looked at it, and his expression was so calm, as if it were nothing more sinister than a cup of warm milk, and he was about to tell a bedtime story.

Get away! Let me go!

She tried to move, tried to slither away, but whatever thing held her was too strong. Nerves stretched to breaking point, her eyes fixed on the strange black vase held delicately in his thin fingers. Her tears, streaming down her face, were the only things free to move.

"You will drink this before the others arrive; they must remain blameless."

No; please don't! I don't know what you want! I don't know! Why? No! No! Oh God! No! Why? Why? Why?

The terror was overwhelming, and her head felt that it would burst under the pressure of her thoughts and mental pleas and cries. With a thundering deep within her chest and sweat running in rivulets from her body, she watched and wept as he leant forward and gently slid a hand behind her neck. As he placed the lip of the bottle against her lips, he tugged tenderly, lifting her head so that it tilted back.

Why me? Who are you? Bastard! Get it away! Stop! Don't hurt me! Oh God! Don't kill me ... please ... no Stop!

"I cannot ask for forgiveness; indeed, I do not require it, but I do hope that in time, you will understand why I have to do this." His voice was barely a whisper, but in her fear and terror, her senses seemed amplified and immense.

No... no... no... no no!

Her vision blurred with copious tears, and her mind exploded, leaving mental numbness as the cold liquid poured into her mouth, and her treacherous throat swallowed.

Oh sweet Merlin! ... No.... Merlin?

Never mind ... hush! Let me come back! It's been so long! So long.... back...

Who are you?

I'm Ophelia, dear Veronica; and my dear... I was here first!

Lost in the sight of her eyelids fluttering closed, squeezing the last tears from her lashes, and how her frantic breaths slowed, he failed to register the first knock on the door. At the second, more insistent rap, he slowly lowered her head and released his grip on her neck. Waving a hand, the lock clicked open, and he fancied that there was a longer pause than necessary before the door swung open. Glancing up, he saw Minerva standing straight and focused and Lupin silhouetted in the doorframe.

"The potion will take several hours to have an effect, and then, according to what we know, take a few days to run its course," Dumbledore said as he eased himself up off the bed. "I expect that she will suffer as her memories germinate and evolve; it will be distressing for you to watch."

"Severus explained it," Minerva said soothingly.

Dumbledore nodded solemnly. "We have a very limited idea of who she was and is now; the woman she will become is beyond our ability to fathom. Be careful and wary!" he warned sternly. "Poppy has been told that she may be needed, but other than that, she knows nothing; therefore, be assured that she is available, but only if you need her. Severus is also prepared for any emergencies that may occur due to a reaction to the potion. I will send Alastor up shortly. Please take care...of her and yourselves." He smiled reassuringly at them both and then swept out of the room; the door clicking shut behind him was a relief. He met Moody on the stairs, the grim Auror bristling and wand at the ready.

"Well?" Moody queried sternly.

"I doubt that she remembers much at all; the memories I managed to catch are few and fractured. She has an intuitive grasp of magic; she knows that she can do things that others cannot, and she has mastered the art of using it." Dumbledore spoke quickly and simply; the last few minutes with her had been incredibly draining. "To her, the dreams and nightmares that have teased and plagued her are mere fancies and not the memories of her former life. The adjustment will be harsh."

"Yer think that she will help us?"

"Alastor, dear friend," he said, placing his arm across the shorter man's shoulders as they stood on the stairs. "One thing that we have learnt about Ophelia Black is that she is an incredibly intelligent and sensible woman. She will help us because the consequences of *not* aiding us are terrible."

"Aye," Moody agreed sadly.

"Choice is a liberty for us all; we must do what we must do." Dumbledore paused and looked up at the shadowed door and the mystery behind it. "We have her and Tom does not, and if that is all the good that comes of this then we must cling to that; how she wishes to move from here is up to her. It is a choice of sorts...not a fair one or an easy one...and, most likely, it will be the last choice she will have." He stroked his beard and smiled sadly. "We face the future better armed and prepared, and hopefully, we will live to regret the cost; but for now, we will be content with what we have."

Chapter Fifteen

Chapter 15 of 36

The potion runs its course, and all involved suffer as the reality of watching a mind struggle to survive becomes apparent.

Sirius stood at the bottom of the stairs; his face was expressionless, but his scrawny hand clutched at the banister 'til the knuckles popped. A Silencing Charm had been cast, but one slip by Lupin had indicated the extreme anguish suffered within the room...the scream had ripped through the house. It had rooted him to the spot, his head twisting towards the sound and the cup he held slipping through his fingers. He had rushed to the foot of the stairs, his heart banging painfully against his ribs, to see the door to her room slam shut. The cry cut dead! It seemed that the walls still echoed the heart-wrenching sound, or was it the blood whistling past his ears? He felt his legs move, and before he could register what he was doing, he was part way up the stairs. Cursing himself for a fool, he stopped and turned back, storming into the kitchen. He wanted no part of it.

He made some tea, even though he wanted...needed...something else, but he saw Lupin's sorrowful and disappointed face every time he thought about the Firewhiskey in the cabinet. He slammed a mug down on the worktop and Summoned the tea caddy, but in his anger, it flew past his left ear and thudded against the wall in an explosion of tea leaves. Staring at the scattered pile, he saw it as the spreading mould that was his decaying world; nothing about his existence was pure anymore... even Harry was slipping through his fingers. Bitterness welled up; he had fought to escape for this! Swallowing the brewing rage, he tried to dispel his growing discontentment, but he still had that vicious nagging feeling that he was losing his grip. A few spells later, and the tea was back in the caddy, hot water in the teapot and Sirius feeling numb as he

watched the sparrows fly past the window.

It seemed that his life had been one stay in hell followed by another; only those glorious days at Hogwarts seemed to suggest that he had ever known joy. Sixteen years in this stinking hole, so horribly called home, and then thirteen in Azkaban, suffering the same nightmares over and over, and then after all that, to be trapped within this hell once again. Left here while the others went about their business, their special and secret tasks that were so vital to it all. He gulped down his tea, ignoring the scalding liquid against his lip and the roof of his mouth.

But that scream had slid past his defences; it had resonated within him, the howl of pain and suffering. He suddenly discovered that despite his best efforts, he was sympathising with the witch, relating to her anguish now and the bleak future ahead of her. He had resolved himself not to be a part of it; he couldn't let himself be party to her abduction, her forced insertion back into this world and her imprisonment. He couldn't accept the cruelty of it.

A soft sound caught his attention, a sniffing sound coming from under the sink. Puzzled, he put his cup down and stepped over to crouch in front of the wooden doors. Tugging them open, he saw Kreacher curled up on his collection of tattered blankets and sniffing into what looked like a bedraggled handkerchief. The elf looked up desperately and quickly stuffed the piece of cloth down the front of his dirty smock before launching himself out from his hidey-hole and past Sirius.

"What does master want with Kreacher?" the elf said snidely, his manner belying the sniffing whimpering that Sirius had just interrupted.

"What was that cloth you had?"

The elf looked panicked and bounced from foot to foot. "Kreacher doesn't know what master is talking about?"

"Don't lie!" roared Sirius. He had found something to help vent his fury; this vile creature that had ruined his chances of freedom countless times as a child would now be his release. "Show me!"

The elf screamed, and with trembling limbs and eyes brimming with tears, he pulled out the cloth and held it out. Every tendon and muscle in the twitching elf's body cried out that it was against his will. Sirius pulled the fabric free and opened it up. It was heavily creased, and he grimaced at the damp patches on it, but he saw the embroidered initials in the corner. The green cotton was frayed and most of it had fallen out, leaving small stitch holes, but he could see that it had been R. B. stitched within a circle.

"Another keepsake?" he asked softly while he gently waved the hankie. "Another precious memento of the good old days?"

Kreacher looked suitably mortified at Sirius' treatment of his valued treasure and was wringing his hands and bobbing on the spot. The large tear-filled eyes never left the dirty piece of cotton as it swayed from side to side. Sirius knew that he was being vicious, but he couldn't stop; the elf had destroyed his hopes no end of times, and this was the beast's just rewards. He grinned, and his eyes felt wide as he drank in the sight of the frantic elf. Suddenly, it didn't seem funny anymore; he felt sickened, and he let the cloth slip from his grasp. Kreacher moved quickly to catch the falling hankie, and once he had it, he gripped it tightly between his small hands. The elf seemed to gather himself together and backed away with a nasty smile curving his lips.

"I thought that I'd told you to go away," Sirius said despondently, finally managing to break the awkward silence. With that subtle command, Kreacher ran, laughing, from the kitchen.

For several moments, Sirius stood frozen on the spot as his mind went over and over what had just happened. How low had he sunk that tormenting elves was sport? How terrible was his life that this had been his one moment of happiness in far too many months? He licked his lips and took a deep, shaky breath. Things would change; they would have to.

--X--

Lupin had cursed and slammed the door shut as the piercing scream filled the room. Minerva woke with a start and jumped up from her chair, her face pale and frantic, contorting with pain as she watched the young woman fight with unseen things. Ophelia's nails scratched deeply, leaving long, bloody welts on her bare skin, and her sobs and screams were heartbreaking. Minerva had resorted to Transfiguring the duvet into straps that criss-crossed the writhing woman to prevent her injuring herself, but that had just increased the desperation and volume of her screams. Lupin dragged his fingers through his hair; he was at a loss. Ophelia had screamed herself hoarse, and pathetic whimpers and moans now tumbled from her dry and cracked lips.

"It's been two days already," Lupin whispered incredulously. "It doesn't seem to be easing."

Minerva looked ready to weep and then inhaled sharply as she rallied. "She will remember very little of this, Remus; we must endure this as best we can." She smiled wearily and turned her attentions back to her ward.

"I hope this is worth it."

"It has to be," mumbled Minerva. "Otherwise, what have we become?"

Finally, Ophelia's energy and breath seemed to flag, and she lay limply on the bed, her eyes staring blankly at the ceiling, her breath coming in hitching pants. Her skin was glistening with sweat, and her cheeks were flushed and bloody from her frantic attempts to dislodge some unseen foul things. Soon, her eyes began to roll in their sockets, and her breathing softened and deepened; her guardians watched anxiously as she finally settled to sleep.

"We take regular breaks," said a gruff voice from the opposite corner of the room. "This is hard, and we'd best make it easy on ourselves." Moody had thought himself sturdy and immune to seeing suffering, but this went beyond what he was used to. It hurt all the more knowing that he was part of the cause, that he had thought the end worth it. "From now on, two watch while the third rests, ready to assist when needed."

Lupin and Minerva nodded; they were fatigued and the thought of dealing with her distress and their own troubled minds was overwhelming. It had seemed so easy when they had discussed it in the kitchen, the anguish a necessary evil as they sought something so vital. Here and now, the necessity of it seemed inadequate. In fact, it seemed quite monstrous.

"Now that the students are doing their OWLs, my timetable is fairly clear," Minerva explained quietly. "I will carry on here if either of you wish to take a break and grab some sleep."

Lupin noted with some amusement that Moody had settled himself in the rickety rocking chair. "I'll go and get some sleep," he offered redundantly with only the mildest hint of irony in his voice. It seemed that the verbalisation of his intent exacerbated his exhaustion, or maybe he really noticed it now that he could relax, but it seemed that aches and pains were blossoming throughout his body; he stifled a yawn.

"We'll wake yer if we need yer," Moody said. "Rest well, lad."

And so they had taken turns; one resting, eager to be out of the room to doze uneasily, while the others sat and suffered with the memory-tormented woman. The morbid monotony was disturbed violently when she unleashed all the magic she had in order to free herself from the horrors she was enduring. They had been forced to counter these displays, their wands flashing furiously as they worked to keep the damage and chaos under control. Exhausted and trembling, they had grown to fear those outpourings of magic, the madness and desperation condensed into mere moments.

--X--

She had stopped running. Running just exhausted her, and she knew that sooner or later, she always fell. It seemed that with this numbness, inspired by suffering such protracted fear, that she could think more clearly. She stopped to study the scenes unfolding before her; she saw idyllic days in the sun, playing with an older boy; he

seemed so familiar that she almost called out a name only to feel empty when she couldn't. A smile tugged at her lips at the joy so apparent on their faces, and she wondered if she had felt such happiness. Was that young girl her? The day darkened, and she was in a cellar, watching a young girl and another young man chop and slice as they laughed and chatted. She seemed to resonate with the thrill that was so evident, that sense of discovery and achievement as the two figures worked and concentrated, the tension eased by pleasant companionship and delight. The young girl was older, and her heart skipped a few beats; the girl was her! Caught up in the moment, her lips parted and her eyes greedily watched; she tried to find clues, tried to expand upon the memory.

You know who they are.

She spun on her heel, her eyes wide and her breath lodged in her throat. The voice had seemed close, the speaker standing at her shoulder, but although she searched frantically, there was nothing to see.

Oh, laughed the voice, you can't see me, not yet anyway. But soon, you'll know all about me and them; you'll know everything. And then, my dear, we will have a little chat about your fateful decision...about your betrayal!

"Get away from me!" A dreadful thought was growing like a hulking mountain ready to spew forth ash and fire. She had looked for so long, dedicated so much to finding out about herself and trying to draw out the memories that she had lost. Now, it seemed that her hopes and efforts would be rewarded, and suddenly, she no longer wished to know, but, strangely, dreaded *not* knowing.

"I don't want you; I don't need you!" she shouted into the darkness, her eyes trying to pierce the thick shadows and the shifting shapes, indistinguishable, against the dark backdrop. She had never felt such fear, such desperation; she had always managed before, even after she had stopped taking her medication. She had left the hospital knowing and assured that she was healthy. Why should that horrible, terrible thing manifest itself now? Her mind was spinning with ideas and theories...she was merely reacting to her current ordeal; she was stressed and afraid. This was just the result of terror. She thought back on the little tricks that the doctors had taught her; those little mantras that she had used to smother and stamp on that little voice.

"I am Veronica Speedwell; I am calm and at ease."

You stand there shivering with fear, the voice sneered. And whether you want or need me is irrelevant; you have no choice.

"I am in control; you are nothing!"

Anthropomorphising your delusion! the voice said softly, giving a gentle, almost consolatory, sigh. *You're falling back into bad habits.*

"I beat you once, and I can do it again," she screamed out wildly. "Do you hear me?"

There was no reply, only the sound of laughter fading away.

--X--

"Protego!" screeched Minerva, her voice barely audible above the strange, screaming howl that filled the small room. Instinctively, she crouched as dozens of shards of shattered glass struck the shield and ricocheted off in various directions. Moody cursed under his breath as some of the larger fragments embedded themselves in the wall mere inches from his head. The bed was rocking wildly, the feet thumping heavily against the wooden floorboards, and the bed linen whipped around as if caught in some ferocious wind. Groaning walls bulged and the ceiling bowed; the wardrobe had splintered in sympathy with the smashing window, and needle-sharp splinters were darting through the air. The protective charms in place were crumbling under the ferocity of Ophelia's unconscious assault. Magic crackled in the air, discharging itself loudly into the charms and defences that they had carefully constructed.

Moody deftly cast *Immobilus*, and the vicious projectiles stopped in mid air. Breathing hard, Minerva and Lupin strengthened the charms designed to absorb and dissipate the magic Ophelia was releasing. Magic flickered and flashed brightly, startling the eyes and adding to the disturbing disorientation. But as with previous times, the magic began to weaken, and the scene calmed; the suspended splinters and shards fell to the floor with a series of melodic thuds and chinks.

The event had lasted minutes, but the madness and chaos condensed into such a short time had them reeling with exhaustion. They stood, still hunched defensively, and watched the witch anxiously, wondering if this was the end or just the eye of the storm. After several fraught moments, the witch slumped back against the mattress, and her eyelids fluttered closed; the eerie, screeching howl faded, and the last residues of magic fizzled and sputtered about them.

"Well, we're makin' progress," Moody said with forced enthusiasm while plucking inch-long, wooden splinters from his hair. "Really felt this time that that were an half-hearted attempt at killin' us." He sighed deeply and looked at the mess around him. "I'll fix the window, but I'll be buggered if I'm fixin' the blasted wardrobe again."

Chapter Sixteen

Chapter 16 of 36

Veronica and Ophelia face each other as they begin to battle for dominion and survival.

They circled each other as wary predators would over a succulent morsel. One seemed alive with malice while the other seemed oddly detached from the terrible drama growing between them. They were mirror images, both tall and slender, both dark-haired and pale-skinned, both emanating a sense of power. They wanted the same thing: control. They had a lifetime of suffering to hone their skills and refine their want; they had no intention of surrendering or squandering their advantage. It seemed that Ophelia had the most to gain, which meant that Veronica had the most to lose.

You cannot win against me! Her voice was so confident and strong that her words seemed no less than prophecy. Veronica felt a flutter of panic; never had they met in such a fashion, for the deeper, darker, part of her had always been a whisper in her mind, a subtle pressure on her intentions. Now, Ophelia stood before her, eager and hungry.

"I don't have to win; I just have to hold onto you."

Hold onto me! She laughed, the sound reverberating and gathering strength until it became a vibration deep within their bones. *You wouldn't know how to, my dear; you have neither the strength nor wit.*

But she knew the truth of it; she had been held down and smothered for decades. Veronica's will and mind had kept her at bay, and not her long-lost protector's charm. Struggling and fighting had only strengthened the bonds; now she needed to be free, things were changing, things were no longer the same; she was needed in a way that Veronica could only nightmare about. Ophelia wondered if her host knew of it, sensed the world shifting; wondered if that could be the leverage that she had been denied while they had been safe and sound in the Muggle world.

"I have managed it for years," she said firmly, a soft smile curving her lips. "This disease has battered at me for decades, and I have kept it deep inside where it could do no harm."

Ophelia stopped pacing and stared blankly at the woman before her, noting the calm serenity that suffused her and the subtle strength in her stance. Could it be that Veronica had confused her for some bizarre and hateful manifestation of dark desires and fancies? Ophelia felt her eyes widen as the thought thundered along its track, reaching the terminus in an explosion of realisation and ironic ramification. Ignorance and fear were her true judges and guards; Veronica had condemned her on a few tragic and disjointed memories; Veronica had no idea that Ophelia was disparate, had no idea that there were two distinct minds within the same brain.

You don't know who I am, do you? You think me an illness?

Veronica frowned at the sudden change of tack; she saw the wide-eyed confusion and the remarkable and unexpected innocence in the other woman's dark eyes. "You would hurt and kill. You would maim and destroy, lie and cheat. That is not healthy, not right."

All very true; I cannot lie to you. The voice was small and emotionless, as if the admission had stolen the will to feel. Ophelia took a deep breath and tucked a few strands of hair behind her ear, tugging on the ends, and Veronica felt almost more afraid of this weaker aspect of her demon than the one who had stood so proud and menacing moments before. *I have done things that would and should make you cringe, conspired and worked to bring about death. I set myself the task of killing a man, a traitor to all that I had grown to stand for. I lied and destroyed; all the things that you deem me capable of, I have done. May not have been healthy, but it was most certainly right.*

Veronica's frown deepened; was that remorse flickering across Ophelia's features? Was it pain? Could she risk trusting this facet of herself; did this creature hold the answers? Was knowing worth the risk of losing herself? Of being the one held behind bars, watching the horrors committed while trapped behind uncaring eyes? She swallowed nervously; would knowing change her? Would she become the woman she had spent twenty years hating and fearing?

I had no choice, Ophelia finally whispered, her eyes staring into memories that were locked to Veronica. *I tried,* her voice trembled, *but I didn't have the strength. And that is my sin, my shame, my sorrow. It is the constant pain that has distracted me from claiming what is mine by birthright!* Her posture suddenly shifted, and she seemed more feral; her dark eyes glittered dangerously as they fixed, pinned, Veronica with a hungry, greedy glare. *Who do you think was here before? You know that there was a before; wouldn't you like to know what I know?* she asked while tapping her temple. *Know what it is that terrifies you? Why those things were needed? Know why we did them?* She stepped forward until she was nose to nose with her naive and dedicated gaoler. Veronica was caught in her gaze and senseless on her words; she was unable to prevent it.

"Is there a reasonable excuse?" Veronica asked more bravely than she felt. "Can you give me an excusable reason?"

We had to! she shouted out, breathing fast, her eyes flashing with fury. *If you let go of your selfish and stifling fears, then you'd know! You'd understand!* Her face twisted in disgust as she studied Veronica. *But you will never do that, will you? Your life is comfortable and sweet, and you know that mine was far from it. You are a coward! You stand there spouting ethics and morals to me, using them as a defence, as a convenient shield. Using half-truths and doubts as the backbone of your arguments!* Her voice rose in volume until she was screaming in Veronica's face, her eyes blazing and her teeth bared. As quickly as her wrath had struck, it dissipated, and her voice dropped to an icy whisper. *Your spine is weak! It will snap! Already, you feel it quake and tremble under the strain.*

"I don't want you!" Veronica snapped out, her own anger flaring, her temper breaking. "You want to do more than just defend; you take the power that I have and want to twist it, to make it hurt people rather than protect me."

Protect! She hissed out bitterly. *You call the meagre defences that you created a protection? Out there at this very moment are people, wizards, who will do unspeakable things to you, to us, and you will be unable to stop them.* Ophelia looked mad with fear, anger and desperation. *The demons in the hospital are nothing compared to what you're being dragged back into. Listen to me, she pleaded, her dark eyes wide, you need me!*

--X--

Lupin watched Sirius serenely slice through the egg and scoop out the white from the severed top. His friend had adopted this unaffected air and had kept to himself since they had carried Ophelia into the house and placed her in the spare bedroom. He had tried to talk, but everything seemed so obvious or futile that the words had withered on his tongue. Lupin had contented himself to cook a simple breakfast before returning to his watch. Only the clatter of spoons against crockery and the sound of rain slamming into the windows filled the uncomfortable silence. Sighing softly, Lupin cracked his own egg and peeled away the shell one fractured piece at a time.

For his part, Sirius kept glancing across at his friend with an urge to say something, the need to shatter the barrier that had fallen between them, but not knowing what could be said that would be enough. He knew that it was his own stubbornness that had caused it, he knew...had always known...that Lupin was the voice of reason, the reasonable one and the conscience; without Lupin, Sirius would have done far worse and suffered worse.

Several times, he thought that Lupin was going to start talking, and his heart had leapt at the prospect, but his friend had merely looked pained and then moved on to another task. The rain battering at the window and the wind rattling the back door only accentuated his sense of gloom, loneliness and feelings of enforced isolation. In this sombre mood, he caught sight of Lupin fastidiously removing tiny pieces of shell from his boiled egg; for a moment, he was fascinated by the delicate movement, and then his temper snapped.

"For Merlin's sake, Moony!"

Lupin started, his chair legs scraping against the tile floor and his spoon clattering against the plate as it fell from his fingers.

"Just slice the blasted top off!"

They stared at each other, and then, just as the tension threatened to thunder down, they both felt utterly ridiculous; it was so reminiscent of their school days: Sirius frustrated by a prank gone wrong and Lupin feeling awkward because he couldn't sympathise. It was Sirius's snigger that prompted a laugh to bubble up from Lupin's chest, and over shattered shells, they laughed.

"So, what is she like?" Sirius asked nonchalantly as they tidied away the breakfast dishes.

Lupin sighed and dropped the plates and eggcups into the sink. "We don't really know. That potion is still affecting her," he said, his voice thick with disgust. "Three days of it," he whispered, looking nauseous and extremely exhausted. "We've had to tie her down," he said angrily, his hand trembling as he reached out to turn the tap. "Merlin knows what she's going through."

"Well," interrupted Sirius coolly. "We'll know soon enough."

Lupin felt as though he had been hit in the stomach, and he gaped for a moment at the calm man before him. A surge of fury rushed through him as his efforts, the efforts of everyone, were belittled so neatly. He bit his tongue and turned the tap with more force than was warranted. Where was the Sirius that had told him stories of a little girl sitting on his back and laughing with glee as she clung to his fur? Where was the Sirius that had clung to him and wept on his shoulder after her death?

And that was it! He knew where the man was. He was hiding... hiding from his pain and anger, from the life that was crumbling and falling around him. He peered into the depths of Sirius' eyes and saw a flicker of sorrow...or guilt...and that quenched the fire of his wrath. Lupin sighed softly and felt his heart clench. The drinking and the seeking of solitude, the smooth apathy; they were escapes. Why hadn't he seen it earlier?

"It must be rather bad though," Sirius conceded quietly. "You look like you've just gone through a transformation."

Lupin chuckled grimly; glad of the concession. "Feel like it too."

"When will it be over?" Sirius asked as he picked up a tea-towel.

"According to what we know, today should be the last day, and given what she's gone through then I think that she'll sleep for a while. I know I shall," he said with a smile.

"And then we wait to find out what she is."

Lupin smiled inwardly. He knew that Sirius couldn't be that dispassionate; he had suspected that behind the façade, he was as curious as everyone else. He just hoped that she would be a light in the darkness for him, just as she had been as a child.

"Moody has been trying to find out more; some evidence supports that she's a vicious, devout Death Eater, and other reports indicate that she's a sensitive and caring woman. She has him baffled."

Sirius nodded thoughtfully. "You mean that since the memory loss, she's different?"

Lupin laughed mirthlessly and then shrugged his shoulders. "It would be so neat to say so, wouldn't it, but it isn't quite the case." He turned to look at Sirius, his face animated with wonder. "She uses magic, Sirius, and complicated magic at that. She knew that she was a witch, which seems to suggest that if she did suffer a memory loss, some of it has recovered. If so, then Ophelia wasn't the evil witch we think she was," he said softly, his eyes reflecting his hope, but then he continued with a sad expression, "but that her mind had been twisted and skewed by events around her."

He looked at Sirius and studied the man's thin face, wondering whether his suspicions would force Sirius back to the unforgiving man he had been. The idea that as some of her memories had returned, so some of her true personality had shone through without the corrupting influence of her family; and it had been far from twisted and foul.

"I don't understand." He frowned at Lupin and rested his hip against the work top, waiting for the first dish to dry.

Lupin turned away and began to scrub at the sides of an eggcup. "Moody's findings indicate that while in the Muggle world, she was a deeply troubled child, prone to violent, furious attacks upon those who threatened her, and yet she defended and helped those who needed it. Her life after her stay in hospital was reserved and calm, and he found that she had made a few abiding and deep friendships while in possession of her full abilities." He paused and looked up to face Sirius' sceptical expression and sighed resignedly. "I just have this feeling that she's more than what we think or remember her to be."

"A feeling?" Sirius queried softly as he dried the eggcup.

The question held none of the incredulity or ridicule that Lupin had expected, but it was amazingly interrogative. The other eggcup was subjected to a bout of intense attention as they stumbled through the conversation.

"I can't explain it well," Lupin said with a hint of frustration. "But when I saw her outside the cottage, there was a sense that she was as lost as everyone else."

"Don't expect me to believe that she's another person struggling with a terrible past to be a good person," Sirius snorted contemptuously. "I have enough trying to deal with Snivellus helping us."

Lupin placed a spotless plate on the draining board and pulled out the plug. He watched the water spin and then pull down into a small whirlpool as the dishwasher drained. There was one other thing that was occupying much of his thoughts: that sense of recognition, a recognition that went both ways.

"I can't recall ever meeting Ophelia like I remember meeting many of the others?" His question hung in the air, as innocuous as a dusty cobweb and yet as inescapable. He watched Sirius potter around the kitchen, putting the few dishes away.

"Nah!" Sirius said while tugging on a sticking drawer. "I can't see as you would have; we rarely spoke at school because of ... well, just because, and she spent most her time with Narcissa and all the other Slytherins. Over the holidays, she was at Malfoy's, and she wasn't with Andromeda that long." The drawer sprung open with a clatter of cutlery and a curse from Sirius. "I can't think that you would have had the opportunity to meet her. You may have seen her about the school?" He paused and stared into the drawer, his face paling, pain flickering across his features. "You would have liked her; she always reminded me of you." He smiled. "She was a remarkably stern child too."

"With you around, Padfoot, I had no choice," he countered with a smile. "I just have this feeling that we've met before...that I know her."

Sirius shrugged and tidied the drawer so that it would shut and open smoothly. "I don't know... just one of those things, I guess."

Lupin inhaled slowly and tried to relegate his feeling to a mere 'one of those things', but still, the sensation nagged at him. He couldn't see that a chance meeting, especially one that he couldn't recall, in the corridors of Hogwarts would have had such an impact upon him. He bit down on the rising frustration and turned his mind to another dilemma.

"Sirius," he said gently. He saw Sirius stiffen and slowly close the drawer.

"I know that voice, Remus," he replied warningly, still looking down at his hand on the drawer handle, "and the answer is no!"

Lupin felt the urge to argue, to force the issue, but he knew that of late, Sirius' mood was variable and unpredictable, and he was loathe to spoil this tentative moment between them.

"You're right," he conceded. "Have you heard from Harry lately?"

Sirius shook his head and sighed wearily. "Not since he used the Floo in Umbridge's office and basically told me off about tormenting Sniv... Snape." He smiled wryly at the memory of his godson's troubled face in the flames. He sobered and shook his head sadly. "He worries me," he said quietly. "And there is nothing I can do!" He thumped the worktop, suddenly outraged. "I'm here doing nothing, and he's facing it all; he's suffering that woman, Umbridge, and Voldemort crawling around inside his head, and I'm here, babysitting a Hippogriff and a Death Eater!" His voice had risen in pitch and volume.

"You need to be here, Sirius."

Sirius stared at him as if it was the most ridiculous thing he'd heard. "I don't *need* to be here," he protested. "What I *need* is to be looking after him; need to get out of this hell-hole and watch over him."

The sudden desperation and frantic expression on Sirius' face distressed Lupin, and he swallowed hastily. He knew that the enforced stay in this house was contributing to his bouts of dark depression, and he knew that Sirius was succumbing to other vices while within these walls. His mind worked quickly to see a way to give Sirius some focus and hope, but he knew that the only answer to Sirius' dilemma was to go to Harry and leave this mausoleum of a house.

"It'll be the end of the school year soon," Lupin said with forced brightness, but before he could expand on his ideas, Minerva's amplified and harried voice filled the kitchen.

Chapter Seventeen

Chapter 17 of 36

It seems that Veronica is as determined to stop the memories returning as Ophelia was to be rid of them. Two battles now rage: Veronica and Ophelia's struggle for the body and the Order's fight to keep them both alive.

She was running; she seemed to think and dream of that with distressing and frustrating frequency. She could feel the jolt of each impact through her legs, into her hips and up her spine, her whole body wracked by each stride. She was so very tired, and each footfall hurt. Her arms pumped furiously by her sides as she continued to run, but she knew that she was tiring, knew that soon, she would stumble and fall. Her lungs burned with the effort, her sides felt like hot knives were slicing through to her belly, and sweat stung her eyes, blinding her. Her chest felt ready to explode, and the blood rushed painfully through her throat to roar past her ears. Thud! Her foot on the ground. Thud! Her heart in her chest. Thud! Her foot striking again. Thud! Thud! Thud! Slowing down, she whimpered... she was slowing down. She gritted her teeth and summoned the last vestiges of strength.

Thud!

...Thud!

...Th...thud!

She stumbled and hit the ground, rolling and tumbling as momentum carried her forward. The world became a confused blur of sky and ground, of flailing limbs and tangling clothes. The wind was knocked out of her as her back struck the sturdy and unforgiving trunk of a tree. Gasping and struggling for breath, she tried to see what she was running from. What terrible thing had been on her heels?

Blinking away the sweat, her eyes frantically swept the scene. Trees crowded her, standing like morbid spectators to her plight, their branches creaking overhead. Ferns and brambles filled the gaps between the hazardous tree roots, vicious things that had snagged her legs and scratched at her as she had ploughed through their ranks. Weak sunlight filtered through the bare branches, and a mist was gathering in the distance, seeping slowly towards her as it thickened into a fog. It felt as if the world was closing in on her, intent on smothering her and trapping her here with whatever hunted her.

Her ears strained for some tell-tale rustle in the undergrowth, some crack of a twig being stepped upon, but all she could hear were her deep, rapid gasps for air, the thumping of her heart, and the creaking branches. Wincing as her bruised ribs protested, she moved slowly, crouching and creeping low through the ferns. She eased her way as quietly and as quickly as she dared through the foliage. A treacherous bubble of hysterical laughter rose up into her throat...she had no idea where to run! Where was safe? Where could she go? She no longer even knew what direction she had been running in before the fall. She battled the tears and the desire to scream. Crawling along between the tall stalks, careful not to disturb the ferns too much, she figured that any direction was better than none. She followed the land as it sloped downwards; maybe it led to water, which in turn may lead to a town of sorts. As the day dwindled and the darkness descended, she crawled and slithered her way through the wood.

She kept an ear and wary eye on her surroundings, and crept until the ferns petered out and the forest thinned. Through the younger trees with their slender trunks, she saw what looked like a cave, and with some trepidation, she darted towards it. She stopped on the threshold and gave her surroundings one last careful scrutiny before stepping inside...and without warning, found herself suddenly knee deep in ice-cold water. The cold of it snatched her breath, and she instinctively scrambled to get out of the murky wet. Her numb fingers connected with stone, and she waded closer, her hands and eyes trying to discern a way out of the water in the gloom. Scrabbling and clinging, she heaved herself out and onto an outcrop of rock. Where had the water come from?

Breathing hard and shivering with the cold, she lay down and curled up, wrapping her arms around her shins. Her teeth chattered loudly, and she shuddered violently. Why was it so cold and dark? Surely she hadn't fallen so far into the cave that the meagre daylight couldn't reach her? Exhaustion and the cold connived together, and she felt the frantic energy that fear had provided ebb away. Her eyes closed.

--X--

Lupin sprinted up the stairs with Sirius close on his heels. He used his wand to open the door before him and sped through with heart hammering, eyes wide and dread heavy in his stomach. Minerva sat on the bed with her back to the door, blocking most of their view, but they could see patches of blood on the pale blue duvet and on Ophelia's arms as she lay perfectly still. Minerva was muttering frantically, and her wand fired spell after spell.

"Merlin!" Sirius whispered, intense emotion thickening his voice. Lupin rushed over to the bed and moaned at the sight. Blood ran in streams from her mouth, down her throat and seeped alarmingly quickly through the bed-linen. He saw something pink and fleshy, glistening on the pillow by her head, and he retched violently when he realised what it was.

"She bit through her tongue!" Minerva sobbed. "And I can't heal it!"

Sirius walked, as if in a dream, to stand next to Lupin, and his eyes latched onto the pale face smeared with blood; how peaceful she seemed amidst the horror of it. She was as he remembered her, the features hardly changed with time. In that instant, he reached a conclusion; feeling a weight lift, he serenely left the room.

Lupin was aware that Sirius had left, and the hope that he had nurtured in the kitchen withered, but there was no time to mourn its quick death. He aimed his wand at the woman drowning in her own blood and cast every spell he knew to keep her alive.

--X--

Some insistent prodding at her legs brought her weary mind back, and her eyelids reluctantly opened. It took several moments for her brain to process what she saw: grey, bloated arms reaching out of the water and fingers gripping at her clothes. With silent horror, she tried to pull her legs back, but the sudden movement seemed to incense them, and their grip tightened. Taking a deep breath, she finally managed the scream that had been lodged in her throat. As it echoed around the cavern, the water's surface looked as though it boiled, and more of the terrible limbs erupted from the depths.

Scratching and peeling the fingers and hands from her, she struggled and thrashed, but those hands pulled her ever closer to the water. Her feet slipped past the surface, and one of the things leapt out of the water and used its body to pin her legs. Screaming and twisting in earnest, sobbing and almost mindless with fear, she tried to grasp at anything that she could use to pull herself away from the water and the monsters within. She was frantic as she slipped down to her waist, feeling more things grabbing her legs. Her hands were slick with water, sweat and blood from her efforts, and she knew with horrific certainty that she was going to die.

More of the creatures were breaching the surface to leap and lie upon her. One emerged with enough force that it fell next to her so that their faces were only inches apart. With the attention to detail that only fear can encourage, she took in the features. It looked fresher than the rest; the skin was less grey and turgid from the water. The hair

was dark and plastered to the thing's skull, and the eyes still had a subtle hint of blue in their depths. She noted the length of the face, the cheekbones and the long nose, the slenderness of it. She knew that face! Her eyes widened at the monstrosity of it! She screamed, and even as they pulled her under the icy water, she continued. *Regulus!* And Regulus embraced her as he had many times, held her as water flooded her lungs and the life began to leave her twitching, shuddering, body.

--X--

He couldn't understand it! The spells were potent enough to have healed injuries much worse than this, and yet, she still bled. They had managed to slow the loss, but it still trickled down her throat and bubbled out from between her pale lips. Lupin glanced across at Minerva, who was wide-eyed and frantic.

"We need Poppy," she hissed out.

"No," Sirius called out calmly from behind them. "You need him."

Their startled gaze flew to Sirius and then to where he had directed with a gentle wave of his hand. In silent wonder, they saw Snape standing in the shadowed corner, his black eyes fixed on the witch now white as death. Lupin stood with mouth agape, his bemused gaze flicking between Sirius and Snape; the withered hope made an amazing resurrection. The dark man strode over to the bed, and he began to sing in a whispered voice an unfamiliar tune in an unfamiliar language. It was oddly beautiful to listen to, soothing and yet, suggesting a power behind it. They stood and listened, watching the enigmatic man wave his wand over the almost dead witch. As the song carried on, certain segments repeating and increasing in tempo, they could feel some power building. The air felt heavy and charged, as if a storm were gathering. Sweat beaded on Snape's brow, and his wand arm trembled slightly with the effort of the magic he controlled.

They looked on in stunned and fretfully hopeful silence. After what seemed an age, Snape picked up the severed tongue, and her mouth fell open at some unspoken command. Holding the slippery flesh between forefinger and thumb, he slipped the tongue past her lips. His song was almost inaudible and tumbled from his trembling mouth while he passed the wand tip over her face.

Sirius' expression was unreadable in the gloom when Lupin tore his gaze away from Snape and Ophelia to look and wonder at his friend. He had an idea what it had cost Sirius to ask Snape for help, and he felt a pang of shame that he had doubted his friend. He felt rather than heard the song stop, and his gaze flew back to the bed; his attention riveted on Snape as the man removed a potion from his breast pocket and poured the contents down the woman's willing throat. Some of the colour returned to her cheeks, and her breathing began to even out.

"Severus," Minerva said with undisguised relief.

Lupin let out his held breath in a jubilant sigh, and he turned to share the moment with Sirius, but the wizard had fled the room; only the faint smell of stale alcohol lingered.

"Nothing we did stopped it," she said in a small and bewildered voice. "I thought that she was going..."

"Nothing you could have done would have stopped the bleeding completely, Professor," Snape said swiftly, as if eager to forestall any outpourings of grief or gratitude. "You did remarkably well to keep her alive."

"What went wrong?" Lupin asked gently, not wishing to suggest that he was placing blame. "So that we know for next time."

Snape glanced across at him, not quite meeting his eye. "She resisted her memories coming back."

"Wouldn't that have been expected?" asked Minerva, her voice laced with confusion. "We have been assuming that she has memories she wished to remove and forget; it's hardly surprising that she would resist."

"We have the ability to repress memories," Snape explained. "Those repressed memories are not affected by the potion because they would have not been affected by the Obliviate Charm. I suspect that the combination of potion and resurfacing memories has triggered a response within her to recover everything, and some aspect of her is fighting the attempt."

"The Obliviate Spell only affects memories that are prevalent," Lupin muttered.

"Precisely," Snape confirmed tonelessly, and the notion crept over Lupin that Snape was on the verge of collapse. The fatigue was showing itself in the way that his shoulders drooped; his lips were parted slightly and his eyelids appeared heavy. "She was fighting the insurgent memories, fighting them with all that she had, fighting to the death."

"Oh, my word!" Aghast at the implication, Minerva looked horrified.

Snape nodded slowly; he seemed to sway ever so slightly, and then he summoned some strength, and he straightened into that irascible tower that had the power to terrify. "I doubt that it will happen again," he said stiffly. "But I will leave some essence of dittany, in case it does," he finished as soothingly as he could. His dark eyes swept the room, and he frowned. "I was under the impression that Moody would be here."

Minerva snorted...a sign of her recovery that her temper could flare so easily. "He was called away by the Ministry; they wished to know where Albus had disappeared to and if Alastor could shed some light." She smiled grimly. "Seems that they are quite eager to track him down."

Chapter Eighteen

Chapter 18 of 36

Snape reflects upon his own feelings and thoughts regarding Ophelia, and Veronica and Ophelia face each other on a more equal footing.

On trembling legs, Snape staggered down the stairs, using the handrail to keep his balance as immense fatigue battered at him. So exhausted! Seeing her had been the last straw. It had taken too much out of him to stifle the incendiary memories exploding in his head at the sight of her. Merely knowing of her existence had been an effective stopper, and seeing her had effectively blown the cork away, releasing the pent-up thoughts and recollections. Blood whistled in his ears, and his vision blurred; with a lurch in his chest, he stumbled and slid ungainly down the last few steps. Gasping, sweating and cursing, he gripped the newel post while his heart pounded and his head swam. When did he last sleep? When did he last feel energised and at ease?

It was difficult enough keeping up with the day-to-day duties as teacher and Head of House, but with the added stress of playing spy and ad hoc potion-maker, it was now

more than a strain. Without the Time-Turner, he would have blown a cauldron before now. Inhaling steadily in an attempt to clear his head, he swayed on the bull-nose until the hairs prickled on the nape of his neck.

Slowly turning his head to peer into the unrelenting gloom of the hallway, he saw a shadow shift, and then Sirius was stepping closer. Snape stiffened; he would not show weakness... especially not before the mutt. But it was just so... *hard*. Every muscle cried out for rest; his bones ached out their pleas for respite, and his brain was smothered with exhaustion... Whatever Black wanted, he hoped that it would be quick.

~X~

The thought of Ophelia with the Dark Lord had rattled within his skull since Snape had mentioned it all those months ago, and with each passing day, the incessant noise had drowned out all other notions. Held within his quaking grip were the fast corrupting memories of a little girl giggling in the sunshine, of a child snuggling against him ready for sleep and an excited new student flourishing her own wand, grinning with glee and kissing him on the cheek. Knowing that he would never get any answers from either Veronica or a corpse, he had swallowed everything that he had left and summoned Snape to save the woman's life.

Something had flared within him when he had seen the blood pouring from her slack mouth, and he was now past the point of feeling shame that he had acted out of intense curiosity rather than affection. Even Snape's sneer as he turned to address him in the Floo had done nothing to dampen his desire to know exactly who he had loved. Perhaps the flicker of concern in Snape's obsidian depths had penetrated his need for enlightenment to leave a lingering inquisitiveness, but his main focus was on picking at his wound, seeing how deeply she had hurt him.

~X~

Snape stepped off the stairs; he did not want to be trapped at their foot while Sirius gathered his wits to say whatever inane thing was scuttling round in his head. Frustrated and tired, Snape scowled and tried to step around the silent and still wizard, but a hand darted out and gripped his bicep. Startled at the contact, Snape instinctively grabbed the wrist of that restraining hand: it was pitifully thin between his fingers. Sirius leant forward, and Snape caught the aroma of stale whiskey on the man's breath as he breathed over his face.

"I have better things to do, Black," he snarled out. His lips drew back in disgust, and he wrenched the hand from his arm.

Not waiting for any response, he turned on his heel and yanked the heavy door open, preparing to Disapparate from the porch.

"Wait!"

Snape paused, one hand gripping the door handle and the other clenching into a tight fist; he was trembling with fatigue and desperate to flee and collapse. He heard his rapid and shallow breaths, felt his heart flutter uncomfortably fast, and it was alarmingly difficult to focus.

"I don't have the time or patience, Black." He knew that he had spoken, but his lips felt numb and the words seemed to struggle to form in his mouth... He felt almost intoxicated.

"I... need to know," Sirius said softly, hoping that if he kept his voice quiet, then maybe the hint of begging would be lost in transit.

"Know what?" Snape snapped back.

"Was she a Death Eater?"

The question sent a thrill through him, and his exhaustion fled like clouds beneath a scorching sun. How often had he asked himself that question? Turning to fully face Sirius, he examined the carefully blank face and the tense body, and for that instant, he felt some kinship with the troubled wizard. Their feelings for Ophelia bound them together...a very weak bond, but one that was inexplicably abiding...and he wondered if they both had seen one face of a little girl, neither knowing her completely.

It was so tempting to thrust a dagger into the heart of the man who had tormented him as a student at Hogwarts and declare that his sweet cousin had been a vile viper close to the Dark Lord, lapping up *His* poison like Mother's milk, but he was just so damned tired.

Yet, even if he wished to, he could offer nothing to soothe the wizard; he had assumed that Ophelia would take the Mark just like the others, but neither she nor the Dark Lord had mentioned it. Her status was as unclear now as it had been then; only the sight of her unblemished left arm gave them some hope that she was free of the Dark Lord's influence. The Mark in itself proved nothing though; it could be branded on the weakest sycophant and never ruin the skin of the most devout follower.

"She bears no Mark, but she loved the Dark Lord; of that, I have no doubt."

There was something in the coolness of his eyes and the way the tension fell away from his previously rigid frame that made Snape uneasy. He knew that he was a bastard...few would dispute him...but Snape was also a sensible bastard, and in Sirius, he saw a man slipping down a steep slope towards a personal hell. Pushing his resentment aside, Snape resolved himself to talk to Dumbledore about Sirius' behaviour and suspected inclinations. Leaving Sirius staring into the darkness of Grimmauld Place, he exited the house, and without a sound, he Disapparated.

~X~

Grimacing at the time, he tugged the Time-Turner free from beneath his shirt and twisted it for an extra six hours worth of time; catching sight of his earlier self slipping out of the door to start the school rounds, he slouched off to his bedroom and collapsed upon the smooth bed, but sleep teased him mercilessly, and instead of the rest he craved, his mind whirled.

He knew that Sirius and Ophelia had met regularly; she had let slip snippets while they had worked together, and it had always seemed that she was different with Sirius, more playful and wild than when she was working and laughing by his side. But it suited him; she was perfect company, and he had derived a great deal of comfort from her presence. And then it had crashed down. He knew why he had felt some connection to Black; he too had felt close to her, only to have his impressions shattered.

It had been futile. Trying to sleep naturally had only made him feel all the worse; he should have relented and taken a sleeping draught, but that would have carried the risk of belatedly answering his Master's call, should the Dark Lord have need of him. Working had only increased his frustrations as he slashed red ink across the parchments that purported to be coursework, and after a series of terrible submissions, he gave up and retreated to his armchair. Grumbling under his breath, he sipped his coffee and returned to the earlier musings that had kept sleep at bay.

~X~

The flame under the cauldron sputtered loudly, and their heads snapped round; moving simultaneously, they descended upon the expanding mass spewing from the cauldron. Where the foaming liquid touched the struggling fire, plumes of evaporating potion billowed out, filling the small room with a purple, stinking haze. Casting spells to contain the vapour, kill the flame, and clean away the dark green mess that had poured over the work bench, they both thought about why the potion had failed; this potion could not fail.

A dark look passed between them, and then Severus stormed away towards the notes festooned over a workbench. His frame vibrated with reined-in fury, and from across the room, Ophelia could hear the rapid and heavy puffs of air whistle through his nose. Giving the cauldron one last scour, she carefully stepped over to him where he was bent over, his finger stabbing at the sheet of paper outlining the method that should have worked. Long, black hair curtained his face, but she could see his lips curled back and twitching as he mouthed his frustrations. Tempted to touch him and offer comfort, she was surprised at the reticence she felt...she never hesitated to hold Sirius or Regulus: what held her back here?

A sudden movement startled her from her musings, and she watched open-mouthed as Severus began to grasp at the papers and hurl them into the air. Despite his fury

and effort, the sheets danced and whirled in the air gently, as if mocking his venting, and they fluttered whimsically to the floor, whispering as they slid over each other.

"It should have worked!" he snarled out. Shaking his head and repeatedly clenching and unclenching his fists, he struggled to control his anger and desperation. It wouldn't have been difficult to predict this weeks ago; she had seen that the workload was straining him, and as such, she had made herself available to help him as much as she could... Besides, she needed access to Malfoy's basement to obtain her own supply of ingredients. The Dark Lord had demanded a range of potions, from simple Healing Draughts to various poisons, and in case Severus had had time to sleep during that request, he had also made it clear that he wanted some potion to defend his followers from Veritaserum.

"The purple fumes suggest that the Belladonna somehow..."

"I know what it suggests, Ophelia!" he snapped out viciously.

That hurt! The flash of pain across her pale features was clear, and the way she turned her head to hide it twisted the knife a little deeper into his chest. Gripping his hair and tugging harshly, he inhaled slowly and stepped over to her.

"I'm sorry" he muttered.

When she failed to look at him and accept his apology, he inhaled shakily and mentally berated himself for his stupid, angry outburst. Placing his palms on the bench, he steadied himself and stared down into the empty cauldron. Behind him, he heard the soft susurrus of the papers being gathered together, and he turned to watch her. Even after working with her for the last two hours, he had not noticed how tired and pale she was. The skin that had always been smooth and delicate now looked grey and fragile; her hair that had been rich and shimmered, even in the gloom of his lab, was drab and lifeless. When had she stopped glowing? Frowning, he studied her more closely. Her frame was slighter, the robes hung loosely on her, and he noted with rising alarm that her hand was less than steady as it reached out to slide a sheet towards her.

A thought erupted. Regulus was looking less than healthy recently. Had they argued? Was the sudden depression and poor pallor due to disharmony in their relationship? Licking his lips, he pondered if he should involve himself. He certainly considered Ophelia a friend, and her pain made him feel a sympathetic ache, but he knew that he was sadly lacking in the ability to offer comfort.

The notes were collected, ordered and placed in a neat pile on the bench by the time he reached some tentative decision. Gathering his thoughts and confidence, he pushed himself away from the bench and called out to her.

"Let's go for a walk."

She frowned and turned to him. "A walk... as in outside?" she asked with an impish smile. "Won't you combust in daylight?"

A chuckle rumbled in his chest and he extended his hand as an encouragement. A flicker of nerves made his stomach roll at her apparent reluctance, but then a warm wave suffused him as her cool hand slipped into his.

"Have you done a Side-Along Apparition before?"

"No," she answered warily.

Another, darker chuckle rumbled and he tugged her closer. "Then I suggest you hold on!"

As the spell took hold, the sense of compression was immense, and her arm around his waist was almost bruising while his hand was crushed in her grip, but whereas the spell was smothering, her tight embrace was... pleasant.

The grace with which she usually conducted herself was snatched away, and she stumbled; he instinctively steadied her and felt her breath brushing over his cheek. That tight grip of hers intensified, and he heard her panicked inhale.

"Severus," she hissed out, fear tingeing her voice.

"Don't worry," he whispered back. Some small part revelled in her panic; enjoyed knowing that a thrill of fear danced down her spine, and another part basked in the feel of her, the way she cleaved to him and her rapid breaths teased his skin. The larger part, however, wondered why he had been so blind to Ophelia, and he fidgeted nervously now that he had been made aware that she was no longer a child...when had that scrawny eight-year-old morphed into a sixteen-year-old woman? "It's always dark in here."

"Dark!" she snapped out. "The lab is dark! This is pitch-black!"

"No fear of sudden, inexplicable combustion then," he said softly into her ear, wondering at the shudder he felt run through her. A sudden urge caught him, and in the utter darkness, he tipped his chin down and carefully turned his head until the fine hairs at her temple tickled his cheek

"Hmph!" she snorted. "I was teasing. I know that you're a workaholic and not a vampire."

While she spoke, he inhaled; the scent of her was subtle, but he caught the tang of lemon and the faintest hint of thyme. A stray strand of hair fell beneath his sensitive nose, and he was momentarily swathed in the sweet scent of violets. He inhaled again, but that sweetness abated, and he was left with the aroma of lemon, thyme and her skin.

It was unnerving to be so... unnerved by her. He had been drawn to women before, harbouring thoughts and desires about them, but he had never been in a position to extend them beyond the confines of his own imaginings. Sighing softly, he moved away; it would be folly to ruin the friendship they had, especially considering that he was so confused about his feelings.

"Shield your eyes," he said firmly. "*Lumos!*"

Through her eyelids she saw a flash of light, and as the light beyond intensified so her field of view shifted from black to magenta. Squinting, she cautiously opened her eyes, and as they focused so her breath was snatched.

They were in a cavern, the walls of which were lined with ancient crystals spiking out and branching into delicate finger-like structures. But that wasn't what made her knees weaken so that she had to cling to Severus. The light from the tip of his wand struck the crystals, and through them, the light was diffracted, splitting into its component colours until it was like standing in a constantly shifting rainbow.

Next to him, she gave a great shuddering sigh and placed her head upon his shoulder, and he eased his hand from hers so that he could hold her around her waist.

"It's beautiful," she whispered.

~X~

A magical fire had replaced the spell, and they sat on a large crystal; exactly how they had managed to end up sitting as they did eluded him, but he was so very contented. One leg rested flat along the smooth, cool, crystal surface, and the other was angled, resting against another crystal which ran parallel and slightly higher; Ophelia sat between his legs with her back resting against his chest. Around them, the colours shifted like they would in an aurora, and despite the chill of the cavern, they were more comfortable than either of them had been in years.

"How did you find this place?" she asked, still evidently in awe of the cavern.

She had turned and tilted her head up to address him and some errant strands of her hair had become snagged on his collar; as he answered her, he brushed those tendrils free and smoothed down her hair.

"Believe it or not, I botched a Disapparition, and instead of moving so many yards along, I moved so many yards down."

She giggled. "I have no difficulty believing you," she whispered playfully.

As a punishment for her cheek, he tugged on her hair, and then it seemed that he was going too far; in what context, he couldn't be sure, but having her in his arms no longer seemed wise. Licking his lips, he eased his hand away from her hair and raised the arm that had been wrapped around her waist, and his hand shifted away from where it had so nicely cupped her hip. He hardly dared to breathe, didn't dare to move; her body seemed too warm against his, and he... he needed her to move.

"Ouch!" she squealed out before twisting in his lap to peer accusatorily up at him, her jaw dropping in indignation.

Oh Merlin! Don't move! Don't look at me like that! Don't smell so good... don't touch me... don't part your lips like that... dear Gods!

"I bet you pulled the girls' hair at school too," she whispered in mock disgust; her tongue darted out to moisten her top lip. "Do you know what they say about boys who pull...hey, Severus, are you okay?"

His hands had darted out to grip her waist, and he gently but quickly pushed her away; she held his forearms for balance as she slid smoothly across the crystal's surface, and the mock anger morphed into genuine concern.

He released her, but she refused to let go of him, and he growled out as he pondered how to get his right leg to the other side of her.

"What's wrong?" she asked, and he could detect a mix of anxiety and anger in her voice.

"We should get back to the potion," he hissed back.

Rearing back, she released her hold and folded her arms across her chest. "The potion?" she demanded sceptically. "I'm not buying that. What got up your nose?"

She knew that he hated that term, and he knew that she had the tendency to infuriate on purpose in the hopes that anger would make him more loose-lipped, but he wouldn't bite...not today.

"As I recall, it was some purple vapour," he said as sanguinely as he could, and he was gratified to see her eyes narrow and her delicate nostrils flare as her tactic failed.

"I don't want to go, not yet anyway."

"Tough," he mouthed at her before lazily flicking his wrist.

"SEVERUS!" she screamed, her yell echoing around the cavern.

In the dark, he felt her frantically waving arms connect with his own, and then she was crushed up against him, trembling and hiccupping as she fought back tears. Various emotions warred within him as she mumbled against his chest: alarm at her distress and, more disturbingly, a liking of her distress. A thrill tingled along his nerves as her fingers dug into his back, and his breath caught in his throat as her slick cheek pressed against his neck. Oh, how he wanted to stay locked in the dark! Such selfishness shocked him, and he restored the magical brazier. In her relief, she slumped against him, her breath coming in heaving gulps.

"Not partial to the dark?" he said in what he hoped was a consoling tone, but obviously, he had not made enough effort.

"Fuck!" he yelled out as her teeth clamped painfully down on his neck.

He reflexively reached out and grabbed her hair in an attempt to pull her away from his worried throat; his fingernails bit into her scalp as he tightened his grip. It hurt! Her teeth hurt, but he was swamped with other emotions; they'd never been this potent and unquenchable. Soon, he would have no desire to stop.

"Ophelia!" he snapped out. "This must stop!"

Perhaps his tone had conveyed more than he hoped; she relaxed her jaw and eased back from him. Her face was blotchy from her weeping, and her eyes were downcast as if in defeat...he groaned. *What is it with me?* Confused and befuddled, he rubbed at the slightly swollen skin where his neck joined his shoulder. It was tender and he prodded at it, the dull ache intensified into pain and he winced, but then he did it again. His confusion escalated into panic...just what was going on with him? Even though he wanted to continue tormenting that mark, he forced his hand to his lap and looked back at her. Her dark eyes were focused intently on what must be a reddened crescent shape on his neck, and he couldn't quite fathom the expression in them. All he felt was the heat of his emotions cool and a rising dread that he had ruined what they had.

~X~

The silence was broken by the merest of drawn out sighs and the creak of a chair. Stifling his gasps, Snape arched back into the cushions and pressed a trembling hand against his open mouth, using his knuckles to stopper the threatening whimpers when the coiling sensations in his gut peaked. Twisting his head to the side and squeezing shut his eyes, he worked what his recollections had spawned, and just as the memory flashed into his mind of Ophelia's teeth pressing into his neck, he inhaled, convulsed, tensed and then collapsed, her name escaping from his mouth in a relieved groan.

It had been a very long time since he had thought about Ophelia, and even longer since he had indulged in his darker whims, but there had always been something about her that had incited such dubious passions. The afternoon in the cavern had been as close as he had dared come to expressing himself in such a way to any woman, but it had left deep marks upon him. And it must have affected her in some subtle way too; his healing chant had worked too easily, and she had responded to him without doubt or question... It had taken all his remaining strength to smother his own response to seeing her and her quiet obedience.

~X~

Are you happy? hissed a snide voice in her ear. *Did you think that killing us would help?*

It was becoming easier; thinking, talking, even coming to this meeting place was no longer the struggle that it had once been. She was also more aware of the world beyond Veronica's skull; she was hearing voices, catching snippets of terrified and desperate conversations.

"I don't know what you're talking about," Veronica responded, the confusion and concern clearly evident on her face and in her voice.

Ophelia stepped back and studied the woman standing quietly in the darkness, looking so tired, so bereft as her world was caving in. Could it be that her grip was slipping; could it be that their roles were shifting? Was Veronica the one now imprisoned with only memories for company? Sympathy was something she couldn't afford to let develop, so she crushed it, quickly and adeptly. If this was her chance, then she had to take it.

I can hear them, those out there doing this thing to you, she said softly. *They fought hard to keep you alive* She was disappointed by the lack of response and felt a flicker of annoyance; she could deal with denial and anger, but this silence was impervious.

Aren't you even wondering who they are and why they're doing this to you? she demanded waspishly. *I know that not long ago, you were screaming out those very questions, begging for answers.*

Veronica tried not to listen, but she couldn't stop the words from mixing with the cacophony of thoughts that collided and colluded within her. The traitorous thoughts were generating more compelling arguments to give in and discover the truth...whatever that may be. But her mind stuttered and trembled at the concept. Some deep rooted fear stretched itself, meandered through the notion of surrender and strangled it, exerting its thought-numbing will, and keeping her set in her task: to keep Ophelia bound.

You will give in, she spat out, her anger and impatience almost overwhelming her. *Can't you feel how much stronger I am? How easy it is for me now? How they are helping me?* Me!

Veronica finally looked at her. "Who are you?" she asked, her voice heavy with despair.

Ophelia, panting as the rage coursed through her, stared at the woman standing morosely and looking at her with eyes bordering on beseeching. She wanted to keep hold of that anger, wanted to feel the heat and power of it. She wanted it to keep the idea strong that she didn't care about Veronica, that she had no feelings towards the woman who had held her. Despite her intent, it slipped from her grasp, withered and died. They had existed side by side, shared subtly in each others pain and joy, they had worked together to protect those they had grown to care about...it was impossible not to feel some deep kinship. Those Muggle doctors with their terms and ideas had polluted Veronica's mind, had twisted the bizarre relationship that they had cultivated. Ophelia had been classified as a pathology, as a neurosis, as an aberration to normal thought; it had been easy for Veronica to listen and believe.

Could she blame Veronica for choosing the easy way? The doctors had been thorough in their techniques and had delved deeply and excavated ruthlessly; they thought they had found dross, but had unearthed gems. Her life, their lives, had become awkward as the few, extant memories had surfaced and with them, the magic. In the face of such nightmares and terrifying abilities, Veronica had done what she had thought best. Ophelia sighed as the last vestiges of anger evaporated.

I am Ophelia Black, she replied gently. *And I am no part of you. I was here a long time ago, made to forget; begged to forget. You filled the place that was left, grew in the spaces between those instincts and feelings that we all have. I let you; for so long, I left you to grow, content that who you were and had were better than anything I could be or have.* She sighed again and tugged on the ends of her long hair. *I don't understand why I'm here... I shouldn't exist* Her voice was quiet and hollow, as if she didn't dare to delve into the emotions surrounding her confusion. *But now, someone wants us, wants me.* Her eyes latched onto Veronica's; there was no anger or malice, no hate or pain...just fear. *This is dangerous, Veronica. You have to believe me; what they're doing is getting the memories back, and they will come whether you want them to or not. We have to work together or we are both lost.*

It was the first sign of weakness that Ophelia had ever displayed, and Veronica watched on with mystified awe. Could it be that the thing she had feared for all these years was as fragile and as afraid as she was?

NO!

To think such was madness! Utter madness! The thing was a mental hiccup, a demon that her damaged mind had created to help cope with the strangeness of such complete amnesia; the doctors and counsellors had shown her the truth of the matter, they had aided her to smother that unnecessary and unhealthy aspect of her fractured psyche. Ophelia was nothing more than a delusion and a viscous, deadly one at that...to trust her would be the annihilation of all that she had worked for. Ophelia was nothing better than a monster borne of the train wreck that had scarred her and ripped away her memories. Even listening to her was a treachery against the years of healing and a deadly omen, portending the descent that had deposited her in that hospital! All those years suffering....

Ophelia stepped back. There was an edge in Veronica's harsh gaze that seemed too shockingly familiar; the same sharpness that she had avoided looking at when she was at Hogwarts was reflected in those eyes. Flicking out her tongue, she moistened her lips, wondering what had caused the shift from troubled worrier to flinty warrior. Frustration slipped into fear, and Ophelia felt overwhelmed at the prospect of convincing a woman as tenacious as she that she needed to just surrender.

The pressure of Veronica's will was pushing her back to the dreaded darkness that she had inhabited and endured for decades, and even as she struggled against the force, she screamed out her pleas and begged for understanding.

Not back to the dark! she screamed. *For the love of Merlin!*

Chapter Nineteen

Chapter 19 of 36

The stresses of the situation become more apparent, and long-dead feelings surface to add new, malicious elements to their anxieties.

"Yer should have opted for the rest, Minnie."

The gruff voice, softened by concern, penetrated the fog that had settled in her mind, and she was pulled away from the numbness to feel a burgeoning affection for the rugged man. Blinking slowly to help focus her tired eyes and ease the smarting, she turned her bowed head towards him and smiled.

"I wouldn't have been able to rest anyway," she confessed quietly, and when she saw Moody's slow and acknowledging nod, she slumped in her seat at the realisation that she was not alone in her anxiety or guilt. Despite the assurances that she had bestowed upon Dumbledore, her own mind had suffered as it pondered the destruction of a mind for the greater good...a mind that may be purer than the one they sought to reinstate. The arguments had rattled inside her skull until they felt like the pelting of stones against the skin of the heretic. It all seemed right and wrong, and she couldn't find the balance that would give her some peace of mind. At her strongest, she felt like a soldier doing what must be done, and at her weakest, she felt like a murderer.

The haunted expression on her face was distressing, and Moody felt that some essential part of Minerva McGonagall was in danger of erosion in the face of what they stood against. As an Auror, he had seen too much of the world to bother categorising it, and he knew that no one was immune to either pain or grief, nor could they go through life without at some point engendering such feelings in others, whether intentionally or not.

In accepting to aid Dumbledore, he had been more far-sighted than the others, and in that, he had seen the storm clouds gathering over his good intentions, but he would be lying if that acute vision had adequately prepared him for the pain of his actions. If only he could be sure that the result would be worth all this! Sighing, he let his head fall against the back of the chair; he had his duty, and that gave him an inner hardness that would not bend in the face of such a dilemma... He often feared the realisation that at some point, his duty would end.

"When will it be over?" Minerva mused in a desperate whisper.

Moody stared up at the ceiling; he suspected that his friend referred to the whole, terrible war, rather than the one intense and dubious endeavour they were party to now. In the quiet times, he asked himself that question over and over, and he had no answer; he could only offer up that he would either be alive or dead at the end of it, and depending upon the outcome, he would either be grateful to be alive or wearying of life.

"I would never have thought..."

Her strangled comment dragged his mind back, and he turned his attention to her, unease fluttering in his gut at her perplexed expression. He had heard such a tone being used by those who had done some terrible wrong and struggled to accept the consequences. Was this act upon Veronica Speedwell damaging Minerva? Moistening his dry lips, he leant forward, clasping his hands together and focusing both his eyes upon her.

"It would be a fine gift if we could see the outcome of our choices before we made 'em."

With her gaze fixed on some disturbing distant point in her memory, she nodded slowly. "I wonder how many would still make the same choices, even after knowing what would be?"

It struck Moody that Minerva was no longer talking about these recent and painful events, but dwelling upon something that had cut her more harshly and left deep scars. He closed his eyes against his own recollections, but they came.

~X~

The rain hammered down; it had done so for days, and the common room was full of children brimming with unspent and unfocused energy. Squabbling had set in after the first evening, and now, after three evenings of hearing the rain pelting the leaded glass and the wind howling past, the squabbling had turned nasty. The Head Girl had descended upon the boisterous spell-casters with a keenness and ferocity that had reminded him of harpies, and he had shivered. Her red hair had escaped its plait and wafted round her heart-shaped face like languid flames, and her green eyes had shimmered like polished emeralds set in alabaster.

But there was an added element to her wrath that had disturbed him; there was so little restraint in the normally graceful and precise movements, and her lips were pulled back in a snarl rather than pursed with mild frustration at exuberant behaviour. He had unfurled from the red, velvet sofa and watched her sweep over to the duellists in the corner. Even from such distance, he could see how her slender body trembled with reined-in fury, and he glided across to her with his wand snug in his suddenly slick palm. What words issued from her white lips, he hadn't caught, but the boys' fighting stopped almost instantly, and the colour drained from their faces. Relief flooded him that she had not raised her wand, but judging on how quickly the combatants had fled, she must have scared them with the tip of her tongue just as easily.

The wake of her fury had almost emptied the common room, and they'd stood with just the crackle of the logs and the diminishing, frantic conversations from the retreating mass of students and the thunderstorm raging outside.

He had known her since the first year, and their friendship had been as strong as any that he had cultivated. He had thought that it went both ways, but she had cut it down when he had dared question her decisions, and now, when the cause of their row had crushed her by casting her aside, she felt that she had somehow been in the wrong, and in turn, he was at fault for not supporting her.

"Takin' it out on the young'uns ain't all that nice, Minnie."

All he could see was the edge of her reddening cheek and her quaking back, and then, she turned on him, her face flushed and her teeth bared.

"Don't you dare, Alastor!" she snarled out viciously. "I would never stoop so low as to take things out on the undeserving...unlike some!"

He reared back, her words lashing at him like hail, and it took some effort on his part to dam the anger and focus on the tears beginning to form on her eyelashes.

"He deserved it, Minnie," he responded in a resolute whisper.

"And what on earth had he done to deserve you hexing him, Alastor?" she queried tremulously, her features shifting between desperation and frustration.

*Yer loved him, and he never loved yer! He hurt yer, and then made yer feel that it were all **your** fault!* But instead of expressing those thoughts, he merely sighed and glanced at her white knuckles. "He wastes what he has."

Her face slackened, and for a moment he feared that she understood what he meant, but then her face twisted and she stepped closer, lifting her wand as she did so. "So that's it!" she said with bitter comprehension. "You're jealous of him."

Damn right!

"Alastor, if you knew what he'd been through, you wouldn't want to be him; he's suffered so much...orphaned and left in the Muggle world to be tormented by the other children; it's just a sign of his good nature that he never resorted to cursing them, like you and those... those brats earlier feel so compelled to do to solve disputes!"

"Is that what he told yer?" Moody demanded harshly. "That he was some poor-little-lost-boy just achin' for someone to rescue and love him?" He felt his own hands curl into fists, and he wished that he'd hit Riddle with a harder hex; it would have made him feel that he had made better use of his chance. "He's trouble, Minnie; ask any of the others that he's used and cast aside. And if he's so innocent, then how come he knows so many Dark Curses... and uses 'em?"

"Oh, Alastor, you just don't..."

"...understand?" he finished for her, his eyebrows raised and his face expressing every ounce of cynicism.

It had all gone wrong; instead of appealing to her, he had made himself repellent to her, and he had stood aghast as he had watched her retreating back. Decades had passed before they had met and spoken with each other again, and then she had absolutely known that Tom Riddle was a nasty piece of shite, and from that common knowledge, they had forged their friendship anew, but what he had hoped would develop, never did.

~X~

"We'd never live if we knew how things would turn out," he finally mumbled in the heavy silence.

Minerva looked up and into his eyes, and she saw the same careful lack of expression that always masked his features when he spoke about the past, and she wondered if he still thought her the young fool that she had been back then...to have loved Riddle. She had been blind and foolish, and yet.... To her shame, she still sometimes, in the silence and the solitude, thought about that young man with the dark hair and the smooth voice.

~X~

It had been a drug... such a delicious drug! It had seeped under his skin, flooded his veins and warmed his bones, and now it was gone. Brian Topliss had recalled the Aurors and ended the investigation into Norwood's alleged murder, and now, he was once more just an old man in a house with half a heart, wishing that his life was other than what it was. An unsurprising flash of bitterness exploded within him; how cruel to have given him a taste of something that had nourished him as a youth, only to withdraw it before his hunger was appeased! Snarling and curling his hands into tight fists, he stormed through from the kitchen into the hallway, and ripping his cloak from its hook, he fled the house; somewhere, there was an enemy.... Somewhere, there was glory, and Onesiphorus Smith raced to face it.

~X~

The sunlight filtered through autumnal leaves, and overhead, those leaves whispered to the gentle breeze. The grass was soft and cool beneath his back, and he idly brushed his hand over the succulent carpet. It was a glorious day. Next to him, he felt movement, and his eyes lazily opened to focus on a face he had not seen in far too many years. Her lips were curved up into a sweet smile, and those chocolate-hued eyes were impossibly deep as they drank him in, and he was lost. In those depths was a delicious hint, a promise that would make any man crumble, and a glint of need that could brush aside almost any argument. Thoughts and feelings that he would never have thought he possessed rushed into his skull, causing his mind to stutter to a halt and his chest to constrict and lurch frantically. Surprised by their appearance and intensity, he moaned out and squeezed his eyes shut.

Only once had he thought about the possibility of crossing that line, and that had been so very fleeting and almost twenty years earlier when she had looked frantic, yet composed, confused and yet terrifyingly purposeful. He had prided himself upon never dwelling upon that day and never regretting that he had pulled away so quickly. He loved Ophelia, and he knew that she loved him as a cousin, as a friend, as a brother, and he would never destroy that, but those eyes a few moments before had ripped out any self-imposed promises.

The warm pressure of a hand on his abdomen made him tense, and his back arched involuntarily upwards. This shouldn't be and yet, he felt unable to mount an objection. Confused, alarmed and greedy, he gritted his teeth and gripped the grass; he should move, stop her, he should.... *Oh!*

That hand! That hand that shouldn't be there, that hand that couldn't possibly know how to touch him like that, that hand... that hand... It had slipped down his abdomen to cup him intimately.... Oh, how those fingers burned his skin! A groan escaped his parted and trembling lips, and his head twisted, digging into the cool earth as he tried to disperse the frantic energy coursing through him.

We shouldn't be doing this, Ophelia. Her eyes flickered up to meet his, and her hooded gaze nullified his argument. The last flicker of resistance raised its head, and he placed his hand upon hers to stay her tormenting motion. *Please, tell me that this is what you want.... Oh, Merlin! Ophelia!*

His trembling hands moved to grip the grass, and his fingers ripped blades free from the ground when he felt her shift next to him; the tips of her soft hair grazed his chest, and then her breath was ghosting across his cheek, moving to warm the sensitive skin behind his ear. The feel of slippery warmth against his throat made him keen, and he thrust himself into her hand as she licked him, lapping at the flesh. Mindless and frantic, he relinquished his hold upon the earth and reached up to push his fingers through her hair, pulling that delicious tongue closer to his skin. Tightening his hold, he lifted her head away so that he could take his turn to taste her skin. He swiped the flat of his tongue along her neck from clavicle to chin...she tasted divine.

I promised that I wouldn't. Tell me that you understand...not when you touch me like that; not when you taste so good.... Oh, Ophelia.

Opening his eyes, lids heavy with lust, he latched onto her face; it was smooth and pale, and the eyes were so filled with passion that they appeared as black pools. His lips twitched into a smile, and Ophelia smiled back, those delicate, plump lips curving invitingly, but something seemed... odd. Blinking and refocusing his eyes on her face, he began to see that something was amiss. The skin was too taut, as if something were pushing at it from beneath, and there was no subtle colour to her skin; it looked unreal, as though painted on. Though her lips had moved, there were no shadows on her face, and the cheeks and surrounding skin had not altered; that smile was pasted onto some false façade! Her hair was soft to the touch, but did not waft in the breeze, nor did it fall as it should; it looked more like fabric than a beautiful cascade of individual strands. Swallowing nervously, he released the strange creature before him and tried to roll away from her, but the hand that now cupped the evidence of his departed desire tightened, and it seemed that her nails became as hooks, warning him to keep in place.

What the hell are you? What are you doing?

Sweating and terrified, his breath came in heaving gulps, and he trembled as he fought the urge to scramble to his knees and crawl away, and then his lungs froze! Her free hand, with eerie grace, lifted so that her fingers grazed her chin, and then those nails tore into the flesh, ripping it away in glistening strips of meat. Gagging and wide-eyed, he continued to watch in morbid and undeniable fascination as she clawed at the remains of her face. Emerging from the mess was another, blood-smeared face, the skin taut and the lips grinning in a horrific mockery of a smile. Delving beneath the tattered edges of her previous face, the thing that was Ophelia tore at the new visage with feverish glee. While one hand slashed at the face, the other rubbed him in a grotesque parody of love-making, and with disgust, he felt himself respond beneath her pawing.

His chest suddenly heaved, and he let out his pleas in a string of whispered words, but the thing took no notice, and as her false, bloodied lips lowered towards his, he squirmed back until her weight fell upon him, pinning him to the earth. Blood dripped onto his face, and her hand worked him expertly and viciously; moaning and quaking with a mix of rising lust and fear, he tried to push her away. Despairing of his body's treachery and fearing the succubus that was writhing over him, he closed his eyes, waiting for the nightmare to end, but it wasn't over.

The thing's warm and wet lips brushed against his, and he pressed his together in his only act of defiance, but she was some demon, and her tongue slid out, the tip easily forcing its way past the resistant mouth, and then it was squirming in his mouth! He gagged and bucked, trying to bite down upon the alien and foul thing invading his mouth, but it surged down his throat, uncaring to his frantic struggles and his suffocated cries.

Oh Merlin! Stop! Get off me, you bitch!

His hands and fingers scabbled at the monster's head, scratching and pulling at it, using his last vestiges of strength to dislodge the beast as it abused him, but he was weakening, and his body was succumbing to her ministrations; it was almost as if his body sensed the end, and it strived to do what it had been designed to do and seek some mind-stealing peace as it surged towards orgasm. Lungs burning with the desperate need for air and heart hammering away to deliver what oxygen it could to his starving organs, he felt the beginnings of that delicious coiling in his gut, and his hips curled up hungrily as her hand moved over him.

It was a blissful cover to his death, and his body forced the terrified mind into a pleasant numbness as it concentrated on achieving the goal that Ophelia had set. His eyes closed...no need to keep them open as his vision had faded, and his hands gripped her not-quite-right hair, but this time to anchor himself as his hips jerked selfishly. Muscles using the last scraps of oxygen to tense and cramp with the force of his need, he mindlessly rutted against her, the fear and horror dispersing to be replaced with a primal urge that transcended everything...his last attempt at a sort of immortality, and his most abiding duty as an animal...and with a stoppered roar, he dispensed his duty impotently.

Panting and clutching at his burning throat, Sirius jerked awake, fighting with the constricting bedcovers and scrabbling for his wand to exorcise the demon that had tormented and terrified him.

"Lumos!"

Wide eyes peered into every corner of his bedroom, and Sirius only lowered his wand when he was convinced that he was indeed alone in his dingy and dirty bedroom. Releasing the held breath in a shuddering sigh, he fell back and curled up into a tight ball of confused misery. Disjointed images danced through his mind: Ophelia smiling down at him with a hunger that now repulsed him and the recollection of how her touch had sent him spiralling down into visceral bliss. Pulling the blanket back over himself, he shivered and held the glowing wand before his eyes as a talisman against all the vile images that had plagued his mind.

What on earth had that nightmare been about?

Chapter Twenty

Chapter 20 of 36

A brief interlude to dip into the minds of Ophelia and Veronica.

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Chapter Twenty one

Chapter 21 of 36

The potion has run its course.

Veronica shuddered. This was a strange and bizarre thing! Tentatively reaching out, she brushed her fingertips over the shimmering wall. It was a perplexing puzzle. It must have measured only a few feet in diameter, but it followed her wherever she walked, as constant as a shadow, but not as unobtrusive. Beyond it, she could see indistinct shapes moving, but no matter how she moved, she couldn't see past the obstruction. Frustrated and mystified, she tried to ignore it as she followed the memory of her younger self through the grounds of the hospital.

Despite the austere building and the barbed fencing around it, the grounds were quite pleasant. Years of neglect on the part of the staff contrasted with the tender care of some of the patients had created little islands of beauty...a herb wheel of tricolour sage and lemon balm, pink hyssop and feverfew; a rock garden of alpine flowers and broken breeze blocks, and her favourite spot... a hollow within a copse of trees. In summer, the hollow was resplendent in blue, a bevy of bluebells, and as autumn neared, the ferns would slowly turn a burnished gold, their fronds hiding the pale domes of mushrooms; crocuses and snowdrops thrived in the spring, and over winter while the earth was at its quietest, the holly would shelter the hollow.

It was to that hollow that her younger self trudged. The ferns were dry, and an early frost coated the tips of the copper fronds. The woollen-clad girl settled herself on one of the many thick roots that sprouted from the hard earth and wrapped her arms around herself in a bid to trap as much heat as possible. Veronica shrugged and leant against a sturdy trunk; she was as much a prisoner in this memory as the girl had been in the hospital, and she wondered why her mind lingered over these images from her stay in Edmont.

Perhaps it was because this was the only place where she had felt safe; such an odd thought that in this hospital, she had felt more secure than anywhere else, despite the drugs and the late night crying that had become her lullaby. Tugging on the ends of her hair, she rested her head against the bark and closed her eyes; she had been safe, but it had been an illusion... hadn't it? Shaking her head and scowling, she tried to oust the thought that Ophelia had made her feel safe.

Movement made her turn her head, and she saw a darker shadow just beyond the strange, flickering barrier, and then, it seemed as though it breached the surface, and from it emerged the ghostly silhouette of a young girl. Fascinated and anxious, Veronica edged away from the tree for a better look. The young girl was her, she was sure, but from a time before her accident and memory loss!

With her breath stuck in her throat and her heart thumping wildly, she stepped over to that glimmering screen and the pale form, and as she approached, it grew like a tsunami; before she had the chance to scream or run, the strange wave of images and shimmering light broke over her head.

oooXooo

Sirius sat in the drawing room, staring at the dust motes dancing in a shaft of light that had fought its way past the thick curtains. Late last night, he had heard soft mumbblings and then the front door closing as Minerva had left to seek her well deserved rest.

He thought back on the previous evening, thought back to the panicked commands and the worried glances, and he even reflected upon the sneering condescension that Snape had bestowed upon him as he had asked for help, but nothing occupied his mind more than the sight of his cousin as she had lain in a growing pool of blood.

He had looked at her, and it suddenly had seemed so wonderfully clear what he wanted. He wanted to know exactly what she was and what she had done; he wanted to know why... wanted her to explain everything. What had twisted her from a sweet child, all wide smiles and innocent eyes, into the vile thing that would kill family as easily as scorch their name from a Family Tree?

Hadn't he done enough to convince them all that there was another way, that he could have helped and saved them? He'd left the family home, made his stand and shown his true colours; it had been a hard decision, but he had done it. Regulus had never shown such strength, instead choosing to stay and rot in the filth of the Black mentality.

Hadn't he loved Ophelia enough that she could have joined him, left all that darkness and stayed with him in the sun? Why had she preferred *that* to him? Hadn't he done enough to ensure that his friends and fellow Order members should have sought his release from Azkaban? Hadn't he done enough? Hadn't he bloody well done *enough* to have some peace?

He licked his lips, craving a drink...just one to clear his thoughts: just to help him make sense of it all. He glanced over at the drinks cabinet hulking in the corner and the rows of glittering decanters; he saw the dark liquid, looking as sweet as honey. He snorted angrily and dug his nails into the leather of the chair arm. Resistance was easy; he knew that the drink would dull the edge of his anger, it would soothe his wound, and he wanted it to be fresh and raw, he wanted to pick at it and rip it... keep it keen. It had to be ripe and vicious when he spoke with her, he needed it to be hot and wild; he wanted it to burn out the love he had for her, scorch it and render it down to nothing. He wanted to hate her, needed to *loathe* her. Closing his eyes and focusing on his breathing, he turned his thoughts inwards to each treacherous memory of her. Around him, the dust motes danced and the shadows lengthened; the house creaked and sighed, and inside, his fury slashed and burned.

oooXooo

Whimpering and trying to crawl away as strange scenes erupted around her and forced themselves upon her, Veronica begged for help, pleading for it to stop. It made no difference where she went as there seemed no escape from the terrible images and the deafening cacophony. Covering her ears and closing her eyes against it, she stopped moving and curled up, her mind going over and over the mantra that should be keeping it all at bay.

It won't, you know, said a voice gently. *That mantra can't keep me locked away now.*

Veronica inhaled sharply and jerked away from the source of that tormenting voice...Ophelia hadn't helped then, and she wouldn't help now. But that wasn't right, Ophelia *had* helped! It was too confusing, too hard and too terrifying to contemplate. Keening and clutching at her hair, Veronica turned on what she saw as the cause of it all.

"Go away!" Veronica hissed out.

I can't, Veronica; I belong here now.

Sniffing, Veronica unfurled enough to look up at her deadly doppelganger. Ophelia stood there, looking radiant and so alive that it snatched her breath, and Veronica was left feeling ugly and broken. Behind her calm usurper, there was a gaping hole in the fabric of the new and terrifying images, and Veronica looked upon it hungrily.

If you go in there, Ophelia said carefully while gracefully waving a hand towards the tear in her recollections. *you'll never come out.*

Veronica stared up at her in embittered disbelief as she was forced to bathe in the serenity and the peace that Ophelia projected. Veronica shook her head uncomprehendingly; the gentle concern and affection that shone from Ophelia was a mockery...it had to be! Ophelia had hated her and used her; Ophelia had only ever wanted to destroy her so that she could take control. There had never been love... it had been a lie!

"How do you know?" Veronica snarled out.

It is where I was kept.

Veronica's gaze darted from door to demon; it was impossible to say what she feared more.

Ophelia stepped closer; her hand reached out, and her eyes beseeched, imploring Veronica to come to her.

Please, Veronica, just let it come... Please, trust me. Panic tore through her at the sight of Veronica shaking her head madly and scrambling backwards; if Veronica didn't accept this, then she feared the consequences; those wizards who whispered had hinted at a terrible outcome. When it came down to it, Ophelia didn't want to face existing alone.

"You're a monster!" Veronica cried out, pointing a trembling finger at her tormentor.

Ophelia straightened and stared coldly down at her foolish gaoler; her feelings were cut free with that declaration. Maybe she was a monster, maybe she wasn't; all that Ophelia knew for sure was that what she had done had felt *right!* No one, not even someone she loved, would take that comfort from her.

The memories were coming; neither of them could stop them, and Ophelia knew that she dreaded their return as much as Veronica did... but for a completely different reason. With their return, Veronica would know all of it, all that she had done and all that she had planned to do, and she feared that Veronica would be strong enough to make her start all over again. The thought of that was terrifying.

"Why?" Veronica asked plaintively.

Why what? Ophelia snapped back.

Hiccupping and sniffing, Veronica stopped rocking back and forth and fixed Ophelia with a penetrating stare.

"Why did you betray me?"

Me? Betray you? Me... betray... Ophelia repeated, dumbstruck at the accusation. The question completely derailed her train of thought. How could Veronica even dare to think that she was the one who had been betrayed?

"I needed you, and you turned on me!" Veronica spat out. "I was helping that man, and you tried to make me stop; you said... you said that once I was gone, you'd be in control... you wanted... nothing more than this... this shell!"

It seemed impossible! *She* had the gall to think that she'd been betrayed! What about being buried for twenty bloody years! Wasn't that the true betrayal? But Veronica looked so heartbroken and defeated, so lonely and terrified, and so utterly bewildered that it made Ophelia pause. Thinking back to that night, she recalled what she had screamed and ranted, and in a general way, Ophelia realised the horrific misunderstanding.

That was a Dementor, Veronica: a terrible creature that feeds off joy and leaves you a husk with nothing but nightmares Ophelia sighed and slowly knelt between the roots next to her struggling counterpart. *You had no particularly happy memories to incite its appetite and no horrible memories to suffer from. The Dementor would not have had such a terrible impact upon you, but on me... it was awful, drawing out everything that I hated and feared,* she said in a strained whisper. *I feared that it would bring it all out, summon all of it, and I didn't...couldn't...let you know about me.*

Veronica watched on as Ophelia spoke and wrapped her arms around herself. Part of her wanted to believe Ophelia, wanted to discount her treatment and prescriptions and just gather Ophelia up. They had been so happy together, but Ophelia was just a figment... not a person. Veronica sobbed out... How could she trust it? Weeping and feeling so very torn, Veronica was overwhelmed with fear and indecision. She just didn't know what to do. But if someone asked, and there was no fear about just what Ophelia would do if she had control, then she'd scream out that she wanted Ophelia back! And the way that Ophelia sat there, looking so very vulnerable and desperate, it seemed that she needed her just as much.

I didn't want control, Veronica... not then. The thought of it terrified me, and I was pleading with you that with you gone, I'd have it all back, and I didn't want that. Veronica... she stuttered to a halt, her tears rushing down her cheeks. *I didn't want you to... to... leave me; I can't be alone.*

The held breath escaped in one long moan, and Veronica felt her whole world tremble as she thought over that time from Ophelia's perspective, and it made a horrific kind of sense...Ophelia's panicked screams and frantic ramblings...it hadn't been an intense possessive desire that had fuelled it; it had been abject fear!

And that was it! Veronica no longer cared if it was right or wrong, she no longer cared about the consequences: they needed each other. Half crawling and half lunging, Veronica hastened over to embrace Ophelia; the other woman looked at her warily, hesitating at what was happening, and then, she fell against Veronica, and they wept on each other's shoulder.

It was glorious! The sudden ecstasy of accepting what she had denied for so long stole Veronica's breath; she felt so liberated. The weight of her fractured existence was lifted as she supported Ophelia, and her release was stunning. Her tears now fell as a result of exquisite joy; it almost hurt. In her ear, she caught Ophelia's words of gratitude and joy, and Veronica felt whole. As she held onto her friend, her sister, her missed half, their minds finally connected, and Veronica began to experience *everything!*

Ophelia. I'm scared.

"It'll be okay, Veronica. I promise."

oooXooo

"Opella?"

She loved his voice... so soft and gentle, so smooth and melodic. It sent shivers over her skin whenever she heard it, causing her to thrum and smile with pleasure, and it made her stop whatever she was doing to revel in the soft tones. She smiled and turned to her benefactor and guardian. His smile was so sweet that her heart swelled at the sight of those lips curving up for her. A gentle and delicate hand was outstretched, a silent and undemanding beckon, and his eyes were intent upon her...those eyes with their scarlet depths had the power to draw her in; there was no more potent incentive for her to fall into him than knowing that it made him happy.

"Yes, Uncle Tom," she said, her arm lifting so that she could slip her small, slender hand into his long-fingered grasp. It was a joy to be this close to him; his presence soothed her in ways that she had failed to find beyond his embrace. Smiling, she allowed herself to be pulled onto his lap and snuggled against his chest, her eyes fluttering closed, and her lips parting...such bliss.

"My," he chuckled deeply, his breath ruffling her hair, "you cling tighter than Nagini!" He stroked her hair, running his fingers through the sleek strands, and gave the back of her a neck a gentle squeeze. She shuddered and eased her hold, giggling when he gave an exaggerated relieved inhale. "That's better!" he said with a grin.

It was a common enough thing for her to sit on his lap, so when he placed his forefinger under her chin and gently lifted so that he could look at her, he barely had to apply any pressure. The eyes that she adored bored into her, and she did as he had taught, allowing him to extend his mind into her brain. She could feel delicate, gentle fingers brushing over her memories, stirring up pleasant recollections of her time with Sirius and the serenity of the basement with Severus.

Relishing the closeness, she felt him delve deeper, past the eager, happy memories, to those darker ones that preferred the shadowed recesses of her mind far from her recollecting. He hushed and soothed her, his hands gentle upon her shoulder and cheek while he incited the memories he sought. Obedience was a talent that he encouraged, and she never questioned what he wanted, what he searched for in the recesses of her head, she just opened up for him and let him penetrate her mind. It was such a beautiful thing to her, her best way of showing her devotion, and he loved her for it.

"There we go," he said, leaning forward to place a gentle kiss on her forehead. "All done."

She settled back, her cheek resting against his chest, and her hand splayed over his heart. Beneath her ear, his heart beat strongly; she could feel it beneath her fingers, and she could hear each intake of breath; she tried to be as calm, tried to slow her heart to match his steady, sturdy rhythm.

"Tomorrow, you will be visiting with Sirius, and you will tell him about the story we made up, about how those naughty wizards were going to hurt that family, and how he rushed to save them." His voice washed over her, lulling her, and she felt her mind become pleasantly sluggish. "Do you remember how to tell the story?"

"Hmmm," she said sleepily. "Yes, I remember."

"Good," he said proudly. "You are my clever little Opella: my sweet, little imp."

With her face buried in his robes, she grinned and snuggled. She was his; he said so. She was his... she was his... she was his.

"When you've had your birthday treat with him, come back here; I have something for you."

Her breath caught in her throat, and her eyes popped open. She scrambled in his lap so that she could look at his face. He chuckled; it must have been at the awestruck expression on her face, how her eyes were wide and glistened, how her lips parted in bemused surprise.

"No need to look so startled. You don't think that I would have forgotten, do you?" His lips quirked as he gently mocked her, and she shook her head quickly. "How could I forget that you're ten?"

"I'm eleven!" she declared hotly.

"Eleven, eh?" He seemed to examine her closely, his scarlet-hued eyes scrutinising her for proof of her age. She tried to maintain her indignant stance, but she lost and sniggered. "Of course," he conceded, rolling his eyes at his own silliness. "How could I have gotten that wrong? In that case," he continued, "I will have two gifts for you when you return from cake and ice cream with cousin Sirius."

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"Remus," whispered Minerva, her hand reaching out to clutch his forearm.

Lupin lifted his head wearily and took in the intent and focused scrutiny etched onto his former professor's face. His tired eyes followed her gaze, and he found himself looking deeply into chocolate-hued eyes. She was awake! Exhaustion evaporated like water from a salamander's back, and he jerked forward, hands gripping the chair arms. The questions that had scuttled in his head stuttered and scattered, even his heart and lungs seemed distracted by the sheer wonder of the woman's wakefulness. He watched as she struggled in the sheets to lift herself up, but her ordeal had weakened her, and she flopped back with a pained sigh: fatigue taking its toll.

Minerva recovered first and fired off her Patronus; a sleek, silver cat appeared and sped out of the room, its tail held high and proud. Overcome with maternal concern, Minerva stood and straightened the bed cover, tucking the witch in and making her as comfortable as possible. She even smoothed Ophelia's wild and matted hair and stroked her pale cheek. The potion had run its course. Minerva swallowed; now was the time that the victim of their possible crime found her voice. It was far from over.

Moody entered the room with his wand at the ready and his eyes upon the bed's quiet occupant. His magic eye took in her form; she was sleeping...not the potion-induced slumber, but a natural and deep sleep. He glanced at Minerva, her eyes reflecting remorse, and at Lupin sitting, frowning and staring at the eiderdown. He inhaled and slowly lowered his wand; he could sense the weight of the situation crushing down upon them, their resolve weakening as the plight continued. The apparent nobility of the principle morphed horribly into reality, and a strange unsettling notion emerged with the shift: what had they become?

"We'll put up wards to keep her safe," Moody said firmly, breaking the heavy silence. "Go get some hot food and some proper sleep; she'll be fine."

Minerva nodded and stood; her bones ached, and her muscles trembled with weariness. Her eyes felt gritty, and she longed for a bath. Casting one pained glance at Ophelia, she swept from the room. Lupin slowly eased himself out of the rickety chair; he winced as his vertebrae popped and a muscle went into spasm in his lower back. His mind conjured up images of a full stomach, a warm, soft bed and clean sheets. A flicker of guilt made a valiant attempt to disturb his dream, but days of worry and anxiety had rendered him immune; he was exhausted.

"I'll be back in about nine hours," he mumbled to Moody as he lumbered past.

"Aye," Moody said solemnly. "And then, we find out... Find out if this was worth it." When Lupin had gone, he added, "or what harm we've done."

Chapter Twenty two

Chapter 22 of 36

Moody and Smith attempt to redress a wrong committed twenty years ago; in the process, they restore their old friendship and make an abiding and foreboding vow.

Author's notes: Many thanks to falconfalmorgan and Trickle Woo.

The archive was a truly magnificent thing of beauty. Built hundreds of years ago by craftsmen of uncommon skill, many of the secrets of its impressive structure had since been lost, but Smith had delved deep enough to divine a few of those long-forgotten wonders. For instance, not many realised that the archive itself was capable of archiving.

In his personal slice of time, Smith stared at the thick scroll, and he felt his enthusiasm wither. He hadn't expected it to be so... daunting. The scroll was as thick and as wide as his forearm. Apparently, numerous wizards had felt it necessary to study the scrolls into Ophelia's and Capella's deaths. It would take days to trawl through the scroll, looking for some anomaly or clue...he needed to refine his search. But to what? What variable would give him what he sought?

Capella had left the Wizarding world, and she had managed it so effectively that she had only been located at the time of her death when the use of the Killing Curse had lured in the Aurors. Why had she left? What had prompted her to flee? Moody had discussed Dumbledore's plans with him, the old camaraderie returning, and with it, that wonderful sense of purpose and vitality. As Moody had talked, postulated and occasionally ranted, Smith had learnt that Capella had smothered all magical attributes in both herself and her daughter. Fear had made her run, and based on the timescale, she had fled in the very early stages of her pregnancy.

Smith sighed; they had studied the illegitimate child as the reason for the escape, but despite other attitudes harboured by purebloods, a bastard was not generally frowned upon, unless the parentage was considered repugnant. Had Capella taken someone to her heart and bed that she'd known her family would have disapproved of? There again, would she have known that she was pregnant when she had disappeared? Her effort had required planning, and he doubted that there had been time between being aware of the child and the escape to concoct such a feat. No. It was more likely that the pregnancy had happened en route... which brought them right back to square one.

As delightful as the archive was, he began to suspect that the answers weren't here. Maybe centuries of prejudice and distance between wizards and Muggles had blinded them; maybe the answers lay in the world that Capella had cleaved to? It was the only way forward for him, and for some reason, he considered the answer of Ophelia's parentage to be in some way important. He suspected that it was the reason for their murders, and if he only solved the mystery surrounding Capella's death, then he could hold his head up as an Auror rather than be browbeaten as a caretaker.

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Moody watched with appalled fascination as Smith dipped the biscuit into the china cup, swirled it around in the stewed tea and swiftly navigated the soggy biscuit into his mouth.

"What?" asked Smith after swallowing the offending mouthful.

"Yer had no idea where that biscuit's been or who made the tea?" Moody hissed out; he was incredulous at Smith's lack of care.

"It came out of that packet there, Moody," he responded patiently. "And the tea was made in that urn what everyone in this bank has been drinkin' out of since we've been here." He took a deep gulp, inwardly relishing the sight of Moody's shudder at the wilful disregard of personal safety. "Don't be so uptight," he suggested amiably. "Have some faith in the fact that I'm just not interestin' enough to need killin'."

Harrumphing, Moody removed his hipflask and took a quick sip. "Complacency will be the death of yer."

"Sounds better than evisceration," Smith quipped while reaching out for another biscuit. But as he dunked the digestive, he watched his friend carefully, and he saw behind the scowl, the smallest flicker of pain and fear. The long and hard years since they had worked together seemed to sublime into so much inconsequential vapour, and Smith felt much as he had back then: an affectionate concern and wry fondness. Those feelings stirred at the sight of fear on Moody's face, and if nothing had quite drummed home the despair and the dread that the Order were experiencing, then that flutter of fear had pounded the message deep. Voldemort was close to winning.

Moody inhaled to scold his glib friend when the door opened and a young woman walked in, carrying a plastic wallet folder and smiling in a slightly bemused manner.

"You're lucky," she said breathlessly while sitting next to them, dropping the A4 wallet onto the coffee table and pushing her slipping glasses back up the bridge of her nose. "It seems that we did keep the old passbooks."

Moody and Smith exchanged a baffled glance due to her terminology, but Smith had always been faster at taking things in his stride. "Remarkably efficient of ye," he bluffed. "Could ye 'elp us old 'uns out and give us a clue as to what we need to be lookin' for?"

The young bank clerk blinked slowly, seemed to battle the hex holding her, but then smiled sweetly. "Of course," she said brightly, and under the power of Smith's magic, she began to assist them as best she could.

Moody edged closer to the table as she tipped out the contents of the folder, and his eye roamed over the vaguely recognisable books and slips of paper. But despite the apparent glee on the clerk's face and the anticipation on Smith's, he saw an incomprehensible mass of letters and numbers. It had all seemed quite positive when Smith had burst into his kitchen in the early hours of that morning and said that he had a line of enquiry that could help them. But now, sitting in the Muggle bank's over-bright office, his head pounding from lack of sleep and the seemingly never-ending tension of meetings and spying, he felt that it was just another bitter dead-end.

"It's quite simple, really," trilled the woman as she opened up one of the passbooks. "This section gives you a rough or specific identity of whoever received money from the account or paid money into it; these spaces relate to the bank and verify the amount and authorises the withdrawal or deposit." She offered Smith the sheet that she was holding and reached for another. "This account was opened in nineteen sixty-three with a payment of sixty-pounds...a cash payment. Here," she exclaimed, pointing out the date and the amount.

Moody studied the printed date...twenty-second of January. That rendered the idea that Capella had fled due to her pregnancy moot, the opening of the account happened before Ophelia had been conceived.

"Ah," sighed the clerk, "there was a standing order generated a few weeks after the account was opened... Hmm... Could have been for rent or a mortgage."

"Do you have any idea who opened the account?" Moody asked, his interest piqued once more; he felt that he began to understand where Smith was going with this looking into bank accounts.

"It says that the account was opened by... Mary Croft and Martin Stote. It was closed on eighteenth of March nineteen-sixty-nine; the monies within the account awarded to... a... hmmm... oh, transferred to Trevillian and Mariband solicitors."

"Martin Stote," grumbled Moody. "Who the 'ell is 'e?"

Under the influence of the hex, the woman frowned and studied the small, brown book before her, trying to divine what she could from the neat print. An idea seemed to blossom, and she began flicking through the book and the stapled pile of slips. Moody and Smith watched her with polite and hopeful interest.

"Lover? Husband?" Smith muttered.

"Such a romantic!" griped Moody.

"Cynic!"

"The debits from the account were fairly standard," exclaimed the clerk. "There was a standing order once a month, one small cash withdrawal at the start of the week, and a few other payments here and there." She daintily licked the pad of her forefinger and quickly rifled through the books, her brow furrowed and her eyes wide and keen. "It seems that the payments into the account were also standard: a cash deposit at the start of every month and... oh yes... a larger payment at the start of December. The monies alter in relation to inflation and cost of living changes. There's a strange payment here, dated twelfth August nineteen sixty-two...it was a Banker's Draft, but I don't recognise the name of the bank."

Smith extended his hand. "May I?"

Smiling, she dropped the book into his hand and picked up another. *Whoever these two gentlemen are, they're so charming and polite*, she mused as she went through the statements. It was so bizarre to think that she had originally refused their request. They were lucky that Mary and Martin had been so frugal, otherwise the workload would have been immense, trawling through countless transactions. It struck her that there was something so mechanical about the statements, nothing to suggest spontaneity or light-heartedness. In fact, the regularity seemed quite sinister, but towards the end of nineteen-sixty-four, the outgoings increased, and fickle withdrawals began.

Relaying her findings to the two grizzled men made them seem edgy, and they muttered under their breath, but they seemed very pleased with her efforts, so she was happy. The information seemed to tell them a different story, and she could see their mounting excitement and energy as they read the financial record.

While Smith frowned over the strange entry, Moody leant forwards. "Any change in payments from nineteen-sixty-four and onwards?"

Nodding, the woman hastily retrieved the relevant pages. "Hmm... yes!" she said excitedly. "From May of that year, the monthly deposit almost doubled, and the standing order changes too...and it's a mortgage payment; the payee is a building society."

A sharp nudge in his ribs made Moody grumble and turn to Smith with a scowl, but Smith was grinning and holding up the passbook, his long crooked finger pointing at a name...*Marmaduke's Monetary Exchange*.

The Wizarding and the Muggle worlds were required at times to do business with one another; Muggleborns required Galleons for school, and wizards required pounds sterling to purchase items when away from Wizarding establishments. In fact, a rather healthy coexistence was to be found between certain businesses and suppliers in both worlds. Marmaduke's Monetary Exchange had been one of a few banks that had exchanged between the two currencies; wizards paid in Galleons could have their wages exchanged into pounds and pence and transferred into their own Muggle bank accounts and vice versa.

Moody felt his eye bulge. With that snippet, they had a chance to find out who Capella's mysterious benefactor had been, and they could use that date and the reference number to track the Wizarding account of Martin Stote.

"There was a significant change in Mary's banking details in October of nineteen-sixty-eight."

Moody and Smith turned back expectantly to their generous assistant.

"The monthly credit stopped," she said solemnly. "All payments into the account ceased, as did all withdrawals, save for the standing order which was nullified a few months later."

Moody exhaled slowly and Smith pursed his lips...Capella had died eight days after that missed October payment. Had she sought out the reason for that waylaid payment, and had that led to her death? Or had some unknown assassin killed Martin and then hunted down Mary? Smith closed his eyes; had the lack of payment been the portent that Capella had needed to take her own life?

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"I never actually was retired," stated Smith with some smugness. He recalled Moody's look of shock in Marmaduke's Monetary Exchange when he had withdrawn his identification and waved it at the sneering clerk.

Moody mouthed silently, his amazement snatching his thoughts. "Ye are still an active Auror?" He waved a hand at the bent wizard smirking at him, and his frustration grew. "But ye were hurt, and ye... ye... well, ye're older than me!" he ended lamely.

"I guess that still havin' most me own body-parts impressed 'em," Smith countered with some amusement. His tone developed a brief bit of bitterness then. "Besides, I don't exactly do much runnin' around these days, but I needed the same privileges as the others so I could go in and do me job in some of the restricted areas," he explained soothingly.

Moody was only slightly mollified, but he saw the wisdom in allowing Smith to keep his active Auror status, so he smothered how it irked him and focused on the benefits of his friend still being what he longed to be.

The bank clerk at Marmaduke's had been less inclined to fall for a Befuddlement Charm, and as a result, he had been typically surly and unhelpful. Smith's credentials had only managed to impact upon the man's willingness to provide them with what they had asked for, but the irritated clerk had made sure that the Aurors had known that he wasn't happy.

Sitting in Smith's kitchen with a coffee and a pile of transactions, Moody felt the last dregs of his frustration slip away; it was just good to be working with Smith again. He had forgotten how much better he had been able to cope with things, how much easier work had been while standing by Smith's side. They had been a good team, not only for the Ministry, but also for themselves. Even during the worst of times, they had kept each other going, and Moody wondered how he'd coped for so long without such support. Guilt wove its way through his realisations, and he felt a painful pang that he hadn't worked harder to maintain his friendship. Time had just slipped by....

"Knut for ye thoughts," remarked Smith as he sat down at the table, placing his cup of tea on the table and picking up a sheaf of papers to study.

Moody wanted to share his thoughts, express his sense of companionship... his affection for Smith, but he couldn't formulate the words. "Just glad to be workin' with a professional," he finally said. "These new recruits in the Order are downright frustratin'...got no idea."

Smith grinned and looked up. "As I recall, we were wet behind the ears once," he said generously. "Or at least mildly damp."

"They'll get 'emselves killed," continued Moody, his mind following a lonely, often travelled path.

Smith placed his papers on the table and picked up his tea. "Ye can't protect 'em all." Moody's outburst had surprised him. Not the issue or Moody's obvious concern, but the fact that it had erupted from such a small spark. Moody was notoriously introverted about his feelings, and for him to be so expressive was a startling revelation.

Moody's eye snapped back to focus angrily upon Smith. "I know that! Don't ye think that I know that?" he snarled out.

"I know that," Smith answered softly. Moody's temper had always been terrible when provoked, but as fearsome as it was, it generally stemmed from some desperate sense of inadequacy or uselessness. As such, it heralded some need rather than signified some antagonism. It was Moody's useful mechanism to express his disguised weaknesses. Many stumbled into his trap, and his character would send many running, but Smith had known him far too long to be deterred by the prospect of being cursed. Besides, smirked Smith, Moody hadn't inserted his magical eye, and without it, he had poor depth perception.

"They're so bloody young," Moody whispered.

"We shouldn't be worryin' about their age," Smith said sternly. "Ye can damn well believe that Voldemort and 'is Death Eaters ain't worryin'."

"Smith!" Moody scolded, appalled at the wizard's attitude. "'Ow can ye say that? They're bairns most of 'em... Potter ain't passed sixteen yet. None of 'em 'ave any trainin'," he said bitterly.

"Ye want 'em to live past fifteen?" Smith hissed out. "Then stop worryin about 'em and bloody well do ye job!"

"Ow dare ye!" Moody yelled out, his hands gripping the edges of the table. "I 'aven't been bustin' a gut over the last year for nothin!" He reared back, his eye blazing and his lips pulled back. "I've been preparin' 'em as best I can; trainin' 'em and warnin' 'em."

"While back at the Academy, we 'ad people to do those things," countered Smith smoothly. "We called 'em lecturers!" There was more than just Moody's disquiet hanging in the air between them. "They did their job, and if we were wise, we paid attention, but most of our learnin' 'appened outside the Academy...you know that! Mollycoddlin' is what we 'ad until we were let loose on the world. Out there, and it were a whole new cauldron of toads.

Ye can yell at 'em and advise 'em all ye want, Moody, but they'll still make the mistakes that we can see 'em settin' 'emselves up for, and we 'ave to let 'em."

"They'll die!" Moody shouted out.

Smith reared back in the face of Moody's ferocious prediction, but something lurked beyond the anger, beyond the outrage. Something was festering that needed lancing, and Smith loved Moody enough to suffer the wizard's wrath if it meant that his friend of over six decades would be pure once again.

"That Potter kid seems to be holdin' 'is own," Smith stated with simple conviction. "'Ave some faith in the kids, Moody. If ye don't and ye keep on doin' this, then ye'll all fail." He leant forwards and licked his lips, preparing to lift the lid on the can of worms. "Ye got to stop thinkin' that they'll fail because ye 'ave." There was the barest flicker in Moody's blue eye, but Smith caught it. "There's no Auror out there who hasn't failed at some point, and we 'ave to learn to use that, we 'ave to use it in whatever way we can, because if we let it use us, then we've lost."

"Ye're wittering on about second year psychology, Smith," ground out Moody. "Don't think that I can't remember discussin' the psychology of loss!"

"Oh ye discussed it alright," Smith said bitterly. "But ye never had to do it because of ye being so bloody good! Nowt what 'as 'appened was ever down to ye or a mark on ye," he hissed out. "Ye 'ave never really faced personal defeat; ye've never faced 'ow to deal with failure. Ye've suffered seein' friends and fellow Aurors get devoured by this life, but ye've never 'ad to face that there was somethin' that ye could 'ave done."

Both of them were breathing hard, wheezing and smothering the urge to cough as the row went on, but Smith wasn't quite finished yet. "Moody, ye've been so bloody perfect that ye're only facin' the idea that ye can fail now! Ye've never 'ad to worry that ye're not up for it or that there are those who are worse and better than ye out there."

"They," Moody snapped out, "got me from behind. I should 'ave known."

"Known what?" Smith said contemptuously. "That ye'd be stuffed in a trunk for a year?" He snorted in disgust. "Ye arrogant scallywag, Moody, to think that ye're so much better than everyone else, that just because ye got caught, then the whole Order is doomed!"

"That's not it!" Moody howled out. "Ye 'ave no idea, Smith. Ye 'ave no idea what it's like to know that ye lost so easily, that all it took were one moment of weakness and ye were as good as meat for the Death Eater dogs. Knowin' that ye could 'ave been the one who ended the Order before it began."

The anger seemed to evaporate, leaving Moody to sag in the chair and hold his head as the despair swirled unpleasantly through him. Smith closed his eyes, and he felt a complete bastard for riling Moody up, but he'd do it again and again if it meant that Moody would heal.

"It were terrible," Moody said softly. "I couldn't get out, and there were no way of warnin' anyone, and he kept me alive, so I couldn't even 'elp in that way."

Smith's eyes snapped open at Moody's words, and a chill dread crept up his spine to freeze his lungs and squeeze his heart...damn Moody's professionalism! Tears prickled his eyes as he realised that the last dignity and honour had been wrested from Moody's grasp... No wonder he felt such a failure...to have it snatched away from him when so many of his friends and colleagues had died so disgustingly easily doing their jobs. The sense of uselessness must have been worse than death. Smith shook his head. Moody had sought death as the last and only weapon and defence.

What could he say? What words could possibly begin to ease the pain that flowed through Moody? Smith knew that there were no words. There was just work. There was always work. Moody would never really recover from his ordeal, and the scars of it would pull and tear at him at every opportunity. His fears for the others would never diminish, because his own fear would never let-up. All Smith could hope for was that Moody would rise up from it and battle it, to be the Auror that had survived so many times before.

"E's just a boy, Smith," Moody continued chillingly tonelessly. "'E's a boy and 'e 'as to do so much. From what Dumbledore says, 'e's the only one who can kill Voldemort. It is just... so worryin' that it rests in Potter's 'ands." Moody slumped further and sighed woefully. "It ain't my failure that haunts me, Smith." His head lifted, and Smith gasped at the dread pooling in Moody's eye. "Do ye know 'ow 'ard it is for me to trust that Potter can do what's needed?" Shaking his head, he settled back against the chair. "I know that I can't make 'im understand what's loomin'... I try, and it almost cripples me to know that until 'e suffers the same, 'e'll never know. To be honest, I doubt that what we've seen and dealt with will come close to what's goin' to 'appen next."

A flash of understanding burst in his skull; Smith began to see everything in a new light, and in that harsh glare, he felt his own unease blossom. Moody wasn't trying to protect the kids from the Death Eaters, but the Order from the kids.

"What a task ye've set yerself, me friend." Smith said kindly. "But ye know that it ain't down to ye... it's somethin' that all of ye are bound to support. Whether the Potter boy can deal with it all is not ours to decide or fathom; all we can do is give 'im the best of us an' hope because we can't protect 'em all... not even 'im."

"Ye're right!" Moody affirmed brightly. "I can't look after 'em all." The smile slipped, and the blue eye glistened. "I can only be damned sure that they 'ave a bloody good chance at doin' what they 'ave to do!"

Smith felt his own eyes prickle once again with the promise of tears, but old men did not cry, so they grinned at each other.

"Die an Auror," Smith said grimly. And there was no greater threat against the Death Eaters than an old Auror ready to die.

Moody nodded firmly, reaching out to grasp Smith's hand. "No better way to die."

Chapter Twenty three

Chapter 23 of 36

Ophelia wakes and faces two influential people from her past while coping with the emerging memories. Sirius triumphs over his demons to face a lengthy convalescence, and at the last, the Order asks the question it has been waiting to have answered.

"I was prepared to become what I'd dreaded and feared," Dumbledore's voice wavered, and it was his tone more than his words that made her open her eyes and look at him.

His face was turned away, and the light gave his skin a greyish cast. "I was satisfied that the end would justify the means." Disgust coalesced on his face and thickened his voice. "Those dear to me warned me in subtle ways that some things cannot be, and that some people cannot be swayed or coerced, that to force such things was terrible."

She released a breath in his pause and tried to see the manipulation, the sting.

"I was so convinced that you were the key, that you could turn the tide of this war." He turned to face her, and despite his quiet voice, his eyes blazed. "And what do I discover?" He smiled bitterly and waved in her direction. "I find another Death Eater!" He gave a derisive laugh and shook his head. "Another viper lurking and waiting for its moment to strike!"

She turned away and stared at the peeling door; she knew that her chaotic thoughts would betray her, and she was in no mood to slip so easily into Dumbledore's trap. The old anger was beginning to bubble and rise, and she would use whatever weapon she could scrounge up, but anger was a two-edged sword and as liable to cut her as well as him. They couldn't possibly know anything but what was allowed to be known.

The only other who knew was long dead, as good as dead by her own hand. She closed her eyes and forced down the unwelcome images and the rising bile. Her mind was reeling; so many things competed for attention: questions, memories, desires and terrors. It was horribly ironic that after all her efforts and determination all those years ago that she, herself, should be her undoing.

"We have searched for you in the vain hope that you would be some lost avatar against Voldemort..." He paused, seeing her eyes widen and her pulse pound in her throat. "The name still thrills you, does it?"

He frowned; he looked quite fearsome towering over her, only a thought away from raping her memory.

"The things I was prepared to do and become to help you, the things I would have willingly sacrificed to have you and destroy Tom Marvolo Riddle." His eyes were fierce, but there were no tell-tale touches within her mind, no subtle fingers peeling back her thoughts and dredging up her memories. Never had she wasted an opportunity, and she concentrated, extending her mind; she had always been a skilled Legilimens, a skill that had not diminished with her flight from the magical world. Amongst his anger and despair, she saw one image, one that was quickly and fearfully snatched from her grasp, she saw a young boy with a red scar on his forehead and bright green eyes, and behind him, like a horrid and constant shadow, the wispy form of a red-eyed wraith.

Dumbledore reared back, his expression closed and unrevealing, but his quivering hand smoothing down his beard belied his calm.

"You have nothing to say?" he asked gently. "No defence? No protestations of your innocence? Many of Voldemort's followers soon betrayed him when they thought him dead. They denounced him as a manipulator and a madman and pleaded that they had been cursed. Your disappearance was quite fortunately timed." He smiled sweetly, and in a swirl of purple velvet, he turned and left the room.

Releasing her breath, she shuddered as wave after wave of shivers wracked her body; she had never been this terrified; the Dark Lord had never terrified her this deeply. Could Dumbledore know? Could he know that she had planned her timely disappearance? Her heart hammered, pounding in her chest, and her breath was drawn down into desperate lungs; it was possible that she had not been as careful as she had thought. If Dumbledore suspected, then did *He* know? Swallowing quickly, she felt the almost forgotten sensation of mind-numbing fear overwhelm her, stealing her thoughts and breath. She tried to move, but her limbs felt as though tied to her sides; only her head moved freely. Reining in the mounting dread, she willed herself to think; her mind had always been her greatest weapon, and now, it was her only weapon.

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"It's not true!" she screeched, lashing out until Regulus was forced to catch her hands to prevent injury. She struggled, trying to twist her wrists free from his tight, desperate grip.

"Listen to me, Ophelia!" he shouted. He spun her around, wrapping his arms tightly around her upper body, trapping her flailing arms by her side, and then hauled her back so he could speak in her ear. "Uncle Tom and the Dark Lord are one and the same." She squirmed and struggled, kicked at his shins and stamped on his feet. He gritted his teeth as pain flared from his bruised toes and shins. "He is the Dark Lord!" he snarled out. "He is Voldemort!"

It was if the mentioning of the dreaded name cleansed her madness, and she collapsed against him, sobbing and wailing. When he released his hold on her, she turned into him, pressing her face against his chest. He could feel her tears soaking through his school shirt and her hot breath as she muffled her screams against him. Frantic arms swiftly encircled him, clutching at him, her fingers biting into his flesh. Wincing at the sting, he wrapped her in his arms and held her as she came to terms with the idea that the man she loved like a father was the man that she had secretly grown to despise and fear.

Regulus swallowed and wished for a chair; the Room of Requirement obliged, and a large, soft sofa appeared behind him, and shuffling backwards, he fell into its welcoming softness. Ophelia followed and landed by his side, her arms and fingers still cleaving to him. He crooned softly and stroked her back, whispering words of nonsense and letting his arms comfort her.

Eventually, her sobs subsided, and she fell away from him, lying on her back with her forearm draped over her eyes. It was an awkward pause in which one still recovered from her bout of hysterical revelation, and he trembled in fear of the consequences of her disillusionment. Would her love for Uncle Tom outweigh her hate for Voldemort? He ran his tongue over his dry lips and carefully lifted up onto his elbow. The first step towards completing his vow had been taken, and in the process, he was assured that he had sealed the doom for one of them, or both.

"Why did you have to tell me?" she asked forlornly.

Regulus felt a pain stab through his chest; he knew what it felt like to have faith in someone shattered. He tentatively gripped her shoulder and gave it a steadying and loving squeeze.

"Sirius has run away," he said softly, his voice thickening with grief and anger. "I have no one else to help me."

She stirred next to him, turning on her side, her eyes shimmering and wide as they looked at him; he felt raw in her gaze and blinked away the tears. She still sniffled, and her breath still hitched, but her sorrow was now for him, her own a mere shadow.

"He ran away?"

"A few days after the end of term," he said quietly.

The long month until the start of the school year had dragged; every morning had been the same agonising walk down the stairs to hear his mother rant about her son's betrayal while his father stared quietly into his porridge, letting her bile seep across the breakfast table. The same awkward silences every day while she caught her breath, and the same thought dancing through his brain: *why hadn't Sirius taken me with him?*

He had yearned for the start of year, yearned to ask Sirius why, only to have his world shattered when his older brother had looked coldly upon him and stalked away with his Gryffindor friends. Regulus' heart had plummeted to his stomach and withered. Desperate eyes had followed Sirius' retreating back, waiting eagerly for any clue or sign that Sirius had seen his error, but Sirius had never looked back; had never seen the tears on Regulus' face or his breaking heart. Without his elder brother, he had sought out the only one who he thought, hoped, would help him; he had sought out Ophelia.

"He left you there?" she asked incredulously. "He never asked if you wanted to go with him?"

Regulus had wept himself dry; he had no more tears to spare for Sirius and the mess that he had left behind when he had slipped out of his window and into the night. It was so sadly ironic that they had never shared with each other their common hatred; that they had suffered in silence and decided to deal with it in their own way. How different things could have been if they had been able to see past the Houses they had been Sorted into.

"It doesn't matter now," he said after reining in his galloping grief. "I have been thinking about what needs to be done. Mother says that his running away has brought shame upon our house, and she's afraid of repercussions." He recalled how his father, after so many years of apathy, had suddenly thundered through the house, casting spells and muttering curses under his breath. His eyes had burned with something that could only be called desperation while he had strengthened the wards around the house as if the Grim itself was howling in the street outside.

She sniffed and pulled out her handkerchief, the one that he had given her a year ago on her first day at Hogwarts; she had sewn a letter 'O' around his initials.

"What will you do?" Her voice was muffled by the hankie as she wiped her nose.

She watched the fourteen-year-old straighten and inhale slowly, how his jaw clenched in determination and his eyes hardened. She swallowed nervously and felt her stomach roll in dread.

"I'm going to join the Death Eaters!"

oooXooo

At the sound of the front door closing, Sirius lifted himself out of the chair, stepped into the hallway and crept up the stairs. Stopping outside Ophelia's room, he stared at the delicate pattern of cracked varnish on the door; he should do it now, now, while the anger was hot. Gritting his teeth and letting the anger burn its way through him, he reached out for the handle. Now, while his mind was set. If he wanted his answers, now was the time to collect them, and if he had to force her, then so be it! The potion had done its job, and she'd had one night to savour her recollections and ponder her situation. He should do it now while she understood her guilt.

"Sirius?"

He leapt away from the door and turned to see Lupin standing half-way up the stairs with a tentative and expectant expression on his face. Sirius was bombarded with emotions...fear, guilt, anger, gratitude, shame, hate. He couldn't move or speak; he felt paralysed by the enormity of what he had planned. What had he become? What vile, disgusting thing was he that he could think of torturing his cousin?

"Moony," he whispered, his throat clogged and voice thick. Stumbling, his side hit the banister as silent sobs tore through him. His head felt ready to explode with the thunderous and repetitive screams filling his skull. The screams demanded that he carry on, that he do what he had set out to do; he wanted revenge, a way to ease his melancholic pain and suffering. His chest constricted painfully, and his gut twisted violently. Feeling as though he was clinging onto his sanity with his fingernail, a wide, hungry and gaping throat below him, waiting to gulp him down into hell, he reached out for his saviour; he reached out for Lupin.

"Help," he mumbled, hoping that his desperate plea would be heard. Suddenly, arms were around him, tight and warm. He slipped down to his knees, and his rescuer went with him; hearing soft words in his ear and feeling the strength of the embrace, Sirius fell apart.

Lupin could only hold Sirius, his heart breaking as the man keened and wailed, as he roared and sobbed out his grief, disillusionment, fears, hates and despair into his chest. Lupin felt tears sting his eyes, and his chest tightening with the pressure of sympathetic sorrow. He strengthened his hold, hoping that it translated his love, and let Sirius purge himself of all that had been rotting and festering deep within him.

Gently lifting the weak and broken man, Lupin guided him to his bedroom, and while whimpers fell from Sirius' trembling lips, he pulled off Sirius' tatty slippers. Tugging the thin blanket up, Lupin tucked the dazed man in and was about to leave when a thin hand darted out to hold him in place.

"I'm sorry, Moony," he managed to croak out. "... I don't know what's wrong with me," he confessed in a high-pitched whine, his blue eyes wide and fear-filled. "I..." he began, gripping Lupin's hand ever tighter.

"Hush," Lupin soothed, gently brushing Sirius' forehead with his free hand. "Sleep will help."

Sitting with his friend until the man's breath evened out was no easy task; the sounds emanating from the wasting man as he tossed and turned in that prelude to peaceful sleep was almost unbearable. Lupin resolved himself to talk with Dumbledore about Sirius' despair. This war was hurting people in unimaginable ways, and he felt something turn to stone deep within: seeking Ophelia had best have been worth it!

oooXooo

Ophelia's legs trembled as they tried to support her weight. Gritting her teeth, she reminded herself that years ago, she had been this weak, wobbling and falling while a physiotherapist encouraged her to walk. She knew that she could do this; only in this instance, time was now her enemy and not atrophied muscle.

Using the bed for support, she shuffled agonisingly slowly towards the door; the ache in her legs almost unbearable as she forced them to move. Gripping the bedstead and panting, she glared at the door handle only a few feet from the bottom of the bed. She inhaled, gritted her teeth, summoned some wrath to buoy up her flagging strength, and lunged.

Fingers scrabbled at the door, trying to find some purchase, but her momentum was such that she crashed into the door and slid down the wood into an ungainly heap. Suppressing a giggle, she reached up and grabbed the spherical handle, using it to pull herself upright. Breathing hard and sweating, she leant against the doorframe. Licking her lips and taking a steady breath, she twisted the door knob...nothing! The knob just turned and turned. She tried turning it the other way but was left equally unrewarded. Her upper lip curled up in disgust; all that effort for nothing!

She sighed and decided that if she couldn't escape the room, then at least she could strengthen her legs. Using the door for support, she pushed herself away and took a few hesitant steps back towards the bed. She repeated the feat several times; each time her steps were stronger and her balance better.

When the time was right, she would be ready.

Without a clock, she had no idea what time it was, how long she had been here, or how long she had been awake. Some time had been diverted to pondering the puzzle, but even if she was now missed by some concerned person, she doubted that the police would ever be able to locate her. A snort escaped her, and she smiled wryly; it

would be a few days yet before anyone even suspected her missing. Hoping that she could at least determine where she was, she had peered through the window, but the small window had disclosed very little other than that she was in a city; row upon row of dark, glistening rooftops, criss-crossing wires, slanted aerials and swooping, cooing pigeons had greeted her inquisitive eye. Something about the view, however, struck a chord, some resonating sense that this was familiar.

Sighing with frustration, she stepped swiftly and surely over to the bed and flopped down upon it. She knew that Dumbledore had her, and although his visit yesterday had terrified her, she still found some comfort in that fact. Some vestiges of faith bolstered her, convincing her that her old Headmaster would do her no direct harm; but of the others who she suspected worked along side him, she had no idea. She wondered what they wanted from her; had they found out about her activities while under the Dark Lord's tutelage? Were they just after answers and information? The thought that horrified her above all others was of being reunited with the Dark Lord; with that hanging over her, being trapped in a wizard's house was bizarrely reassuring. Her mind and legs strengthening in the small room, she resigned herself to waiting for them to tell her what they intended.

The click of the door pulled her out of her musings, and feigning weakness, she angled her head to see who entered. The eye caught her attention first, bright blue and glowing as it latched onto her with disturbing attentiveness. He limped into the room, some prosthesis clunking against the floor, and took up his station in the empty space that the wardrobe had once occupied. A movement caught her eye, and her gaze flicked back to the door; she almost smiled at the sight of Minerva McGonagall. A wave of nostalgia battered at her reserve, and she recalled her Transfiguration lessons with the professor, her sharp, Scottish voice demanding absolute attention, and the way her hat had wobbled on her head when she shook with rage.

"No point lyin' there, girl," Moody grizzled. "We've been watching yer walk about for the last two hours; would have come up earlier, but yer seemed to be enjoyin' yerself." His tone was light, and yet despite the lack of rancour, she felt herself bristle.

"We thought that you'd like to freshen up and then have some breakfast." Minerva managed to put enough inflection in her voice to suggest that Ophelia had some choice in the matter, but not enough.

"What do you want?" she asked, her voice still tight and rough from her screaming. "Where am I?"

"You're with the Order of the Phoenix," Minerva answered curtly.

Ophelia knew the name; how often had she heard the others talking and moaning about the Order? She licked her lips; bath and food sounded wonderful, and she was pragmatic enough not to resist because of pride. She needed to eat and drink. If they laced her food, it was no matter; with the arsenal of spells at their disposal, they could do what they wanted without resorting to subterfuge.

A few moments later and with barely a comment, Ophelia slipped into the wonderful warm bath, and her toes curled as she relaxed into the sensations. The hot water soothed her aching muscles, and she found that she didn't care that it slowed her thinking or that the pleasure quashed her trepidation and anger. She lathered herself and rinsed off the sweet-smelling suds. Soon, her stomach began to protest, and she reluctantly clambered out of the bath and reached out for the waiting towel.

The only garments in the room were folded neatly on a small, wicker chair, and she quickly dressed in the robes supplied. Catching a glimpse of her reflection in the mirror, she paused to study herself; she felt an odd mix of surprise and comfort. It seemed as though she had never seen herself in such clothes, and yet, she also felt as though she had never worn anything but Wizarding robes. The russet gown was plain by Wizarding standards. It hung loosely on her slender frame, the cuffs falling past her wrists, and she giggled at the sight; she looked like a little girl dressing up in her mother's clothes.

She heard a rap at the door and was tempted to flick her wrist to unlock it, but her feet carried her, almost unthinkingly, over to draw back the latch. She looked at the door and frowned; there was no lock. She waved her hand and heard the click of some invisible bolt, and the door swung open.

Minerva stood outside, holding a pair of slippers. "Put these on and then, I'll dry your hair."

"Yes, Professor McGonagall."

Minerva suppressed a smile at the tone of bored acquiescence that was so reminiscent of her as a student. *Perhaps she was*, Minerva thought. *She had been only sixteen when she had lost her memories; would she think and feel as a teenager despite being nearly forty?*

Ophelia slipped on the soft shoes and felt the warming charm hit her cold toes. Standing tall, she obligingly kept still while her old teacher waved her wand. The spell swirled around her head, and her hair felt as though being gently tugged by invisible fingers. Once the sensations had stopped, she tentatively felt her head; her hair was dry and tied up into a thick plait.

"Much better," said Minerva with a smile. "Hungry?"

The question went straight to her stomach, which growled out its answer, and with an eager nod, she followed Minerva, not downstairs as she had expected, but back to the small, far too familiar room. She scowled and glanced longingly down the stairs and into the enticing gloom.

Moody had conjured a table and four chairs; the table was laid simply for one, with a teapot, cup and saucer, crockery, cutlery and napkin. Her mouth watered at this visual promise of food and drink. He pointed at a chair, and she quickly sat down, dismayed to discover that the chair seemed fixed in position. Moody waved his hand and the chair scurried closer to the table, causing Ophelia to let out a squeal of surprise and clutch at it for support. Satisfied that the chair was once more stationary, she let go and draped the napkin across her lap while her companions sat, Moody on her left and Minerva opposite.

Minerva tapped the tabletop with her wand, and the plates were suddenly swamped with food. Porridge, sausage, bacon, eggs, tomatoes, mushrooms, toast, marmalade, jam, honey, brioche, croissants, muffins and fruit appeared, accompanied with a steaming pot of tea. She let her eyes devour the wondrous sight and then tucked in, selecting a bit of everything, her eyes bigger than her belly. Despite the gnawing hunger, she ate slowly and carefully; no point in making herself ill by glutting.

Ophelia felt odd twinges of dislocation as her captors sat so companionably next to her; shouldn't she be confined or restrained? It seemed that time had desensitised her to it all, and the fear that had gripped her was off somewhere, biding its time.

"After breakfast, Dumbledore will be up to 'ave a word with yer," said Moody conversationally.

Ophelia choked on her toast and swallowed hastily. She felt her gut roll unpleasantly, and the toast slipped from her trembling fingers onto the plate. She rallied and smiled sweetly.

"The latest gossip and the highlights of the last twenty years?" she responded glibly, annoyed that they should make her switch so easily from comfort to dread; that they should keep her so off balance.

Moody grinned back, the scar across his cheek distorting disturbingly. "Oh no, lass," he said cheerfully, "'E wants to talk about 'istory; feelin' quite nostalgic at the moment is Dumbledore and wants to share in times gone by." He leant back in the chair and sighed softly. "'E has this idea that yer know somethin' that would be 'elpful to us, and... yer'll laugh, I know, but 'e thinks that yer will 'elp us out."

"Oh, good heavens, Alastor," Minerva scolded gently. "Don't be so melodramatic! We're trying to enjoy breakfast."

"Yes, Alastor." Ophelia felt the hysteria that had clung to her since she awoke rear its head. She giggled and felt light-headed. "Please wait until elevenses at least."

oooXooo

Sirius stopped on the threshold into the kitchen when he heard Dumbledore's voice. He licked his lips and swallowed past a dry throat. Still feeling raw and vulnerable from the recent nightmare and his collapse on the landing, the thought of Dumbledore peering at him made him feel even worse. But he had hidden from too much lately, used

anger and hate as a blinker rather than face and accept his role. Summoning some courage, he sauntered in.

Lupin was sitting, sipping tea and reading the *Daily Prophet*; there was a tight furrow between his eyebrows, and his lips were drawn together angrily. Dumbledore was standing serenely at the head of the table, watching Lupin's wrath escalate with every disgusting word he read.

"They want us to register as Dangerous Creatures?" he muttered harshly, the paper trembling in his tight grip.

"The Ministry must be seen to be doing something," Dumbledore explained, bitterness staining his consoling words. "They have been convincing the public of their ability to control the situation by impacting upon those individuals that have caught the dreadful imagination of the populace."

Lupin slammed down his cup, tea splashing over the sides, and glared up at the Headmaster.

"Werewolves have done less harm than Death Eaters! Do they really think that we enjoy this? That we chose to be what we are? That we don't suffer with this?" Anger and despair made his voice harsh. "We'll lose the support of the werewolves who have been helping us," he said bitterly. "They'll lose their faith in me...all that work." His voice trailed off as his disappointment mounted.

"It is indeed unfortunate, but do not lose heart, Remus; your role is now more important than ever to keep them from turning to Voldemort for salvation."

Sirius swallowed, he had never stopped to consider the dangers and the trials that the others suffered; he had been too busy wallowing in his own self-pity. He had thought that he couldn't feel any worse.

"If anyone can keep their faith alive, then Remus can," Sirius said, part apology, part recognition.

Lupin's head twisted round, and a generous smile bloomed on his grey, tired face when his eyes alighted upon Sirius standing in the doorway.

"Thank you, Padfoot."

"Care for some tea, Headmaster?" asked Sirius as he stepped over to the kettle on the stove.

"Thank you, Sirius, but I have a cup waiting for me upstairs." With that, Dumbledore bade them a good morning and swept from the kitchen.

"She's definitely awake then?" Sirius queried as he filled the black kettle.

After the cathartic breakdown on the landing, his interest had intensified; he felt that after the hatred he had nurtured and then purged, he owed her something: owed her some thought, owed her some chance to be who he had thought and now hoped her to be.

"Yes," Lupin answered, his disquiet still clearly evident.

Sirius felt a flutter of excitement, and his hand shook as he held the kettle under the tap. Carrying the kettle back to the stove and spelling a flame beneath it, his mind pondered the woman upstairs about to divulge her secrets to Dumbledore.

Lupin had turned his attention back to the damning *Daily Prophet* as if the words would twist into something better if he squinted enough. He mumbled his thanks when a fresh cup of tea was slid next to his elbow and finally dropped the paper onto the table top...it was no use; werewolves were damned.

Across from him, Sirius nibbled some toast and drank his tea, his expression calm and mildly thoughtful. Lupin felt his lips quirk; he knew that look from old: Sirius was planning something. It was good to have Sirius back, truly back; the darkness seemed to be lifting, and the old camaraderie returning. It lifted his spirits after struggling for so long.

"Anything planned for the day then, Padfoot?"

"Oh, I was thinking of going upstairs and listening in," he replied innocently. "Dumbledore didn't say that we couldn't."

Lupin thought back, and Sirius was perfectly right; they hadn't been excluded from the event. He felt a reciprocal interest growing, and with a grin, he stomped on his Prefect heritage and exhaustion and took a deep drink from his cup.

"Come on then," he said impishly, startling Sirius into a broad grin, and they carefully walked up the stairs.

oooXooo

Breakfast ended, and the dirty dishes disappeared save for the teapot and the cup and saucer. She felt uneasy as Minerva conjured three more cups and saucers; they rested on the table, bizarre harbingers of the ordeal ahead. Licking her lips, she hid some of her tension behind small sips of tea. Just as she reached the bottom of her cup and the end of her tether, there was a knock at the door. Her cup rattled noisily against her saucer, and she thought she caught a smug grin on Moody's face. Minerva waved her hand languidly and the door swung open.

Ophelia's mind shut down; she could barely concentrate on breathing. She had held the fear and dread at bay, and now, the kindly man who had been her Headmaster was about to break the dam.

"Good morning, Ophelia," he said politely, almost as if he had forgotten that yesterday, he had accused her of being a Death Eater.

"Good morning, Headmaster," she responded out of habit.

"I hope that breakfast was to your liking?"

"Yes, Headmaster." Her palms were clammy and slick, her throat sore and dry. It was surreal! Sitting politely, drinking tea! She seemed disconnected from herself, but aware of the chaotic and raging emotions just waiting to be realised. She wanted to scream, to run, to pound her fists against the tabletop, to throw the crockery and watch it shatter; she wanted to crawl and hide, and she wanted it all to stop.

"I'm sure that Alastor has told you that I wish to have a talk with you, Ophelia," Dumbledore said as he poured himself a cup of tea. "It is the reason that you were brought here." He turned to look at her, his blue eyes twinkling. "We want to know what you know about Horcruxes."

The meal that had satisfied her not minutes before now churned unpleasantly and threateningly in her stomach. A sweat broke out, and she felt a few errant drops run down her back. Her mind tried to see a way past the question, a way to deny knowledge and, for a while, she thought that she'd found a route. But then, she wondered why; why was she keen in keeping this to her herself? Why should it be her task alone? The Order had stood against the Dark Lord for years, dying and killing to stop *Him*. And she was so tired, so tired of waiting for the Killing Curse to cut her down, and it would have done, either by her family's hand or the Order's.

Her eyes stung, and fat tears sprung from between the clenched eyelids; she felt them slide, hot and fast, down her cheeks. Her throat burned with the effort of muffling the sobs, and she knew that she was a breath away from breaking apart. The years that she had been Veronica need not have happened; the pain she had endured at the age of sixteen was as fresh and as keen as ever. It had never healed, it had never gone away; it had bided its time until it could make her hurt again.

Moody, Minerva and Dumbledore watched her fight her emotions; they could see the extent of the struggle in the way she gritted her teeth and grimaced, how her fists clenched, the knuckles white, and how her body trembled violently. Stuttering and stifled, keening wails erupted from her, and her cheeks were moist, tears dripping from

her chin. Minutes stretched, and then, she gave one grief-stricken moan and slumped in the chair, her head falling to rest on her forearms on the tabletop. Her chest heaved as she drew in great gulps of air and they petered out into the occasional hiccoughs. Straightening in her chair and primly dabbing her slick cheeks with her napkin as if she had merely sniffled rather than poured out her sorrow, she faced her potential allies or jurors.

"What would you like to know," she finally asked, her voice toneless and resigned.

"Everything, my dear," Dumbledore responded gently while he poured her another cup of tea.

Chapter Twenty four

Chapter 24 of 36

Ophelia's memories resurface, and her involvement with the Death Eaters clarified.

Are you strong enough for this, Veronica? Ophelia called out into the manic melange that was her mounting memories. *I will need you.*

I am here, Ophelia...always, came a gentle voice before a slender figure emerged to stand beside her, *and I am strong enough. I am almost eager to know what led to my birth.*

Ophelia smiled and held her soul sister in a firm embrace. *Yes, I should imagine that you are... but,* she added hastily as she pulled away to look Veronica in the eyes, *it is not pleasant.*

Shaking her head, Veronica reached out to grip Ophelia's shoulders, and she tugged her back into the embrace. *It is you and should be a part of us; I will not turn from you.*

Then, at your bidding, Veronica, here it comes!

oooXooo

"I'm sure that it's one!" she said in a firm but quiet voice, her eyes dark and resolute as they sat huddled on his bed. The curtains hid them from the view of those who shared the dormitory with him, and the Silencing Charm ensured their complete privacy, but they still felt compelled to whisper. "I know that it sounds daft that he'd use it so openly, but I'm sure that it's a Horcrux."

Ophelia tucked a slender strand of hair behind her ear and edged closer to the preoccupied youth. It was an unspoken rule between them that they never spoke about what happened between them and Voldemort; that in this enclosed haven, they forgot that they had to work for him and with him. This was a special place to bring the monster down. But to enhance her suspicions and explain her reasoning, she would have to break that dictum.

"Sometimes, he lets me use his wand." Her breath caught in her throat and her stomach churned as he stiffened, but she ploughed on. "I've held it, and it feels so different to others...like there's life in it: a life that shouldn't be there." Tugging nervously on the tips of her hair, she eased back, as if the distance would diminish the impact of her words. "I haven't felt such in any other wand."

"I don't know," Regulus said, carefully neutral as he flipped through his scrapbook; 'Voldemort', in bold letters, caught his attention at every turn, but the information he sought remained frustratingly hidden. "If you're right, then he made more than one."

His head hurt. They had struggled for over a year now; the proof of their hard work: the scrapbook, the carefully constructed dossier on the Dark Lord. It was exhausting, and his school work had tripled in readiness for his OWLs; his grades had slipped, and his mother's Howlers had only added to the almost unbearable strain. Ophelia had helped by taking Polyjuice and attending his lessons so that he could catch up on sleep, but the added hours were taking their toll on her too. She had lost weight, and her eyes no longer glittered, but looked dull and red-rimmed. Her skin had lost its healthy glow, and she looked sick most of the time; she had collapsed twice while doing Herbology, and their Head of House had put her in detention several times for aggressive behaviour. This was killing them.

"Well, why couldn't he have made more than one?" she demanded hotly, her eyes blazing indignantly. "You think that *He* cares about his soul being ripped apart?"

Regulus almost smiled at the fire burning in her, how her cheeks flushed and her lips thinned, how her eyes sparkled and her breath came in short, angry puffs. But he was tired and frustrated, and that bested him.

"I don't know," he snapped out, not caring that she reared back...looking hurt. "If he can make more than one, then how many of the bloody things did he make?" Angrily, he slammed shut the scrapbook and flung it across the bed.

She swallowed nervously; she had seen Regulus angry before, the struggle making both of them snappy, but it was the first time that he had directed it at her... and it stung. She tried to relax, tried to forget that he had snarled at her, tried to remember that he was exhausted. She wanted to answer him, give him some focus, something to work with, but she was so very tired. The task before them was immense, and every answer yielded more questions. It seemed endless, hopeless.

"I'm sorry," he whispered.

oooXooo

The work had been hard going, and it would be fair to say that they had fought and snarled at each other in the months since embarking upon their task. Sometimes, they'd wounded with words, and at other times, more bitter times, they had cut with curses. Long days passed between reaction, remorse and reconciliation, but they were never far from each other's thoughts. Something greater than a shared goal held them together; it pained them to be apart.

The curtained bed in his dormitory was still their secret meeting place, a place where they finalised their plans, outlined their endeavours, and wept and suffered as the burdening vow crushed down upon them. The curtains protected them now as they pored over the latest findings and information, but Ophelia was distracted. With the distant chimes, ringing out the hour and ending the day, Ophelia put down her notebook and looked across at Regulus as he studied the papers in his hand.

"Happy birthday," she said with a tired smile.

Dragging his eyes away from the letters and the entries ripped from diaries, Regulus met her gaze and smiled back. His birthday was not as joyous an event for him, but he would rather eat flobberworms than hurt her feelings, and she had no idea that this was the year he intended to put his plans into action. This was the year that he would

join Voldemort.

"Thank you."

Grinning at him, she withdrew a small box from her pocket and opened it up. Craning his neck to peer in, he saw a small cake with an impossibly thin and tiny candle on the top. She charmed a section of the duvet into something akin to a table top and carefully levitated the miniature cake onto the hard surface.

"Wow! That'll put inches on my waist, Ophelia," he said with mock sarcasm. "I'll have to give up being a Seeker on account of being too fat to get off the ground."

"Hush," she scolded and waved her wand over the chocolate-frosted cake, which promptly swelled into a reasonably sized, wonderfully gooey, calorie-laden cake.

"You really want Hufflepuff to win the match this weekend, don't you?" he sniped playfully. "Have you got some Galleons on the game?"

"You've only missed the Snitch twice since joining the team; I'd be mad to bet against Slytherin." She grinned across at him. "Unless I had good inside information that you were out of action."

"I haven't met a chocolate cake that I couldn't handle," he said stoically while conjuring a fork. "Bring it on!"

"Wait!" she snapped out. The fork hovered millimetres from the icing. Laughing, she waved her wand, and the wick of the candle flared into life; a flickering mix of reds, blues, greens and golds. "Make a wish."

The fork stopped menacing the cake while Regulus thought about his wish. Watching the colours caress her face and dance in her eyes, he wondered... pondered the chances, and without preamble, he blew out the flame.

"What did you wish for?" she asked.

"A chocolate cake that I can't handle!" he responded glibly while deep inside, his mind was turning over his wish *Ophelia survives! Ophelia survives!*

The cake had lasted mere minutes; the two of them were merciless. Lying on the crumb-festooned duvet, they enjoyed the odd moment of peace and selfishness. The distant clock chimed out the passing of another hour, and he turned to her to tell her to go back to bed. He was surprised to see that she'd been lying on her side, watching him. Something flickered in her eyes, and he felt his mouth go dry, his heart leapt, and he suddenly felt clumsy and foolish. Something gripped him, and he couldn't look away, and when her lips parted so she could moisten them with the tip of her tongue, he thought that his heart would stop.

He had an idea what was about to happen; he was sixteen, and the others had all come in at one point and bragged about kissing. Listening quietly and suffering their callous remarks about no girl wanting Regulus when they could have the dashing older brother, it had never appealed to him. But now! Now, when she was so close to him, her hand hot against his cheek and her eyes dark, trapping him in her gaze; now, it was the most enthralling concept he had ever encountered.

Lost, he watched her face get ever closer, saw her pupils dilate and a flush blossom across her cheeks. Lungs stopped working and he felt paralysed as her mouth almost touched his, her breath warm over his cheek and then... someone snored loudly. He felt her startled gasp rush over his eager lips, and then she pulled back sharply.

"What was that?" she asked breathlessly.

"That was just Mulciber snoring," he said wearily, not sure whether to feel relieved or frustrated at the boy's startling racket. Regulus inhaled a shaky breath and collapsed back into his pillow.

Ophelia breathed out and glanced at him; it was clear that whatever had gripped her had fled, and he felt a flash of sorrow that the mood had gone.

"I'd best go," she said after a pause. "You got ten house points, by the way, for being able to turn a tortoise into a teapot. McGonagall was very impressed with you."

He grinned up at her as she slipped her legs off the bed. "How clever of me!" he said with feigned pride.

She giggled and tapped her wand against the top of her head; he watched as her charm took affect, and she slowly disappeared from sight. The curtains distorted as she stood and then parted, only to flutter closed behind her retreating body. He sighed and sank into the pillows, his mind racing over the challenges ahead: Voldemort, the Horcruxes, and getting another opportunity to kiss Ophelia.

oooXooo

It was oddly beautiful. She traced the outline of it with her fingertip, careful not to press too firmly against the red and inflamed skin. Above her own rapid breaths, she could hear Regulus breathing fast and erratic, and his left arm trembled as he held it out for her to see the Mark. Tears prickled her eyes, and she felt sick to her stomach. The black snake coiled on his forearm was the portent of their future; it would either be the key to their success or their failure; their deaths were a certainty.

"Does it hurt?" she asked gently.

"It's sore, but bearable," he mumbled out past clenched teeth. His arm burned! The pain coiled along his arm just as the damned snake did, radiating out to his shoulder and fingers, the entire limb throbbing agonisingly. It knocked him sick, and he felt light-headed. He had stared the bastard in the face as the wand tip seared his flesh, he had even smiled, but now that it was over and the anger that had gripped and guided him had dispersed, he felt nothing but terror. It was done, his destiny set. And if he planned it right, then she wouldn't share in it; she would live.

"Let me get the balm, it may soothe it," she stood, but his hand darted out and caught her wrist; his grip painful, unintentionally tight.

"I can't put anything on it," he hissed out. "The Dark Lord was explicit in his instructions; we do nothing to ease the pain."

Paling at his words, her lips drew back in disgust. She had loved him, sat in his lap and listened to his stories, let those lips kiss her cheek goodnight and those hands hold her. Feeling sick, she curled up, hugging herself; even now, she was forced to endure his presence, forced to carry on the charade that she was his 'sweet little imp'. She retched and her head swam, it was becoming too much. It was so *hard* to reconcile the man she spent time with and the man who ordered the slaughter of families and tortured his new recruits to test their devotion; it was macabre!

But that wasn't what revolted her the most; it was her own treacherous emotions. When she was with him, it all seemed so distant, so remote that her mind caused those thoughts to scurry off while she sank into the wonder of his voice and attentions. It gave her small comfort that this proclivity ensured her survival; assured him that she was indeed his clever little Opella.

"Why?" she screeched out. "Why did you have to do this?" Turning on him, she lashed out with her hand, catching him clumsily on his shoulder. "You had to be the hero! Why?" Sobbing, her voice a high-pitched whine as it carried her grief and anger.

In pain and weakened, Regulus accepted her blows, knowing that they stemmed from fear and exhaustion. If he could rant and scream, then he would too.

"I had no choice," he answered simply. "I couldn't sit by and let our family be picked off by Death Eaters because of Sirius. I couldn't let Voldemort's shadow linger over Mother. The house was so full of fear; it was like a fog in the air," he finished emotively. "If Sirius had stayed, or at least given me something, then maybe I could have spared you this and asked him for help, but he didn't."

A sharp laugh punched the air and she sneered at Regulus. "Don't worry about Sirius not helping." Her lips curved up maniacally. "He's certainly helping."

Suddenly alarmed at her disposition and words, he reached out for her arm which she yanked away from him.

"What do you mean?"

She refused to answer and crawled away from him, her mania dispersing as rapidly as it came, and she cuddled herself, rocking back and forth on the tiles.

"You ruined everything," she finally hissed out.

"Did I? And you'd rather be in thrall to a man who orders the deaths of hundreds?" he snapped out, the anger finally exceeding his pain. "A mindless puppet doing harm and evil just because you love him?"

At his words, she spewed bile; falling away from him, clutching at her hair, tugging on it, she tried to earth her vehement emotions.

"I don't love him," she moaned out plaintively. "I hate him," she added hotly.

"You fear him," he amended gently. "We all do."

Weeping in earnest, Ophelia curled up into a tight ball of misery. Regulus moved and wrapped his right arm around her bowed shoulders; she turned into him, embracing him carefully. Together, they comforted each other, both hurting, both fearful. They were alone.

oooXooo

"You seem distracted," Severus whispered into her ear as he deftly plucked the root from her tense fingers. "That's the second time you've sliced rather than crushed the tuber."

Blushing, Ophelia wiped her hand on a cloth and slipped off the stool. "Sorry, Severus," she mumbled. "I'll get some more from the cupboard."

"So you can deplete the last of my stock?" he said sternly, gripping her shoulders and directing her back to her stool. "I don't think so." With a firm push, he plonked her back on the wooden seat. "You sit and rest for a minute; I'll finish the preparation work."

Malfoy's basement had been turned into a well-equipped potions laboratory and had become their domain. Over the year, various other items had made their way down into the gloomy depths: a table, some armchairs, a few lamps, a small bookcase which housed the most upto-date and useful potion manuals and texts, and a small cot for those potions that required round-the-clock attention. Ophelia's uncle was most generous and keen that their potion research should continue quickly and efficiently. Severus would not normally fault or question such gifts and interest, but he could feel himself sinking deeper and deeper. His gaze lingered on his companion: how was this affecting her?

"I'm just a bit tired," she said in way of an explanation.

"You slept like the dead last night," he mumbled while reaching for the roots dangling from their hook.

The potion that they had started could have done with two pairs of hands, but when he'd knocked on her bedroom door and received only silence, he had slipped inside to see her wrapped up in her duvet as though it protected her from all ills. It hadn't strained him to gently close the door and leave her for the lab and the work ahead. The hours alone had passed quickly enough, but he had found himself often on the cusp of asking her to perform some task or seek her opinion, only to realise that she wasn't there, and somehow, that disturbed him. He had grown fond of her presence, relying upon her; her absence impacted upon him.

Twirling the dried root in his fingers, he studied her bent form. She looked exhausted. The yellow potion simmering in the pewter cauldron only needed a few more ingredients added before it could be left to simmer for three hours, and he wondered if something could draw her out of her mood.

It was only a few days until the start of the Spring term; she'd return to Hogwarts, and he'd be either here or at Spinner's End, fulfilling his new master's every wish. The thought depressed him, but her lack of vigour worried him more; no thirteen-year-old should be so sombre: especially her.

"The potion is almost complete," she said. "We should get it done."

"Since when have you been the voice of duty?" Severus asked good-humouredly.

The glance that she directed at him was chilling, and the smile slipped from his face, leaving him cold. Walking over to her, he caught her chin and tugged her face up towards his; her mood was erratic and terrifying, and he needed the calm and serene girl back. This, whatever it was, went beyond the normal rigours of study.

"You're tetchy and unfocused," he snapped at her. "You can't concentrate, and you're making elementary mistakes. If you can't sort this out, then you're no good to me as a colleague," he continued more gently, his concern seeping out into his voice. At his words, he saw her face crumple and tears gather, but instead of succumbing, she straightened and jerked angrily away from him.

"I get tired once, and you have a go at me!" she stated viciously. "What about all the times you've come back from your meetings with *Him*, and I've had to take up your slack?"

Anger flared; a nasty, hot anger that tried to incinerate his affection. "You're suggesting that you're suffering the same as I am? That in amongst your lessons and study sessions at Hogwarts, you're facing something as terrible as the Dark lord?" Yanking on her arm, he pulled her towards him. "You fail a test, and you get a 'T'; I fail a test, and I get the Cruciatus: how can you compare them?"

Her lips parted and trembled as though a thousand things wanted to tumble from her mouth, but at the last, she snapped her lips shut and looked away. Not quick enough though.

"What has Regulus got to do with this?" he demanded hotly.

"Nothing!" she spat back.

Fear coiled around his throat and chest, making speaking and breathing suddenly difficult. Was she planning something with Regulus? The younger Black had been honoured amongst the Death Eaters, gaining the Mark at a younger age than any other. Bile burnt a path to his mouth. Was she planning on joining the illustrious ranks? Was Regulus tutoring her on how to please the Dark Lord? But that wasn't right! Ophelia had no need to cosset the Dark Lord: she was already adored. The only other thing lumbered into his mind like a troll amongst alembics. Did Ophelia love Regulus? Not the cousinly love that you'd expect...or that Severus hoped...but the love that tormented and raged, indulged and took. Were they lovers?

Releasing her arm, he backed away from her. Those dark eyes of hers followed him warily, and he felt too open and exposed. His sudden and unexpected feelings had surprised and worried him. They brought up too many other questions, and he wasn't ready to think about them; he hardly wanted to know that they existed. Perhaps it was better that she loved Regulus, and he knew about it. Certainly better than letting someone know that you loved them and finding out later that they had loved someone else all along. It'd hurt less.

Shaking his head, he turned away and looked unseeingly at the ingredients cupboard. From behind him, he could hear her angry huffs, but no heels clicking against the tiles. Was she staying despite his outburst? How he hoped....

"I'm sorry, Severus." The voice startled him. It sounded so old, so weary. "I have been working too hard on other, personal projects. I should have made time for this." A

soft sigh carried, and he let a sympathetic keen pass his lips. "I need to do something; something that I can't explain at this time... It's a matter of the heart rather than the head."

Licking his lips and swallowing hastily, he span on his heel and smiled softly at her. "I should be apologising. I had no right to... go where I wasn't invited." Inside, his heart clenched painfully, but more as a result of dashed hopes than a feeling of betrayal. She did indeed love Regulus. The potency of it almost snatched his breath. When had he grown that fond of Ophelia?

The lines on his face hardened, and she gently wove through his thoughts to see the cause of it. Partly gratified that he had concluded that she was in love with Regulus, she found herself wondering if that kind of love was indeed what she felt. It was so confusing! Working next to Severus had become one of her joys, and she would readily admit that she wished to secrete herself in the gloomy lab with him at every opportunity. It hurt to think that Severus thought her out of reach...did she want him to reach out? But then... Did she love Regulus?

It was terrible! Her lower lip wobbled, and the tears that had gathered started to fall. It seemed as though her whole body trembled, and as he continued to watch her, he recognised the signs. Hadn't he had the shakes such as that when he was finally alone? After he had been ordered to do something vile, and he had had to pretend to enjoy his forced barbarism? *Oh Merlin* he beseeched. *What have you gotten yourself into?*

Chapter Twenty five

Chapter 25 of 36

Moody and Smith tidy up a few loose ends. Ophelia continues to fill in the gaps, and Sirius finds himself damned by the emerging memories.

Author's Notes: Many apologies for the long lull in posting; something nasty happened to my computer. I'm not technical, so I have no idea what the murder weapon was, but suffice to say that not much on my old computer survived.

Many thanks to my patient beta, Falconfalmorgan, and to Trickle Woo, who checked through and has offered so much advice.

The trolley plummeted down the steep rails, and Moody glanced over at Smith. A grim smile twisted his lips; Smith was clutching at the handrail and looking decidedly queasy. The Auror had never fared well on any form of transport. It had been a running joke during their training days that Smith had become a master marksman solely to avoid the need to pursue a suspect on broomstick.

Serves the old codger right, thought Moody, *for keeping such a useful snippet to himself; many a skeleton could be found in abandoned closets* Letting out a chortle, which was smothered by the screech of wheels against track, Moody enjoyed the thrill of the ride and let the thrill of the hunt finally infuse him.

The goblin sitting in the front pulled on the brake, and the cart screamed to a halt by a dark and cold platform.

"Thank Merlin!" moaned Smith while clambering out and lurching over to the safety of the stationary wall. His shuffling footsteps echoed mournfully in the small cave-like hollow.

The goblin huffed and lumbered over to a door seemingly carved into the rock face. Pulling out a simple, golden key, the banker waved his long-fingered hands, and with a dull vibration, the door opened. He turned to the two wizards and studied them both with distaste. The amber light danced in his sharp, black eyes.

"As per the agreement between the Bank and the Ministry of Law Enforcement, you have one hour to search the vault for the items you seek." With that instruction and warning, the goblin turned on his heel and climbed into the trolley. With the sound of grinding metal, the trolley rolled along the track to be swallowed whole by the suffocating dark. The two wizards waited until the rumble of wheels faded.

"Charmin' fellow," mumbled Smith.

"Stop gripin' and come on," Moody said impatiently; his palms almost itched at the prospect of rifling through Elladora Black's vault. "We got a lot of vault to search, and I reckon that we 'ave about 'alf of that 'our before they realise we shouldn't be 'ere." Nodding, Smith quickly followed him in. "Yer go over there, and I'll look 'ere. You know what we're after."

"We duplicate the information and go from there," continued Smith, stepping past a pile of Galleons equating to his salary. "This is thrillin', ain't it?" he asked with a merry lilt to his voice. "Takes me back a few decades, it does."

"Well, if it takes ye back to the days when yer were a moody and quiet man, then that'll be 'elpful."

Smith straightened and snorted. "What happened to yer sense of humour?"

"Nothing," Moody answered bluntly. "I never 'ad one."

Dust, cobwebs and gathered treasures littered the small vault. This was the vault mentioned in the codicil: vault 759. This was what Elladora had bequeathed to Ophelia, and it was a fair inheritance. Ophelia would not struggle financially in the Wizarding world while she found her feet. But they weren't interested in that. They were after something that had been put in here after her mother's death. Or at least, what they hoped had been deposited in amongst the gold and glitter. Oddly, it was a treasure that Elladora may have scorned, and one that may have cost Capella her life.

Smith checked his timepiece: ten minutes had rushed past while they had waded through the useless dross. He could imagine the miserable goblin sitting at his desk and pondering the presence of two Aurors in the vault. If they couldn't find it soon, then they'd have to surrender the line of enquiry, but Smith was reluctant to let that happen. Smith was prepared to risk the rest of his life to prevent the mystery surrounding Capella and Ophelia being left to slowly decay in an abandoned vault.

But where were they?

"'Ere!" exclaimed Moody, lifting up a cardboard box.

Smith looked across and dropped the jewellery box that he had been going through; dull rubies and diamonds cascaded to the floor, crushed under his boot as he stepped over to the triumphant Moody. His greedy eyes feasted upon the small, innocuous but precious container. His heart hammered away...he hadn't felt this energised in half a century!

"Now we get out of 'ere?" he asked with a grin.

"Yep!" Moody confirmed with a quick nod.

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Letters! Hundreds of them, spanning almost nine years; it was a heartbreaking account of love, loss and longing. The last letter slipped from Moody's fingers, and Smith sniffed, his own emotions trying to settle after the harsh reading. It had taken three days to go through the whole collection. Some had been impossible to read due to long-dried tearstains and others due to age. There was evidence to indicate that a few had been ripped and then repaired. And they all screamed out a record of something that had been both beautiful and cruel.

"So," said Moody after a thoughtful pause. "That's the reason why Capella left."

"And the cause of 'er death," Smith added sadly. "I know how that can get to ye," he continued in a strained whisper. Moody settled back carefully, not making any sound to disturb his friend. "It's like the world 'as gone, and ye wonder why yer keep goin'." Smith wiped a trembling hand over his face, and Moody knew that he wiped away the tears that he had never allowed to fall all those years ago. "I..." he started, only to pause while he winced. "The ache that never stops; the future full of it grindin' yer down and eatin' at what's left." He looked up, those green eyes full of something terrible: anguish, pain, self-loathing, despair, and longing. "I... I would 'ave done the same, if I'd 'ave found the strength... or perhaps been weak enough."

Moody blinked and inhaled unsteadily. He knew Smith had suffered following the murder of his wife, but the depth of it and the dark routes on which it had led him had remained hidden. It put everything in a different light. This house wasn't some kind of memorial to his dead wife; it was all that Smith really had. This was where Smith's life had ended, and the following decades had been him scrabbling around, waiting for his body to catch up with the awful event.

"Work gave me some purpose, and I think Amelia knew. She wouldn't let 'em retire me. I 'oped that through work, I'd find out who 'ad done it, but other than the Dark Mark above 'er office, declaring that it were the Death Eaters, I never did."

Moody inhaled to speak, but Smith raised his hand and glared at him. "I didn't tell ye to make ye feel bad; it just came out. A day ain't gone by where I don't miss her, but I learnt to live with it a long time ago." Moody's mouth snapped shut. "Capella couldn't. When she found out that 'er 'usband had been killed, she couldn't cope," he added solemnly. "In that one moment of weakness, she dealt the Killing curse upon 'erself." His head dropped to his chest, and he scratched his forehead. "If only she'd 'ad some distraction, some moment between knowin' and actin' to stay 'er 'and; she may never 'ave cast it."

"It explains why she left Ophelia," Moody finished, the last loose end tied up. "She were too immersed in that terrible grief. Her mind weren't workin' right. It must 'ave crippled 'er to know that it 'ad been Lucius Malfoy who 'ad cast the curse what killed 'im. If she 'ad lived," he added, bitterness and pain staining his voice, "she'd 'ave 'ad the 'eartbreak of knowin' that Narcissa lied in court to give 'im an alibi."

Smith snorted. "It's quite ironic, innit?" he asked cynically. "The family that made Ophelia an orphan were the ones to look after 'er the best."

"I figure that neither Lucius nor Narcissa know of Ophelia's 'eritage."

"I doubt it," murmured Smith. "I think the knowledge died with Capella. Despite the obvious pain expressed in them there letters, it seems that 'e never met up with 'is daughter."

"Trust me," said Moody darkly. "It would have 'urt 'im badly."

"You knew 'im?" Smith's eyebrows shot up in surprise, and he lowered his mug, the tea forgotten.

"E was in the Order. One of the best." Sniffing, Moody sat back and folded his arms across his chest. "It makes sense, looking back," he continued thoughtfully. "Dumbledore 'ad asked 'im to keep an eye on the Blacks, and 'e struck up a good rapport with Capella. Dumbledore suggested that 'e use whatever 'e could. I guess that they became close and then lovers."

"Will you tell Ophelia who 'er father was?"

Moody sighed and sat forward. "I'll certainly tell Dumbledore. It'd be good for 'im to see the consequences of some of 'is decisions."

Smith eyed him warily, observing the taut features and the way Moody's eyes narrowed. *All was not well within the Order*, mused Smith. It took a lot to unsettle Moody this much. The sips from the hipflask were more frequent than Smith recalled, and the thoughtful silences that were common from old were somehow more potent and grim. There was something not right, and it was bothering him.

"What about the letters?"

"The letters..." Moody whispered hoarsely, his gaze lingering sadly over the gathered papers. "I'm not sure." He wanted to pass them on. He desperately wanted to pass the letters on to someone. They were all that was left of something beautiful in what had been a vile time, and they were all that Ophelia would ever have from her mother and father. "I think that it's time their tale was told," he suggested. "They can't suffer as a result of it."

"But what about Ophelia?" demanded Smith firmly. "She'd suffer if it got out."

"We'd only tell who needs to know, and they won't tell a soul." He knew he was right, and he started to gather them up, carefully straightening and stacking them in neat piles ready to be bound and delivered. Damn the consequences! These were the last accounts of a wizard who had died doing a duty, and his story deserved to be known. Ophelia had a right to know about her father. She needed to know what had reared up and torn her from her mother's side, depositing her in the clutches of a family intent on corrupting the Wizarding world. She needed to know that she had been loved and could still be part of a family.

Smith thought hard and fast, his mind stretching out over repercussions and ramifications, discerning pitfalls and problems, but he finally agreed that Ophelia would be as safe as ever.

"Ye're right, Moody," he said with a grin, and he began aiding his friend to sort the letters. "Let's take them to Molly; introduce 'er to Fabian's daughter."

oooXooo

In the small room at number twelve, Grimmauld Place, where secrets were tumbling thick and fast, Lupin reached out and gripped Sirius' trembling arm. As the devastating words slipped from Ophelia's lips, Sirius slid down the wall, lost in the pain and shame that was smothering his mind and sense.

It had been *his* fault! His mother hadn't pushed Regulus into their arms...he had! His perceived desertion had been the final push that Regulus had needed to join those corrupted ranks, and all the time, he could have saved his little brother with one word or glance. Sickened and dizzy, he closed his eyes and groaned softly; Lupin was at his side, supporting him again as his world tilted.

Sirius didn't want to believe what he was hearing. Her words portrayed Regulus as a hero as he worked to bring down the Dark Lord: how he had infiltrated the Death Eaters to protect them all and put himself in a position to kill Voldemort. Sirius had thought his little brother a sycophant, an ignorant waste of magic that had lived and died for the wrong cause. The boy had been the apple of his Mother's eye and the pride of his dark family, and yet, ironically, the one who had done the most and the best to destroy what the Order stood against.

He felt hot tears running down his cheeks, and his throat burned with suppressed emotion. He wanted to run. He had misjudged his brother. He wanted to scream. While

Regulus had struggled, he had lived a life that was less than what it could have been and more than what it should have been, and all because he had thought himself so bloody marvellous. He wanted to be numb. This was the price of pride; the pound of flesh was being ripped from his heart.

Feeling the weight of his unsettled emotions, his feet carried him downstairs, as if they knew what would be the most effective way of nullifying the chaos in his head. The cabinet loomed before him, the glass in the doors, glittering like peevish eyes, and the decanters gleaming like teeth. He stood, his mind whirling, and reached out for the Firewhiskey, his fingers sliding over the cool, smooth surface. It was the simplest calnative... the easiest way to end his immediate agony. Yet he couldn't lift that blessed panacea. Weeping and moaning, he collapsed against the cabinet; if it couldn't ease him, then it would support him. Falling onto his knees, the warm wood pressing against his shoulder, he soon felt another warmer, softer pressure against his shoulder, and through his tears, he saw Lupin kneeling next to him.

Nothing was said; they just held each other quietly and desperately, both fighting to keep hold of some truths in the shifting sands of their memories. Both tried to subdue the rage that was burning and coursing through their veins and resolve the bitter irony twisting their insides. They had wasted so much effort in keeping secrets and hating when they could have worked together and defeated the Dark Lord once and for all ages ago...no need to wait for a young boy to grow to manhood under Voldemort's wrathful shadow.

They had directed their fate, wrought their own destiny and dictated their future. The trail of tears could be seen meandering through their past; each wrong decision and unjustified hatred a cairn, leading them forward to an inescapable destination. And now, as Sirius sobbed and Lupin consoled, the path ahead seemed set, the route selected by years of misunderstanding and prejudices: it was the only way forward.

Chapter Twenty six

Chapter 26 of 36

Moody uncovers one of Dumbledore's terrible secrets, and Ophelia reveals more about the trials she had faced.

Recounting her past was exhausting for her and for the others. So far, three days had been devoted to delving into her history, and now, they rested. Ophelia had gone back to her room, and although Dumbledore had said that she was no longer a prisoner, she preferred the quiet of the room; until she sorted out the vastness of her mind, the rest of the world had little meaning.

They all paused for breath, for a chance to just deal with it all; Moody and Smith had gone investigating, and Dumbledore had followed a thread poking out from the quilt of her memories. He had studied and ruminated over the remnants of the diary that had caused so much suffering during Harry's second year, and he had gathered together the many phials that held his captured memory. Sirius had become a fastidious carer for Buckbeak, spending much of his time in the attic... keeping out of the way. Lupin had returned to the werewolves with the dire news of the Ministry's intentions regarding their classification as dangerous beasts. McGonagall had caught up with her duties as teacher and Deputy Headmistress, and the house had settled into something akin to a quietly ticking time-bomb. Something at some point would have to give.

"You will not pass this on to anyone."

Moody gaped silently, his gaze flickering from the pile of letters on the kitchen table to Dumbledore's cold gaze. Had Dumbledore misunderstood his intention? Did Dumbledore think that he was about to release the letters into the Wizarding world rather than just to Molly? That must be it! Nothing in the letters was risky...Dumbledore was paranoid, and Moody should know, being an authority on the topic!

"Come on, Dumbledore," cajoled Moody. "Someone needs to know about this: Ophelia at the very least." But something in Dumbledore's eyes caused his bemused humour to flee. "Why?" he asked defiantly.

"I do not want anything about her to be discovered at this time."

Moody gritted his teeth and reached for his hipflask. "That's not really an answer," he grumbled.

"I do not have to tell you everything, Alastor," Dumbledore said tartly. "It is important that as little about her is released as possible, but when this passes," he soothed, "then, you may do as you wish with these letters."

The idea that Dumbledore did not trust him rankled in the worst way...it actually hurt! And this sudden isolation was also disturbing. Dumbledore was keeping something to himself, something important. Moody was amazed at the man's selfish foolishness. Information needed to be shared; plans needed to be discussed; there was no room for someone to keep things from the Order for any reason... After all, Dumbledore could 'pop his clogs' as easily as anyone. But Moody had been an excellent Auror...one of the best!...and he knew how to bypass reluctance.

Slipping into Dumbledore's mind was risky, and he could feel the force of Occlumency trying to keep him out, but there were techniques to support Legilimency.

"So you 'ave no problem with lettin' us tell Molly after whatever it is 'as passed?" He caught sight of the merest flicker of suspicion cross Dumbledore's features.

"Not at all," Dumbledore replied with a smile. "I daresay that it will bring her some joy."

Moody smiled and nodded. "Ye're right. She were in a right state after Arthur was almost killed." There! The memories starting to bubble up unbidden...the subtle way in to get what he wanted. "I 'ear that she didn't sleep for days; but who would, eh?"

"I'm sure that Molly suffered tremendously," he said calmly; while inside, his mind went over his own restless nights of terrifying dreams and dark imaginings.

"I feel sorry for the kids, o' course," Moody said gently, easing back in his chair and taking a deep sip from his flask. "Potter was distraught by it all too." Another sharp spike in memories...so, it had something to do with Potter, which was hardly surprising, but how did Potter relate to Ophelia? This wariness on Dumbledore's part happened after Ophelia had told them the Dark Lord may have made more than one Horcrux. It was time for a stab in the dark. "There again, we're all a bit distraught; this ordeal with Ophelia 'as us all a bit rattled. At least we 'ave somethin' good out of it," he said carefully, his eyes focused on Dumbledore's and his mind eking into the man's skull. "We have a clue about the other 'Orcruxes."

And there it was! It was like a rogue wave against a ship's hull, coming out of nowhere and bringing with it terrifying flotsam and dreadful jetsam, the crest of it a writhing froth of tempestuous hate and anger as it loomed down upon the trembling witness. Moody almost gagged. To get the answer so easily and so powerfully highlighted just how much the thoughts had plagued and pestered Dumbledore: he had wanted to share the terrible notions all along. Dumbledore considered Harry to be a Horcrux.

The link between Harry and Voldemort was well-known, and measures had been taken to reduce the consequences of that union, but up until Ophelia's comments, no one had considered the possibility that Harry was an actual Horcrux.

Moody slipped from Dumbledore's mind and found that he couldn't maintain eye contact. If Harry was a Horcrux, then there was only one thing that could be done if they wanted Voldemort destroyed.

"I underestimated you," Dumbledore said in a tremulous voice. "And I find I am not entirely peeved that I did."

Moody looked up and saw Dumbledore's eyes twinkling with rather more dazzle than usual; a tear slipped down from the corner of his eye. No wonder Dumbledore had kept it to himself; the prospect summoned a nasty conclusion: Harry would have to die.

Moody took another, deeper sip from his flask, letting the burn of alcohol warm him while the thought chilled him.

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"Okay, okay," Regulus said shortly. "The diary and his wand are two. We know where the diary is; it's in plain view on Malfoy's bookcase." He dragged his fingers through his hair and paced his bedroom.

Ophelia sat on the bed, idly picking at the loose threads on his eiderdown while he stomped around and went over old conversations. She knew he was avoiding thinking about the thing that had preoccupied them for the last few months...her sixteenth birthday. It would be expected that she take the Mark sometime in her sixteenth year, and her birthday was fast approaching.

"You can get the diary any time; the wand is, of course, slightly trickier," he said while turning on his heel for another lap of the bed.

"I could just ask to borrow it," she said flippantly, hoping to incite something in him to distract him from going over the questions they couldn't answer. But he didn't seem to notice her glibness, his agitation for her being too strong.

"For Merlin's sake!" she finally snapped. "Would it be so bad if I did take the Mark?"

Without warning, he rounded on her, his blue eyes flashing dangerously and his lips pulled back. She scurried back on the bed, suddenly scared of the young man angrily approaching her. He placed his hands on the duvet and leant towards her until his nose almost touched hers and her head pressed against the headboard. He was emanating such power, his anger unleashing some hidden raw magic; it snatched her breath, and the hairs on the nape of her neck tingled as her hackles rose.

"Bad?" he queried softly, his light tone belying the rage coursing through him. "It would be terrible," he affirmed with a hiss. "This thing polluting you, running through your veins, filling you with venom; your thoughts open to his mind as easily as your eye to a book." He caught her jaw, his fingers splayed across her throat and his thumb brushing over her lower lip. "To make you think of things that you shouldn't; make you want things that you shouldn't." Suddenly, he released her and backed away.

She hadn't dared to breathe when his hand had closed around her throat. Her eyes, painfully wide, had stared into his narrowed and glittering gaze, and a shiver had played across her burning skin. His words had conjured up strange images in her mind: an odd mix of appealing scenarios and terrifying imaginings.

With a jolt deep in her gut, she suddenly realised that Regulus was a man. She was swamped by a rising desire, but it was then smothered by her concern for the darker things he was hiding behind his wrath. Confused and disorientated, she stayed motionless, even after that delicious and promising hand had slipped away.

Her mind reeling at what had just happened, she studied Regulus while he stood by the window, hunched over and panting. Tentatively, she slid off the bed and stepped over to him, half expecting him to flee or scream. Her hand on his shoulder made him flinch, and she thought she heard him make a soft moan. With bated breath, she slid her hand across his shoulder and gently rubbed the back of his neck.

He was much taller than she was, so when he stumbled into her embrace, she was almost overwhelmed and smothered by his frame. Clutching at her, he sobbed onto her shoulder, and in a torrent, he divulged the secrets that he had kept from her: the horrors that he had committed in Voldemort's name.

She cried silently with him, holding him and letting him vent, letting him unleash the terrors that a boy his age should never have seen or done. She held him as he decried his vow, wishing that someone else would finish what he had so recklessly and bravely started. He echoed her own secret fears and hopes, and as he broke, so she did she.

oooXooo

Her birthday had come and gone, and the Dark Lord had not asked her to take his Mark; if he had been shocked or dismayed by her not demanding it and thrusting her eager left arm under his nose, he had made no mention of it. They redoubled their efforts to discover Voldemort's secrets, to find any mention of the other Horcruxes, if they even existed, and ways to destroy them if and when they were found. Late nights and early mornings, disturbed sleep and the pervading fear that had become a permanent feature in their lives had shortened their patience to non-existent. Ophelia had been punished many times for cursing, hexing and missing lessons, and Regulus had been forced to drop several NEWTs, as he 'seemed to be struggling with the workload'. Dismissive of their teacher's worries and recriminations, they plodded through their days and plotted in the darkness.

Ophelia slipped through the Slytherin common room, disgusted by the shouts, laughter and whoops of delight as they revelled in another Quidditch victory. The one who had secured their victory wasn't even there. She wound her way down the spiral staircase to the boys' dormitories and then into Regulus' room. He was sitting on the bed, staring at something in his hand, and something about his pose struck her; he seemed to thrum with some urgency and energy. Stepping over, she sat down on the bed; he remained entranced by a small, silvery object in his hands...a pretty, silver locket held on a delicate chain. Holding it reverently, his eyes were alive as they reflected the shine from the locket's surface. Her breath a little accelerated and her heart fluttering, she reached out and touched his arm. He started, his face twisting into a fierce scowl until he registered who it was, and then the glower morphed into a triumphant smile.

"I know where another one is!" he said, his voice cracking with delight. "He used Kreacher to hide it."

"That's good!" she responded, smiling while her insides trembled. "That makes... what?" Her eyes closed as she went through the growing list. "Four!" she exclaimed, her eyes popping open. "The diary, the wand, the ring mentioned in his diary, and the... whatever you've discovered."

"According to what Kreacher told me, *He* doesn't expect anyone to find it."

"Even better," she said thoughtfully. "We can destroy that one without him even knowing about it. That should give us some breathing room while we track down the ring... and any others that he may have made," she added wryly.

Regulus had been thinking, his mind going round and round in the same destructive circle; he knew his position within the Death Eaters was weak, and he knew the Dark Lord was aware of the friendship between him and Ophelia. He had long thought that he was a danger to her, that his association with her would cause her difficulties with the Dark Lord. Now, if it should come about that *He* should discover one Horcrux missing, then *He* could surmise that Kreacher had told of the whereabouts of the precious Horcrux, suspicion falling immediately upon himself, and if that happened, then she was in danger, terrible danger. *He* would rape her mind and tear out every betrayal, and *He* would make her suffer. This had to be done without her knowing about it, done so that he could never be found, that his knowledge of the Horcruxes would never be discovered: his last act of defiance never realised by *Him*...or her!

"Yes," he said carefully. "But we'll have to wait for Kreacher to recover," he lied smoothly. "The ordeal was a strain for him, and he's too sick to answer any questions."

Her face softened, and she bit her lip. "Is Kreacher okay?"

"He's disorientated and sick, seems feverish, and he keeps moaning horribly." He said it quite simply, but the actual event a fortnight ago had been horrible.

He had wept when Kreacher had appeared in his room, clutching at his scrawny neck, his eyes almost popping from the sockets. The wails and screams that had filled the room had sliced through him, and he had struggled to restrain the elf, who had tried to bludgeon himself with a candlestick. After what felt an age, the elf had collapsed in his arms, his name on his lips like a Benediction before exhaustion claimed him. Cradling the limp elf, he had held him until his own emotions had calmed and then carried Kreacher to the little room under the sink, tucking him in and leaving him to rest.

"I wonder if a Draught of Peace would help?"

"Doubt it," he said bluntly. "Remember when Sirius ordered Kreacher to drink those bottles of wine? The Sober-up didn't work, and neither did the Morning-after potion."

"Oh, yes," she responded sadly. "We'll wait."

Now that he had resigned himself to his decision, he felt wonderfully light and free, something that he usually only felt when soaring on his broomstick. He felt giddy and energised, more so now than when his fingers had earlier caught the frantic snitch; he almost laughed out at the wonder of it. Slipping the locket back into his pocket, he lay back against the headboard, watching Ophelia as she nibbled her lower lip thoughtfully. She had never seemed more beautiful to him; never had her hair had that sheen nor had her skin glowed so enchantingly, and he was sure that her lip chewing had never been so enthralling. He knew that he loved her, had known from that moment over a year ago when she had sat upon his bed and they had almost kissed. She had never mentioned it, and whatever had inspired the mood had never resurfaced; he had smothered his feelings, knowing that she thought of him as her cousin, maybe even a big brother.

"What are you thinking?" he asked conversationally.

Sighing, she tugged on the ends of her hair; he frowned, as she only did that when she was nervous or scared. She turned to him and smiled sadly.

"I was just wondering if there would be an after." She saw his puzzled frown and gave him a genuine smile. "You know," she said softly, "after the Dark Lord has gone." Her smile slipped when his expression darkened, and she regretted her moment of openness.

"Maybe," he said after a heavy and awkward silence. Throwing off the threatening despair, he smiled up at her; he felt too good to let the mere mention of his probable death spoil the moment, and he opened up his arms to her. She smiled and settled next to him, her head resting on his shoulder and a hand resting lightly on his chest. Covering her hand with his and letting the fingers on his other hand slide through her hair, he felt content and closed his eyes, feeling her warmth next to him, hearing her breathing, inhaling her aroma and sinking into the wonderful sensation that was just lying next to her.

He woke with a start, his heart hammering in his chest; some internal nagging had finally sloughed off his slumber with the warning that Ophelia was still in his bed and the others were due to come back to the dorm. Hastily glancing around, he sighed with relief; the room was empty and looked as though it had remained so while he had napped. Next to him, she slept; her face smooth and untroubled. Carefully sliding his hand between their bodies, he pulled out his wand, charming the curtains closed and erecting the wards that had kept them secret in all their previous meetings. Satisfied that they had total peace, he let the lethargy grab him and drag him back to sleep.

He felt something slide across his belly, and he grumbled, trying to dislodge the thing intent on disturbing his sleep. The determined interloper was undeterred, and he felt sleep slipping from his brain; frowning and mumbling, he woke up to feel a strange warmth suffusing his body. His skin tingled pleasantly, and his toes curled in his shoes, he even let out a low groan. Realising that her hand had slid under his shirt and was gently brushing over his taut tummy, he licked his lips and placed his hand over hers, staying her delicious movements.

"Ophelia," he whispered hoarsely. "You will have to stop that."

In the shadowed bed, her eyes were dark and unfathomable when his gaze met hers. He held his breath, hoping and fearing that she would remove her hand, laugh about it and then slip from his bed. Enthralled, he watched as she lifted up onto her elbow, her dark hair framing her face, and looked down upon him. There was something in her expression, some restrained feral quality, and he felt trapped and excited. She bent lower, just as she had once before, but there was no slumbering roommate to hinder her this time, and those lips brushed over his. Inhaling sharply, his whole body jolted at the contact. Closing his eyes, trembling and alive beneath her, he revelled in her kiss, in her soft mouth as it slid over his, and her hand on his belly resumed its exploration. Her sheer presence overwhelmed him.

Caught up and desperate with need and urgency, he reached out to grip her, crush her to him. Her startled gasp thrilled him, and he deepened his kiss, wanting to taste and remember her sweetness. She responded, and her sighs and frantic movements pushed him further, and knowing that he had no will to stop it now, he gently rolled her onto her back. Lying beneath him, she smiled and caressed his cheek, parting her thighs and letting him nestle against her. Sighing into her hair and feeling her arms slide around his waist to pull him against her, he let himself fall into the dream that had sustained him since taking the Mark.

oooXooo

Ophelia sat in the Malfoy library. Her eyes kept darting to the black book nestled on the topmost shelf. It was the diary. How she itched to pluck it down and hurl it into the fire. She'd delight in hearing it scream. But Regulus had warned her about doing anything rash. He had calmed her anger, citing that he needed time to ensure that all the Horcruxes had been identified before they acted and alerted the Dark Lord to the actions carried out against him.

She understood the logic, but how she wanted *Him* to suffer! Frustrated and tired, she flopped back against the plush cushions and closed her eyes. She usually enjoyed the holidays; it was the only time that they could forget their task, as there was very little they could do with so many Death Eaters snooping around. It was during this enforced inactivity that she would sneak down into the basement to be with Severus. But things had been strained recently. And she couldn't understand why.

Severus had barely spoken to her since they had returned from the cavern; his mood usually took to the dark and sombre, but this was different. It seemed that their relationship had finally hit the rocks it had been heading towards. Had it been in the cards from the start that they would crash and drift apart? She couldn't...wouldn't...accept it! They had had fights before...they'd even hurled hexes at each other...but they'd always... *always*... forgotten their wounds and cleaved to each other. This growing distance made her miserable and fearful.

But in a way, she was also grateful for the distance; it gave her time to consider her feelings. So much had happened in the last few months. A smile played on her lips as she traced lazy patterns on the cushion while thinking about just how much had happened. When she closed her eyes, she could still feel the way his hands held her, the way his lips had moved her, and the way he had...

"I know that look."

The knowing voice disturbed her thoughts, and her eyes snapped open to see Narcissa walking into the room. Narcissa! Narcissa would know about such things. Sitting upright and pulling the cushion onto her lap, Ophelia watched her cousin settle on the armchair.

"Who is the lucky wizard?" Narcissa asked kindly. "Or wizards?" she added playfully.

Ophelia bit her lip and blushed.

"So, 'wizards' is right, then?" Narcissa said with a laugh and an arched eyebrow.

At the laugh, which was innocent, Ophelia felt her insides squirm. Did she really love two wizards? The event in the cavern a week ago had left a deep impression upon her. Severus had been so much in control rather than just by her side, and the feelings that he had engendered had been both intense and frightening. The idea that she could just give herself over to him was compelling beyond words: the giving of herself because it would please him and please her was so enticing. But it was so confusing; she couldn't understand it. She had felt so close to falling into something as awesome as it was terrifying.

When he had doused all light, she had felt the bone deep fear that always attacked her, and she knew that she should have been furious about him using her fear against her, but... It had also been so deeply exciting. The arms that had held her had been strong; his whole aspect of contained menace so alluring. The fear had become erotic.

Something had almost happened, and she thought she knew, but if it was love, then it was in a completely different dimension to what Regulus had shown her. It worried her that she felt so little guilt. In truth, she wanted more.

"Don't look so dour," Narcissa said sensitively as she wrapped her arms around her little cousin's shoulders. She had seen the emotions flickering across Ophelia's tense face and had moved to the sofa to offer more tangible comfort. "It happens that we have affection, even love, for more than one person, and there is little wrong in that. How we act upon those feelings is what makes it right or wrong."

Gentle hands cupped her face, and Ophelia relished the warmth. Through teary eyes, she looked at Narcissa. "I don't know what to do. I can't decide which is real."

"They're both real, Ophelia," affirmed Narcissa, as she stroked the slick cheeks. "You just have to decide which one will make you the happiest, and when you do, you abide by that choice."

"If I can't?" she asked mournfully.

"Oh sweetheart!" crooned Narcissa, pulling her into a hug. "I can guess who the two wizards are," she said carefully. Her grip upon her young cousin suddenly intensified, and her voice became cold and steely. "I can only advise you to protect your heart. The life of a Death Eater's wife can be harsh."

Chapter Twenty seven

Chapter 27 of 36

Ophelia reveals the last months of her life before the accident. One chapter ends, and another begins.

Author's Notes: Many thanks to my beta, Falconfalmorgan.

It was a relief to be back in the basement. Her holiday was almost over, and she had fretted that she'd be packed off to Hogwarts without seeing Severus, and that had hurt. Not seeing him before she went back to the dread and constant plotting would be akin to not taking a gulp of air before diving. She needed him to bolster her. Severus gave her a strength that she could not find in Regulus, but Regulus gave her something she knew Severus couldn't.

Since the chat with Narcissa, she had gone over her thoughts and feelings, and she had accepted her affection for the two wizards. She needed them both, but for differing reasons. Looking up, she studied her dark and brooding friend. He was definitely fascinating, and that day in the cavern still made her shiver, but she felt something stood between them. Frowning, she tugged on her hair. Sirius had mentioned Severus' futile friendship with a girl in school. She had no details, but she suspected the friendship was more than just that.

From the corner of her eye, she watched Severus as he carefully stirred some new concoction. It was the latest whim of the Dark Lord, and typically, *He* was running his personal apothecary ragged. That was probably why Severus hadn't sneered or sulked when she had sauntered unannounced and uninvited into his domain.

"If you insist on cluttering up my lab, then you may as well make yourself useful," Severus said, breaking the silence and effectively nullifying the last week of almost absolute silence between them.

Ophelia smirked and slipped off her stool, the epitome of eagerness. She had been right! Nothing could keep them apart for long.

"My supplies are running low, but I haven't had the time to do a stock check; I need a complete inventory by the end of the day." He turned to her and then pointed to the stock ledger on the coffee table.

Nodding, she collected up the waiting ledger and skipped over to the ingredients cupboard. It wasn't the most scintillating of jobs, and she knew that she'd get frustrated before finishing the first shelf, but she'd gladly suffer if it meant being by his side.

The morning dragged into early afternoon, and despite her rumbling belly, she plodded diligently through the shelves. Severus had been busy, judging by the depleted stock. Pursing her lips in frustration, she shook her head. *Why hadn't he asked me for help?*

"Ophelia?"

She replaced the bottle of Lacewing flies and turned to face him. "Yes, Severus."

He remained silent, his black eyes boring into her. Severus rarely prevaricated, and the hesitancy puzzled her. Frowning, she lowered the ledger onto the table and stepped over to him. She knew him well enough to see the anger and tension coiling within him. Her gaze darted to the cauldron; it was empty. The equipment was also back in its place, and the workbench was clean. He had finished the potion a while ago. What had he been doing while she worked?

"You should have stayed with Madam Tonks," he snapped out.

The change from tolerant colleague to vicious intimidator was enough to make her jolt and step back. Her breath caught in her throat, and she felt the hairs prickle on the back of her neck. All she could do was seek the answer in his face.

If eyes could talk, his would be speaking volumes, but she didn't know the language. Unease crawled down her spine and settled in her stomach. He closed the gap and reached out to gently cup her cheek, and that sign of affection worried her beyond reason. A whimper bubbled up, and she bit down on her tongue to halt it.

"I don't know what to do about you," Severus continued in a strained whisper. The hand on her cheek began to tremble. "I have spent a great deal of time thinking about you, and I am... concerned."

"I don't kn..."

"Don't even begin to lie to me," he said harshly, pulling his hand away. "I know you better than you think."

He licked his lips, and his eyes roamed intently over her face, as though he sought to study her soul. Ophelia felt trapped in that gaze; it was enthralling.

"In this place, we are not servants of the Dark Lord; we do not have obligations." He stepped closer, and she thought he would embrace her, but he maintained a distance. "But beyond this lab, we are both perceived as Death Eaters, and we must be superb."

The whimper erupted from her lips. Did he know? Had he found out that she worked to bring down the Dark Lord? She couldn't stand it! She could have dealt with this from any other Death Eater, but not from Severus. It rendered their entire relationship down to so much ash...bitter and inconsequential. But those dark eyes still expressed something that she couldn't understand, and her frantic mind latched onto it, trying to decipher his gaze.

"I am... fond of you, but that cannot protect you if you decide to continue as you are. You must be careful, Ophelia," he said in a trembling voice. "Our lives, such as they are, do not allow for friendships...our loyalty is to the Dark Lord alone." He sighed and scratched at the Dark Mark. "And then, you must live with your choice."

She frowned and hugged herself; she had never felt this cold or uncertain. Was he telling her to abandon her task for her own safety? Had the Dark Lord spoken of his concerns over her or Regulus? *Oh Merlin!* she thought frantically. *Would this impact upon Severus? Would the Dark Lord think that Severus had a part in the plot to destroy the Horcruxes?*

She wanted to hold him. She wanted to feel his arms around her, craving his strength and warmth. This had just been about destroying the Dark Lord, but it suddenly seemed so complicated. Severus was a Death Eater; she was indirectly working against him. What would Severus do if she was discovered? Ophelia almost collapsed. Was he warning her that he would turn away from her?

His gaze was so piercing that she had to glance away, and she heard him grunt, as if she had confirmed some suspicion of his.

"If you listened to your head, Ophelia," Severus said, almost pleadingly, "you'll forget about Regulus."

"I can't," she said urgently.

Severus lunged forwards and gripped her arms; his face was twisted into something approaching mania. "You must!" he hissed out.

Disturbed by his sudden passionate display, she cringed back, as far as his hold would allow. Suddenly, she didn't want to be in the lab.

"You're really scaring me," she said in a small voice.

"Good!" he snarled out. "You need to distance yourself from Regulus."

"Why?" she demanded hotly, and her temper flared. "How dare you tell me what to do!"

"I dare because I... because someone has to pre-empt your foolishness," he hissed out. "It's not too late," he implored. "You can still walk away from Regulus without a blemish...such is your status with the Dark Lord."

The hands on her arms relaxed, and she felt them gently rubbing the tender skin, as though soothing the pain they had incited.

"Regulus is missing," he said bluntly.

"What?" In an instant, her anger was doused, and she felt cold again.

"He hasn't been seen for several days, and he missed a meeting last night."

All her questions died on her lips. The thought that something had happened to Regulus stole her capacity to think, and all she could do was gape at him in horrified silence.

"But he would have told me," she mumbled.

Her attitude seemed to rile Severus, and he shook her roughly. "Forget him!" he shouted. "I could bear the thought of him being your..." he paled and swallowed rapidly "...but I can't stand the thought of him dragging you down with him."

"Dragging me...oh Merlin!" She yanked herself free of his grip and backed away. "What's going on?"

Severus straightened, and his expression hardened. "Regulus has abandoned you, Ophelia."

She fled from the room. Her feet pounded on the steps and along the marbled hallway. The door opened to her, and she sprinted to escape the anti-Apparition wards around Malfoy Manor.

oooXooo

"Kreacher!"

The elf heard her scream and went straight to his distressed little mistress. He saw her kneeling by his young master's bed; tears leaked from her eyes, and she wailed as though something pained her. Concerned, he stepped over and placed a scrawny hand on her shoulder. He was startled when she wheeled around and gripped his shoulders tightly.

"Where is he?" she demanded, shaking his small body. "Where is he, Kreacher?"

"Young Master Regulus?" Scared and confused, he cowered before her.

"Yes," Ophelia screeched into his face. "'Young Master Regulus!'" she mimicked viciously.

"I cannot say, Missy Ophelia." His mind was not right; he knew that much. He kept remembering things that hadn't been and things that couldn't possibly be. But one thing remained bright and rigid, and that was his promise to his young master: he wouldn't tell.

"Why not?" she hissed into his ear. Her grip was painful on his shoulders, and Kreacher felt fear flicker in his belly.

"I cannot say, Missy Ophelia."

She exploded and slapped him across his face; he staggered under the blow and fell to his knees. He snorted out the blood rushing into his nose...saw it splatter across the floorboards...and waited for the next blow; it was an elf's duty to serve his masters. Above the ringing in his ears, he could hear her ragged breaths and the small, desperate keens and mewls as she battled her rage, fear, and despair. Swallowing nervously, Kreacher couldn't stop the treacherous trembles. He whimpered, and whether that calmed his little mistress or whether she managed it herself, he never knew, but he was suddenly cuddled to her chest, listening to her thundering heart and tumbling apologies.

After weeping herself dry, she fell away from the elf and wiped her wet cheeks on the sleeve of her robe until Kreacher, gently scolding, gave her a handkerchief that he had secreted down the front of his smock. She smiled and dabbed at her cheeks; as she handed it back, she saw the embroidered initials R and B surrounded by the letter O. She held the piece of cloth between her fingers, her eyes fixed intently upon it. This was the handkerchief she had given Regulus. Had her tears mingled with his? Was this all that she had of him? Her heart sank, and she retched. What had he done? What had Regulus done?

Knowing that Kreacher couldn't tell her...she knew how much he loved Regulus...she calmed herself and handed the hankie back to him; maybe it held more value to him than to her. Licking her lips and her breath coming in hiccupping gasps, she settled back onto her haunches and watched Kreacher carefully. His eyes were wide; they shimmered as he carefully folded the treasured keepsake from Regulus, and her heart broke again. But she needed to know. Steeling herself, she straightened and inhaled

deeply.

"Look at me, Kreachler!"

The little elf obeyed, and she slipped past his eyes and into his brain, carefully peeling back the confused and disjointed memories of recent events to the one desperate memory that would answer her questions.

Kreachler was tugging on his ears and wailing, his high pitched shriek echoing around the cavern; he watched on as his beloved Regulus gulped down the last of the vile potion, choking and sobbing as he did. The distraught elf was smacking the side of his face and scratching at his skin; his blood mingled with his tears. Why was his master doing this?

Regulus recovered enough of his wits to point at the pedestal and the basin upon it. Screaming and sobbing, Kreachler crept up and hastily snatched out the locket and dropped Regulus' into it before scurrying back to kneel by his master's side, hoping that Master Regulus would retract his demand and beg him to take him back home, but no such plea passed his master's dry and trembling lips. Kreachler knew the thirst that gripped him, and he knew that horrors would be going through his mind as the potion seeped through him. Kreachler's bloodied hands tugged at Regulus' clothes, trying to pull him away from the lake; his master needed to go home.

"Please, Master Regulus," he begged. "Please be coming home with me."

Regulus snarled and pushed the panicked elf away. "Do your duty," he croaked out, before grimacing and collapsing at the lake's edge.

Torn by his duty and his desire, Kreachler slowly backed away, his heart clenching and paining him. He watched on in horror as Regulus tried to quench his raging thirst in the black lake; the frantic elf shook his head and shrieked, knowing what lurked beneath the deceptively calm surface.

"Master Regulus!" he cried out. "Please come home with Kreachler; no need to be staying here!"

Kreachler was almost mad with grief and panic; he bit his knuckles and yanked out handfuls of hair. He screamed when pale arms lanced up out of the water. He vomited onto the floor when Regulus began to scream and flail weakly, his handsome face twisting with fear and anguish. Kreachler dug his nails deeply into his scalp and jumped up and down when the vile inhabitants of that mere grabbed Regulus' thrashing legs. Panting, shaking, screaming and bleeding, Kreachler watched as they dragged his master beneath the surface.

Staring at the lake, Kreachler had waited until the water was as smooth as glass for any sign that his young master had escaped their clutches, but as time dragged, he was compelled to follow his master's last order, and he Disapparated back to the Black house.

Ophelia reared back and clutched her head. She tried to scream, but nothing came out. She pulled her hair and rocked back and forth. How could he have done it? Why didn't he tell her? They could have done it together. Sobbing, she collapsed onto the floor, holding her belly and trying to make sense of it all.

Kreachler scurried over and patted her on her shoulder, his own eyes brimming with tears as he tried to comfort her. He wondered why his master had drunk the potion and not ordered that he do it? So many questions, and so few answers; all he could do was share in his young mistress' grief and hope that soon the terrible agony would ease.

oooXooo

The days passed, and Ophelia's dread grew. The Dark Lord had dispatched Death Eaters to find Regulus, and when they had returned with no news His temper had increased. Ophelia had attended to him, and he had been his usual charming self; he had carried on her lessons, teaching her things that made her shudder and showing her the secrets of darker magics. She found that she had natural abilities, which delighted him; she had a predilection for curses that required a degree of anger and hate. And to her secret shame, she found that she still had that treacherous flush of pride and glee when she pleased him.

It was still common that he would delve into her mind, but not as often as he had once been inclined to do, and she found that she could direct him in her mind away from the things that she wanted to keep private. But she could tell that all was not well; he was thoughtful and withdrawn. His questing mind would always seek out her memories of Regulus, and as time passed, her fear increased...only His arrogance stood between pondering and knowing about Regulus' desertion.

It was late in the evening when the idea formed; it had germinated slowly while she sat in Malfoy's library, glaring at the black leather diary sitting so innocently on the shelf. It forced its way past the mulch of her dread into the light and then blossomed. How often had she done it while they had been at school? How often had she used the benefits of the potion to ease Regulus' burdens? She wondered if she had any left, tucked away somewhere; she hoped she did, as it would take too long to make a fresh batch.

While her insides churned and fluttered, she calmly slid off the leather Chesterfield and walked up to her room. The door clicking shut behind her shattered her serene shell, and she bolted to the large trunk standing at the foot of her bed. Yanking open the top, she sank to her knees and began to wildly and carelessly unpack it. Her frantic fingers scrabbled and grabbed, flinging and throwing items as she sought her potions kit; why did it always end up at the bottom of the trunk?

Taking a firm hold of the familiar wooden veneer, she tugged it free from its prison of books and socks. She stared at it, willing it to contain at least one dose of Polyjuice Potion, and with trembling fingers, she opened it. She let out a cry when she saw a vial containing some thick, dark liquid and clutched the precious philtre to her chest.

When to do it? When would it all work? In her eagerness, she forgot one simple thing: could she actually do it? Could she conspire to have someone killed? It stopped her dead in her tracks. She sobbed at the thought, and her resolve slipped catastrophically; if she couldn't, then it was all lost, and everything that Regulus had died for would mean nothing. Could she think of an excusable reason to kill? Regulus' face loomed before her, his eyes boring into her as she lay beneath him and then fluttering closed as he fell apart above and within her; wasn't that a good enough reason?

Gritting her teeth and summoning the anger that had always been so readily on hand, always far too eager to bare its teeth, she stood, her slender body quaking with the power of it. The candles guttered, and ice lanced its way across the window pane, creaking and squealing across the glass. The water jug cracked, spilling its contents, which hissed into steam before reaching the rug. The bed gave a jolt and then slid across the floor, its claw feet digging grooves into the wood.

Inhaling slowly to keep the inner fire steady, she charmed open the window and walked over to the portal to the death of what remained of her innocence. Climbing through it, she levitated down to the frost covered roses and swept past them towards the edge of the Malfoy estate. Once she clambered past the high hedges and the magical boundaries, she Disapparated.

The city was bustling, and her sudden appearance was barely noticed. She was jostled and knocked until she managed to swerve and dodge between the milling revellers to the relative safety of a restaurant doorway. Panting and slightly overwhelmed, she gathered her wits and wondered where to go; she wouldn't find what she wanted here. Braving the throng, she battled her way to the edge of the crowd and then into a quieter side street.

The sounds of the street, the cars and the raucous laughter died down as she meandered through the alleys and narrow streets. Cats darted out from shadow to shadow; some hissed at her as they scurried past, others just stared disdainfully. Water dripped from cracked guttering into oily, dirty puddles, and the recent downpour ran down the pavements, carrying cigarette ends and empty food wrappers with it. Beer bottles clinked their way down the incline or rolled in grinding, pitiful circles. Sounds were magnified in the gloom, and the buildings with their metal gangways and thick pipes seemed to loom over her. It was both depressing and nerve-wracking.

She swallowed and focused on why she was here. It seemed that she had walked for hours, and she let out a wry laugh; after having been told that Muggles were vicious creatures who would attack any lone woman, she was, ironically, in no immediate peril.

Frustrated, angry and scared, she stormed along a dimly lit street; her heavy footfalls struck the concrete and echoed around, booming in the silence. Desperate and keen

eyes peered into every dark recess, every possible shadow, but nothing other than litter and other Muggle detritus met her determined gaze. Just as she was convinced that her search was futile, she heard a soft noise that hinted at flesh being struck heavily. She paused and waited for the sound again; she was rewarded with a whimper and what sounded like shoes scuffling against cobbles. She straightened and darted to the origin of those dubious sounds...the sound of ripping cloth and buttons scattering on stone, a grunt, a muted cry, and a soothing mumble. She swept into the alley like some descending Fury, her wand drawn and her teeth bared. The young girl saw her, and in that second of their eyes locking, the sheer enormity and horror of what was happening was conveyed.

The young girl softly pleaded and begged, not realising that her effort was unnecessary. Ophelia raised her wand and hurled her hex; in a flash of blue light, he was hurled from the slim body that he had pinned to the wall and slammed into the brick edifice at the end of the alley. He fell into a broken heap, moaning and moving feebly. The teenager stared in befuddled shock before hoisting up her tights and tugging down her short skirt. Her face was pale, and the smeared red lipstick was garish and grotesque on her young face; she tried to fasten her blouse with trembling fingers, but too many buttons were missing.

Ophelia watched her as she processed what had happened and pondered what could have been. Their eyes met again, and the would-be victim read the anger and silent scold in Ophelia's cold depths; with tears spilling, the girl realised the folly of lamb dressed as mutton. On trembling legs, she stumbled past her saviour, and on ridiculous heels, she tottered away...older and wiser.

The man who had twisted the rules, who had allowed his need to smother his sense, and who had allowed himself to be fooled by lip gloss and glitter, slowly rose to his feet. He rubbed at his shoulder and winced; whatever the bitch had done, it had *hurt!* Glowering and mumbling, he limped towards her. She seemed unimpressed, and that incensed him further; not only had he lost his bit of fun for the evening, but now, some scrawny, little girl wasn't showing him the respect he deserved.

His stomach seethed with hot anger, and he lunged for her. The agile thing darted to the left and made a sweeping arc with her right arm; he saw something held in her hand and felt a flicker of apprehension as the thought 'knife' went through his head, but nothing slashed at him, and he let out a snigger. His smug laugh was cut short as the thing in her hand emitted a flash of red light, and his world went dark.

The man fell to the floor, his expression softening from one of extreme surprise to nothing. She Transfigured him into a suitcase and picked up the innocuous item. Feeling the weight in her hand, she licked her lips nervously...no going back now; the first part was done, and that had been the easy bit. Concentrating on the lonely ruin that she and Regulus had visited together when they needed time and space, she Disapparated.

The wind carried the smell of crushed heather and peat: a musky, heady aroma that filled the nose and smothered all other scents. The ruined watchtower lanced up into the night sky, its hulking form silhouetted against a star-speckled sky; jagged edges looked like fingers trying to pluck down those glittering gems. She followed the path cut into the hillside by a thousand feet before her and up through the gaping doorway.

The roof had collapsed centuries ago, the lead scavenged and the wood rotted away. Leaves, feathers, bones and whatever else the wind managed to carry littered the floor. The base of a spiral staircase, and its few remaining stone steps, nestled against the wall from where it would have wound its way around the inner walls of the tower.

She dropped the suitcase onto the dirty, mouldering floor; feathers and leaves swooped up, caught in the unexpected draft. Creating a convincing scene was imperative, and so she cast a series of charms and wards around the tower: hefty spells that would imply great fear and need for security. Her hand trembled, and the incantations seemed reluctant to pass her lips, but she forced herself onwards. The tower seemed to shimmer momentarily from the magic that infused it and then looked no more that it had when she had first arrived.

Panting and light-headed from the effort, she sank onto the lowest of the stone steps, shivering as the stone leeched heat from her. So cold, always so cold; since Regulus had gone, there was nothing but the intense, incessant ache and the terrible feeling that she would never be warm again. It wasn't until a tear struck her hand that she realised she was weeping; she watched more rain down onto her tightly clenched fists. How odd that she should see and feel them without realising they came from her.

It was rising up from deep within, as unstoppable as magma rising through the earth. She trembled and gritted her teeth; her breath came in deep, desperate gulps, and her pulse throbbed in her throat. Closing her eyes and pressing her palms against her eyes, she tried to keep it at bay, tried to smother it, but it was as futile as spitting on lava. It erupted from her in one long anguished howl; it reverberated around her tiny sanctuary. Birds burst from their nests in alarm, and animals scurried in panic. She inhaled deeply to scream again and again; it made no sense, there was no meaning to it, but each wail and sigh, each snarl and mewl conveyed so much; any who heard couldn't fail to understand it.

She must have dozed because she woke with a start and a sore neck. Her throat felt as though it were on fire, and her head had that dull, stuffy feeling that comes from excessive crying. She sniffed and carefully straightened her stiff joints. The sight of the battered suitcase brought her mind sharply back to her duty. Moistening her dry lips, she slid from the step and Transfigured it back into the man that would play such a vital and selfless role in her plan. He staggered before her, his eyes and mouth wide, his mind trying to process that his life and world had shifted. Eventually, his confused gaze rested upon her at the foot of some collapsed staircase, watching him calmly and coldly, and he shuddered; suddenly, women didn't seem so weak.

"Hey," he laughed nervously, "it was just a bit of fun, you know; she was asking for it really...just playing hard to get." He backed away, and his eyes darted over his surroundings, seeking a way out. "I wasn't going to hurt her, you know; some of them just don't know what they want and need a bit of guidance." He would have thought his words would have inspired something...disgust, anger, fear...but her cold stare continued, unnerving him and filling him with a sympathetic chill. It seemed so ridiculous that he should cower before a girl no older than his son, and he let it fuel his ire. "All girls need a little guidance."

Her heart leapt in her chest, and she felt her lips curve up in a vicious smile...how fortunate that he had decided to let his true colours flare; how close she had been to pitying this man and letting him run back to his sad existence. But now, as he leered and approached her, she felt righteous. In one smooth, fluid motion she withdrew her wand and became his judge and jury.

"Imperio!"

oooXooo

He stared at her, his red eyes ensnaring her dark gaze before delving into her mind. She parted her thoughts for him, and he sank deeper, his mind rushing into hers, following the path to what she wanted, needed, him to see. In his negligent eagerness, it was painful and disorientating, and she felt her control begin to slip, but the memory she had skilfully guided him to was quickly discovered, and he immersed himself in it. Gasping and shuddering at his intrusion, she struggled to keep truths hidden from him; he mistook her flushed cheeks and panting for enthusiasm and glee. Smiling, he caressed her cheek; she shuddered at his touch, and his lips parted at the thrill of having power over her.

"Your devotion to me is remarkable, my little Opella; it will not go unappreciated." His voice slithered over her, coiled itself around her and threatened to throttle her resolve.

"I live to serve," she replied breathlessly, lost in the wonder that her intense fear and despair could be so easily misconstrued as dedication and love.

"You love to serve," he amended gently, but irrevocably.

Biting down hard on her tongue, she used the sharp pain to disperse the fog descending upon her mind and watched as Henley, Severus and Bellatrix entered the room. Bellatrix's glance at her was venomous, and Severus looked at her with some concern flickering in the black depths of his eye.

"Henley," hissed out the Dark Lord, his eyes focusing on a tall, slender wizard. "Do you know where Godric's old watchtower stands?"

"Yes, my Lord," he answered quickly.

"There you shall find the traitor Regulus Black." Voldemort placed his long, slender hand on Ophelia's shoulder and pulled her closer, showing their unity of intent. "You will have the honour of killing the traitor." Next to him, Ophelia shuddered, and he smiled at her apparent palpable eagerness.

Henley bowed low and turned sharply, his cloak billowing out behind him as he strove to prove his readiness to serve.

Ophelia swallowed and closed her eyes; it was almost over. Regulus had not attracted the Dark Lord's attention: what they had been doing was still secret. Or had it? Her eyes snapped open, and she sought out Severus. Severus knew, or at least suspected, that her loyalty could be questioned. Her mouth went dry, and her knees felt weak.

He stood by the fireplace, his forearm resting on the mantelpiece. Throughout the little meeting, his eyes had been on her, and she felt that his gaze was peeling back her very skin to get at what she was hiding. He was tense, but he hid it behind a mask of indifference: the death of a fellow Death Eater was nothing of consequence, not when the Dark Lord had ordered it. Would Severus leave it with Regulus' death? Would he be satisfied that without Regulus, she could not continue with the enormous task they had embarked upon together? Or would he expose her as Regulus' co-conspirator in some undiscovered plot?

"Henley!" the Dark Lord snapped out. "A slight alteration to your orders; bring the traitor back here... alive!"

Her mind reeled; she had thought he would have just had Regulus killed. He had never shown such an interest in the motivations of the others who had deserted him. The Polyjuice would only last another fifty minutes; how long would it take for Henley to find him and drag him before the Dark Lord? She swallowed, her throat had become painfully dry, and she frantically thought of a way to prevent the unexpected memories trapped in the Muggle's brain from being extracted and examined by the Dark Lord. The challenge was immense and apparently insurmountable. She was trapped by her own cleverness.

Sweat burst from her pores. Her duplicity would be uncovered, and she would share in the same fate of all traitors to the Dark Lord. But that wasn't the source of the sudden desperation that smothered her. Everything had been for nothing! No one else knew of their work; their findings and discoveries would die with her. It would have all been for nothing...the Horcruxes would remain undisturbed. She and Regulus had struggled and suffered for nothing.

"How did you come to know where Regulus is, Ophelia?" asked Bellatrix carefully.

The voice seemed to drift to her ears as though travelling from a great distance; her head felt heavy, and her eyes couldn't focus on the spiteful witch, who looked so innocent even as her eyes glittered maliciously. Ophelia swallowed and inhaled slowly, as if the question had bored her, Bella's left eyelid twitched, and her sweet smile slipped.

"Regulus is a fool!" Ophelia said witheringly. "He doubted that anyone would think of him using such a place as a hideout, and he trusted me to do something that he should have known me incapable of doing." She paused while they all pondered the inevitable question. "He trusted me to keep his little hidey-hole a secret from my master."

Voldemort smiled, and she felt him squeeze her shoulder; from the corner of her eye, Ophelia saw Bellatrix scowl and look away with a flicker of jealousy crossing her face. Bella despised anyone who was closer to the Dark Lord than she was.

It wasn't Bella's hurt feelings that tormented Ophelia, but Severus' cool stare. She felt nauseous. Would he feel that their friendship had meant nothing? That she had merely tolerated his company when the Dark Lord was otherwise occupied? She could live with Bellatrix's disgust and hatred, but she couldn't thrive without Severus' friendship. He seemed to be staring at her with some element of incredulity marring his features; he was tense and cautious, his busy mind no doubt sorting and analysing the new information. Such an analyst. *Oh, Severus*, she thought, *use your heart and not your head* Her eyes darted back to the clock, and her stomach dropped: only forty minutes left.

"Ophelia once more shows her loyalty to me and me alone." The Dark Lord gazed at her, and she felt that disgusting little flutter of pride. "If only more of my so-called devoted followers loved me as I have made you do."

Her breath caught in her throat, and her eyes widened as his words sliced through her. Thoughts that had skittered around her head united into one amalgamated truth; he had *made* her love him. The wonder that should happen naturally was something he had connived and directed; he had set out to gain her heart, mind and soul. The nausea she felt intensified, and she felt her stomach heave; he had used her.

No wonder he had never sought to sear his Mark onto her flesh; he considered her his in less obvious but more binding ways. His little Opella. She had looked up the name as soon as he had ascribed the endearment to her; it meant 'little labour'. The relevance only striking home now when he blithely confirmed that her love kept her loyal; she had been nothing but a pet project. Disgusted and humiliated, she closed her eyes and let herself be consumed by despair; one love was a lie and the other was lost.

What did it matter now? she thought bitterly. She was wasting away; her life was as good as over. She was dimly aware of the Dark Lord talking to Bellatrix about the rewards of loyalty, but the ticking of the clock held her fascination. From somewhere, she felt a surge of anger; from some deep recess a wrath exploded. How dare *He* speak of love! How dare *He* think to use it in such a gross manner! *He* knew nothing of it while she burned with it; she would show *Him* what love could do.

oooXooo

Doing just as he had been told, he hid between two slabs of stone that had fallen from what would have been an upper level. Some part of him was confused and terrified, but he laughed it off, it was perfectly fine. He let his fingers run through the long, black hair; it was perfectly fine to have such long, thick locks, even though he had been balding for decades. And the body that was so much slimmer and stronger was also, he laughed, perfectly fine. The strange black clothes he wore, so like the cloaks that his old teachers had worn, itched him a bit and seemed rather tight, but again, they were perfectly fine. He had the impression that something awful had happened and was still happening to him, but all he could think about was doing as he was told; he was a good boy, after all.

A soft scuffing sound disturbed his musings, and he stilled, even his breath stopped. Eyes wide, he licked his lips, the moist sound seeming so loud in the sudden silence. But it was perfectly fine; he'd been told as much. The sound of someone trying to make no sound caught his attention, and he imagined them creeping deeper into the collapsed tower, their eyes eagerly peering into the gloom. He tried to slither back, tried to blend into the shadows while the interloper searched. He had his instructions, and he was relieved that they happily coincided with the small desperate voice that kept trying to convince him of his peril...once his hidey-hole was found, he was to run!

The soft crunch of dry leaves and small stones informed him that his haven was very nearly found, and the muscles in his legs bunched in readiness. His breathing accelerated and his eyes felt huge as fear grabbed hold. A flicker of movement from the corner of his eye triggered his flight, and he bolted from his hole towards the open doorway. He heard a muted curse and feet scrabbling as his pursuer was forced to swivel on his heel to keep his prey in sight. The walls glowed red and then something brushed past his shoulder, hitting the wall like a red firework. There was a gleeful, malicious laugh behind him, a flash of red and something striking him between his shoulder blades, then nothing.

oooXooo

Henley dropped the limp body of 'Regulus Black' onto the hearth while the others slowly converged on the traitor. Bella spat on the body, her pale lips drawn back in revulsion; Snape stood a little way off, his expression smooth and indecipherable. Ophelia still stood next to the Dark Lord, his hand on her shoulder, and as he stepped closer, so did she. Her eyes glanced at the clock...twenty minutes. She knew that it wasn't her beloved Regulus, but still, she saw it as one last way to see him, and she said the goodbye that Regulus had deprived her of. The Dark Lord's hand slipped from her shoulder, and he slowly withdrew his wand from the recesses of his long gown.

"I find myself wondering what prompted his flight from my care." His voice was soft and conveyed such confused despair that it seemed he genuinely was astounded about his follower's desertion. "Was I so thoughtless and inattentive to him that he felt in some way dissatisfied?"

Trembling and barely holding herself together, she lifted her gaze from the Muggle's slack features and watched as the Dark Lord aimed his wand. Perhaps his discomfort over the last month was due to the fact that a Death Eater had betrayed him and not that he suspected some plot against his life. Did he worry that his influence was failing rather than fear that a Horcrux was in jeopardy? Maybe it wasn't all lost? Armed with the idea that she could still honour Regulus' idea and ambition, she straightened and slipped her hand into her pocket.

Sweat ran down her back, and her whole body vibrated with tension; as soon as the Dark Lord cast his spell, he would see that the mind belonged to a Muggle. Watching with abject horror, she heard the Dark Lord cast his spell: *Enervate*.

The Muggle moaned and curled up on the rug, promptly emptying his stomach on the expensive carpet. He wasn't sure what was going on anymore. All he knew was that he was terribly afraid and wanted to repent his sins...and he knew he had many.

Voldemort levitated the barely conscious man and held him in mid-air. He seemed quite fascinated by the whimpers and the increasing wet patch emanating from the man's groin. Slowly spinning, the man's defeat and humiliation were displayed to everyone. Bella grinned, Snape looked disgusted, and Ophelia was nearly paralysed by the sight...what could she do? How could she stop this?

"Tell me, Regulus," Voldemort said softly, "why did you desert me?"

The Muggle couldn't answer.

"At my time of greatest need, my most devout and loyal servant fled. What am I to think of that?"

Ophelia slipped her wand from her pocket; she had a plan. If it worked, then she had a slim chance to survive and carry on, and if it failed... well... she was dead anyway. All fear seemed to melt away; it was an astounding response to the knowledge that she really had no choice.

Using the distraction of the revolving Muggle, she aimed her wand at the man and muttered under her breath. Several spells leapt from her wand, but they had no form or colour, they were spells that no one could see, and it was ironic that the Dark Lord had taught her how to disguise her spell-casting. The first spell took effect; the Muggle started thrashing against the magic holding him and snarled viciously at his tormentor. The next spell made it seem as though the struggling man was hurling a hex; a bright sliver of light lanced from the man's hand, aimed straight at the Dark Lord.

It was easily deflected, but the distraction it posed meant that the man fell to the floor. Hastily, Ophelia cast her next set of spells. She focused on the Muggle and directed his moves: he had long stopped thinking and acting on his own behalf. Now was the time!

As the Muggle let out an ear piercing shriek, she moved to stand between the Dark Lord and his prospective attacker. Raising her wand, she cast the spell that would seal her fate.

"Immolatus!"

oooXooo

Tears streamed down Ophelia's paradoxically serene face. Across from her, Minerva held a trembling hand over her mouth, and her eyes were squeezed shut to prevent the tears from pouring down her face. Moody was staring at the tablecloth, his brow deeply furrowed, and his lips drawn together in a grim line. Dumbledore sat with his head bowed under the weight of her recollections, and his heart ached. The war was claiming younger and younger lives, leeching the love and hope from them; there were worse things than death.

"And afterwards?" Moody questioned; his long-honed instincts as an Auror surpassed his sympathy for the young witch.

Her sorrowful gaze locked onto his, and it seemed that the answer poured from her eyes; each tear a missive declaring that it had all been too much for a lonely sixteen-year-old to cope with.

"I couldn't carry on," she said with a mournful sigh. "It was becoming harder and harder to play the games that were needed. There were too many people to be wary of, and too much to do." Her eyelids fluttered closed, and her head lolled to the side; she slumped in the chair, and one sob slipped past her trembling lips.

"So you planned your escape from the Wizarding world?" asked Dumbledore, gently.

A series of whimpers erupted from her, and she nodded as if she was condemning herself.

"I planned for months, but an opportunity never presented itself, and then the train crashed, and it all came together." She opened her eyes and looked at Dumbledore. "I saw my way out and took it," she spoke softly, her voice thick with shame and regret. "I couldn't carry on," she whispered.

They sat silently, each pondering and weighing her words. Forgiveness was a moot topic, they had all done things that they regretted, and all in the name of the greater good; to condemn her would be to admit their own crimes.

"We come now to the thing that prompted us to bring you back, Ophelia," said Dumbledore solemnly. "We know that Voldemort made Horcruxes, and we have set ourselves the task of finding and destroying them." He needed to move forward, to remember why they had done this thing to her and not bog himself down in what may be perceived as her faults and graces. "The diary has been destroyed, but you spoke of a ring and a locket?"

She inhaled slowly and straightened in her chair; her will had gone, shed in her tears. She had nothing left but this.

"His grandfather's ring," she supplied emotionlessly. "Marvolo's ring."

She licked her lips and reached for her tea, sighing as she saw the tea stain in the empty cup. Minerva smiled and poured her another drink. Ophelia glanced up at the woman who had given and taken points, the woman who had been such a strong character in her youth, and smiled in gratitude. She had never felt so secure. Ophelia almost laughed at the absurdity of it; she had been kidnapped and abused, made to relive her best and worst memories and yet, by sipping tea and unburdening herself, she had never felt so free.

"I went to the Gaunt House," she said before pausing to sip her hot tea. "A wizard was there and tried to chase me away. He was quite determined at one point, but he let me in after I spoke with him; he seemed impressed that I could understand him."

"You're a Parselmouth?" asked Dumbledore, his eyebrows lifting in surprise.

"No," she responded quickly. "But it's possible to learn how to understand and speak the language; ~~He~~ taught me, with Nagini's help."

"I don't understand," Minerva asked with a frown. "I was under the impression that one was born a Parselmouth?"

"A true Parselmouth understands the language instinctively," Ophelia said gently. "However, as with any other language, it can be learnt."

"Did you find the ring?" asked Moody with forced patience, intent on keeping the questioning on track.

"No." She shook her head sadly. "Most of their possessions had been sold to pay off debts; we couldn't find the ring amongst what was left. I'm sure that it's there though," she said thoughtfully, her voice tinged with frustration. "It just seems right that it should be."

"And what of the locket?" asked Dumbledore, his voice tight and restrained as he fought an unusual insurgence of impatience.

She swallowed and closed her eyes, her lips trembled and her breath stuck in her throat.

"All I know is that it's in a cavern, in a stone bowl and protected by spells, a potion and Inferi," she said bitterly, her lips curving up into a sneer; it was so much better to be

angry than empty, to be bitter rather than despairing. She opened her eyes and rubbed her forehead with shaking fingers. "And Regulus is beneath the water: one of the ring's hated guardians."

Chapter Twenty eight

Chapter 28 of 36

Ophelia begins to question her place in the Wizarding world. Her doubts lead Dumbledore to seek assistance from someone who had impacted profoundly upon her previous life: Severus Snape.

The sounds of guests and the light had long faded when hunger finally convinced her to leave her room. She padded along the landing and began to descend the staircase into the shadows that had taunted her a few days before. Dumbledore had told her she was no prisoner and had released the wards on her door, but she preferred the quiet of the room, hiding in it.

The stairs creaked beneath her feet; she paused, recalling the bizarre step-and-shuffle dance that had once allowed her to creep silently down the stairs and into the kitchen to snatch one of Kreacher's delicious chocolate treats. She smiled at the fond recollections and the wonder that after so long, her memories should be so precise and so ready to come to the fore.

Dancing down the stairs, she stopped on the bull nose and glanced along the hallway; the door into the parlour was ajar, and the kitchen door stood invitingly open. Her smile widened, and she imagined the long refectory table laden with pots and pans, flour and bowls, eggs and pastry cutters, and Kreacher swirling round, baking and being so remarkably patient with a child trying to be helpful. She could remember the biscuits, how she would sneak one from under his large nose, and his hyperbolic confusion as he counted the remaining fewer biscuits. Her smile slipped, and she frowned; a pang of regret sliced through her chest...why had it gone so wrong?

Stepping off the stairs and walking past the parlour into the kitchen, she was staggered at how stark and empty it was: no herbs hanging as they dried, no saucepans bubbling on the stove, no flowers...her violets gone. She gave a small sob, her first since weeping herself dry, and her first sign of mourning for the life she had found so repellent and yet which had contained some of her happiest memories. How proper that the kitchen should be so barren and empty; how right that as she was restored, so the truth of her life was revealed: those moments of happiness, the icing that had hidden how rotten the cake had been. She gritted her teeth and walked over to the stove, reaching for the kettle and carrying it to the dirty sink.

As the taps gurgled and clunked, she looked out of the window into the small garden at the back of the house. The shrubs were overgrown, the paving stones cracked and resting at odd angles; the brick wall was smothered with ivy, and the bird table was lying on its side, the basin split and broken. Weeds had control of the enclosed garden, and it looked just about as neglected as any garden could be. *This was how it had always been*, she reminded herself, *cracked and broken beneath a smile*.

She searched the worktop for a box of matches and then laughed at her own foolishness; she turned on the gas and waved her hand, letting out a delighted squeal as the gas ignited. With the water boiling, she prepared a teapot and selected a cup and saucer. After a quick search of the kitchen, she found some bread and soft cheese, which still seemed edible. Where was Kreacher with his delicious dishes and tasty treats? She sliced through the loaf and spread the creamy cheese over it, licking her fingers, as her haste made her clumsy. Behind her, the black kettle began to whistle shrilly, and she took a hasty bite before tending to the demanding kettle. She slowly stirred the tea and thought about life and its circles; she had been dragged into her life as a witch years ago and nurtured here... and now, she was back.

The creaking stairs made her spine stiffen, and she gulped down her mouthful of bread and cheese. Her eyes were drawn to the kitchen door, and her palms felt clammy. Fear clustered in her gut, and she tried to remember that she had faced the Dark Lord...even fought a Dementor...but they seemed mere trifles when compared to meeting her family. Her ears strained, and she could hear the soft swish of feet against carpet and then, the door opened... so terribly slowly.

He paused when he saw her sitting at the table, her eyes wide and cautious. His hand gripped the door handle as if he feared letting go and losing himself in her gaze and the tumultuous wave of emotions that she portended. He closed his eyes and summoned an image of her; she was all glee and giggles as they played in the garden, tugging on a rag under the glorious summer sky. How he wished and hoped that this one thing was untainted and unchanged. He inhaled deeply, opened his eyes and closed the door behind him.

"Sirius," she said breathlessly, her eyes fixed upon his wary features.

She took in his haggard appearance: each deep wrinkle and the pallor of his skin: a testament to some terrible tragedy. She swallowed and stood slowly, her legs weaker than they had ever been, and somehow, her feet carried her towards him. His eyes widened and some pained concern flittered across his drawn features.

The anger, still young and fresh despite it being inflicted over half a lifetime ago, squirmed inside...Sirius had abandoned Regulus! Sirius had gloried while Regulus had suffered. He was the man who had made empty promises about being able to protect them; he was the one who had forced Regulus down the road to his terrible death. She had hated Sirius; she had despised him and done all that the Dark Lord had asked of her: her twisted revenge for his abandonment of Regulus. Yet, she had loved Sirius; as bizarre as it sounded, she had loved being with him. It was only after Regulus had taken the Mark and the severity of the situation hit home that her feelings started to shift. And in the aftermath of his death, her anger had condensed into something hard and dangerous.

He had no words, no way to translate his feelings as she stood trembling by the kitchen table. How to capture the raging and spiralling thoughts crashing through his skull and order them into something comprehensible? It was impossible! His world had crashed down, and even as he built new foundations to a better understanding, another quake would render them down to rubble...he doubted he could face building again; he was so tired. As he studied her pale and alert face, he felt he deserved her wrath and disappointment, yet he felt he had a right to rant and scream at her, but it all seemed so redundant: such a waste of energy to scratch at old wounds and make new ones. He was just too damned tired.

"Ophelia," he responded hoarsely.

His voice had changed. It no longer carried the bravado and confidence of the young man she remembered. It was the rasp of a broken man... of a man hoping he could repair himself. The anger squirmed again, but as she watched his shoulders tremble and his chest heave, she let it slip away. She was exhausted, and he was the closest to home and family she had.

"I am so sorry," he whispered, his voice clogged with heavy emotions. "I was a fool!"

He caught her sob before she lunged to hold him, her arms gripping him. Sirius squeezed his eyes shut and bit his lip. "I should never have left him!" he said, pain wrapped around each syllable. Her arms held him tighter, and he thought he heard her soothe him with the same nonsensical sounds that had once tumbled from his own lips. "I could have saved him! I could have..."

He collapsed, sobbing and howling; the consuming grief that had battered at him returned with a vengeance, as if determined to make him suffer more in retribution for the

years he had ignored it. She held him, her own keening equal to his as she succumbed to the pain and loss that her recent revelations had temporarily numbed.

"Oh Merlin!" he moaned. "What have I done?"

"Oh, Sirius," she sobbed, pulling away so that she could cradle his face in her hands. "You couldn't have known what would happen; none of us could." Her voice hitched as she spoke, and her eyes shimmered with unshed tears. "You had no idea; we never said anything... we're all to blame."

It was true; all those preconceptions and prejudices, all those bad decisions and unheeded truths, all of it had conspired and colluded to create the terrific mess they now had to survive in.

"I will make this right again," Sirius said firmly, determination giving his voice a steely edge. "I will be the man I should have been."

How long they cleaved to each other, venting their despair and reaffirming their affection, they had no idea, but it was interrupted by the sound of chimes. Sirius pulled away, wiping his face on his sleeve.

"Some of the Order are on their way back," he said stuffily, the result of his weeping. "I think you should go and rest in your room."

He kissed her on her forehead, and she flashed him a smile before stepping out of his embrace. After all the years apart and the worry caused by the reunion, he was reluctant to let her go. He watched her until she disappeared up the stairs, and he hoped beyond reason that she was the girl he remembered. He doubted he could live with any more disappointment.

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"You look tired," Sirius said bluntly.

It was early in the morning; the sky had yet to acknowledge the sun, but judging by the rain hammering against the house, it was far too preoccupied to notice its companion. She yawned and sat down heavily. There was a strong smell of coffee in the air, and she caught sight of Sirius filling a second mug. After almost two weeks, it had become a ritual for them both to meet in the gloomy kitchen, both looking tired after struggling to sleep.

Ophelia glanced up and smiled wearily at Sirius. "I didn't sleep well," she explained. "The dreams are getting worse." She gathered up the mug, letting it warm her hands, and smiled. "Thanks. It's odd, but I rarely drank coffee while..." she faltered and looked panicked "... while being Veronica. I mean, when I was Veronica." She swallowed, as though nauseous. "I drank it when I was..." Looking uncomfortable, she stopped and winced. "Never mind."

It was so confusing. Numerous notions warred within her head, each suggesting different things: she didn't like coffee; she never drank it at Aunt Elladora's; she should be having tea. She saved coffee for when she was with Severus; it was her treat. Such thoughts had intensified in recent days, and the clashing ideas were enough to make her head throb. The cacophony and the lack of order was something she dreaded; her plaintive pleas for clarification of her thoughts, memories and feelings went unheeded. There was no voice helping her sift and sort her thoughts... Veronica was silent. And it was more than disturbing.

Her unease and sense of being trapped were also acute this morning. She longed to leave and meet others she remembered: Narcissa...how she missed her cousin!...and Severus. The coffee was somehow enhancing her longing. It was stirring up memories she didn't want to study, not with Sirius standing over her. But her mind and emotions were fickle and frantic, and she was left with the disorientating sensation that she should be in the lab with Severus.

All that from a cup of coffee, she mused wryly. Perhaps the rather sterile house had lost meaning for her? Certainly there was little she recognised here. Was she clinging to things that meant more to her or had a greater impact? She glanced across at Sirius, surprised at the rising frustration and resentment she felt. Had Severus found her, she would have been with him, safely cocooned in his lap and aura...but she'd also be back within 'Uncle Tom's' grasp. She shuddered and felt sick to her stomach. She was safe here, but in being safe, she had lost two of the most important people to her: Severus and Narcissa.

"Maybe some Dreamless Sleep would help?"

Sirius's words sliced through her, and she felt the weight of the house pressing against her. "They're not bad dreams... they're just powerful." She clucked her tongue impatiently and frowned, pinching the bridge of her nose. "I can't explain them."

Sirius felt a sympathetic unease. There was so much he didn't know about the woman sitting in front of him, and he found he couldn't treat her as if the Ophelia he had known had merely been put on hold. To cover his discomfort he sipped his own coffee. He grimaced at the bitter taste and then smiled: he had become far too used to Butterbeer with Harry and his friends in the house.

For her part, Ophelia sipped and obsessed over her coffee. The rich aroma and taste stirred up equally rich memories. How often had she ventured down into the basement and caught the scent of freshly ground coffee? How many cups had they shared as they brewed potions and in the rare moments of relaxation? On her fourth sip, a wrench of longing almost made her gasp. She felt such a yearning to be with Severus. She missed him with an intensity that brought tears to her eyes. But he was a Death Eater. Closing her eyes, she tried to purge the need to be with him. He was a Death Eater.

"Are you alright?"

Her eyes snapped open, and she saw Sirius looking tenderly at her. It was an impossible situation, and she wondered what point there was in being bitter about her current existence. What was the point of torturing herself with potent reminders?

"Could I have tea, instead?"

He laughed and shrugged, and she saw some of the old Sirius in him. She couldn't help but laugh with him.

"Of course," he replied gently. "Moony says I make awful coffee; I guess you just cast the deciding vote."

They had spent a few hours a day, going over their histories, both sensing that the other held back a portion of their experiences. She had been introduced to some of the others: Arthur and Molly Weasley, a couple she immediately liked, and Remus Lupin, whom she knew from Hogwarts. The days had been hectic despite her long stays in the room; if she wasn't physically active, then her mind was whirling as it dealt with all the memories and information she was absorbing. So much was happening so quickly.

It was easier and safer to withdraw to her room. Sirius had brought in some furniture, and Remus had helped Transfigure parts of the room until it resembled something decent. It was a mismatch of styles and colours, but it was clean and comfortable.

The chimes, heralding visitors, had become her cue to leave, and although Sirius tried to make her stay and 'get to know' the others, she had left him... she didn't want to get to know people! It was becoming bad enough 'meeting' her ghosts and trying to make sense of her past: it didn't come in smooth snippets, but in a mass of discontinuous images and perplexing emotional responses.

Dumbledore and Moody came with their questions, and she told them as much as she could. It was easier when they were with her. Their questions and Legilimency seemed to keep things in order. Her mind still wanted to skitter over her experiences with the Dark Lord, but they were persistent interrogators. She was invariably exhausted after such sessions, and her head would feel as though it were fit to burst. With the strains of exposing and integrating memories, she found her temper shortening and her bitterness growing.

Something else was beginning to emerge, something worrying, but she couldn't quite isolate and identify it. Whatever it was, she could feel it growing and stretching out. It didn't help being cooped up, and after a month of it, she felt ready to scream.

"Molly!" Ophelia snapped out. "I do not need or want dinner."

"But, dear, you've had nothing to eat all day."

Arthur glanced up from the *Daily Prophet* and studied the two women squaring off over the Cottage Pie. Molly was prepared for battle: apron, serving spoon and plate, along with the patience gleaned from raising a family of seven. Ophelia was standing by the sink, shielding herself with the coffee cup she had nursed all afternoon and showing the annoying petulance of most people when faced with determined mothering.

"You have to keep up your strength, dear," Molly continued sweetly. "Dumbledore says that you've had a tough time of it, and nothing helps recovery better than rest and good food."

"I have plenty of rest, thanks to Dumbledore," she hissed out snidely, ignoring the surprise and pain flashing across Molly's face. "And I will have good food when I'm ready to have it."

"I'm sure you know best," soothed Molly, after a tense pause. "I'll leave a piece in the fridge for you, all the same."

As if I can't decide what I want and need? Ophelia thought angrily. *How dare she presume to know better than me!* Her teeth cracked in her jaw, and she could feel her hands tightening around the mug. Other arguments bombarded her mind. *It's not Thursday today, so I'm not having the Cottage Pie. Cottage Pie is on Thursdays; this is just another trick to make me do strange things. She's setting me up. And I'm not falling for it. I'm not going back into isolation over some sodding Cottage Pie.*

"Fine," she countered shrilly. "I'll eat it on Thursday...when we *should* be having it."

Molly looked puzzled, and Arthur, frowning, let his paper fall onto the tabletop. He'd heard some strange things while in St Mungo's...disjointed ramblings and odd sentiments...and he'd seen the same expression marring Ophelia's face on some of the patients. Truth be told, the war was taking its toll and many of the people trudging through this house were teetering on the edge of madness. He knew it was only a matter of time before someone snapped.

"We can wait until Thursday," he interjected calmly, smiling at Ophelia before giving his wife a pointed look. At first, he thought she'd argue, but Molly must have understood his silent advice.

"I suppose it'll keep," she conceded, despite her small scowl.

See! They think they can get me into trouble. But I know what they're up to, she thought smugly, watching them as they gave each other a brief but tender hug. *And if they think working together will break me quicker, then they can think again. I've been here before; I beat them then... I can do it again!*

She waited, expecting some rejoinder from within, but nothing filled the vast silence. There was no gentle voice soothing her ruffled feathers and congratulating her for seeing through Molly and Arthur's plot to unnerve and punish her. The silence doused her resentment and anger. It left her cold and scared. She didn't want to be this alone. Without Veronica, how would she know she was right and good... and normal? It was unbearably cruel; they had just found each other after years of separation. She couldn't cope just being Ophelia.

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"The Dark Lord himself couldn't persuade me to continue teaching Potter Occlumency!"

Dumbledore sat and watched his Potions master pace the office. It had been just over a month since Harry had inadvertently invaded Snape's Pensieve and privacy, but the wound and hurt were still just as keen. He knew the situation was beyond repair, but he had felt obliged to ask once more.

"No matter," Dumbledore soothed. "Sit down, Severus, and have some tea."

Snape stopped and turned to glare at him. "No matter?" he hissed out. "Do you think I have time to waste on trivial matters?"

Dumbledore frowned and peered over his glasses at the simmering wizard. Minerva had commented a few days ago about Severus' shorter than normal temper, and it was becoming clear the pressures on Severus were beginning to have an impact. As far as Dumbledore knew, Snape had no particular support from the Order or from within Voldemort's ranks, and the sense of isolation, combined with the immense workload, could easily overwhelm the wizard. Snape was a man of his word, and his loyalty and sense of duty were beyond reproach, and he would work until he either dropped or broke. Dumbledore could not tolerate the thought of either outcome.

"Forgive me, Severus," he implored. "I did not mean to trivialise your efforts." Severus snorted, but was mollified enough to sit down. "And I am painfully aware that in the last few months, I have burdened you more and more."

"Don't be melodramatic," Snape muttered. "I was well aware of the nature and requirements of my task when I accepted it."

"Please, Severus," he persisted, almost pleadingly, "let someone in; let someone share your pain..."

"Don't!" Snape spat out, his lip curling up in resentment, and his eyes flashing. "I will do this my way."

Dumbledore longed to argue, but he knew Severus would back away until there was nothing left of him exposed, and Dumbledore would lose him: not as a spy, but as a colleague.

"Very well," he said finally, if unhappily.

For a few moments, they sipped tea and waited for the air to clear. Fawkes chirruped as he dozed, and from the walls, industrious snoring reverberated around the Headmaster's office.

"I have decided not to let Ophelia return to Tom's ranks," Dumbledore said, breaking the silence.

Snape swallowed his tea and nodded slowly. "She would be transparent to him," he said flatly. "She'd be dead before he left her mind."

"The information she has provided us with has been most valuable, and no one knows Voldemort as well as she does. Her memories are priceless."

"No one was closer to *Him*," Snape added tonelessly.

"Alastor and I have been questioning her regularly since she regained consciousness, and we are concerned she is not adjusting to her current state," Dumbledore continued carefully. "Arthur and Sirius have also raised concerns about her mental and emotional state based on their observations."

Snape looked up and watched the old man's features darken, and he felt his stomach clench. "It's hardly surprising that she'd be a little unhinged and depressed after learning what she had been and done." Dumbledore still looked severe, as though he was contemplating something highly unpleasant. Snape sighed impatiently. "If the potion was going to destroy her mind, it would have done so within hours, not weeks. Whatever is bothering her is due to her current state... not the potion."

"No," he agreed, pursing his lips.

"Trust me," Snape added firmly, "if the potion was flawed or had failed in any way, she'd be fit for nothing."

"I'm sure the potion was impeccably brewed," he assured with a smirk. "I have come across some... tension, of sorts, within her memories and when she assimilates those memories. It's almost as if she has several distinct responses to the same event."

It was difficult to define what he had seen in her head: the confusion and almost frantic analysis of the memories swarming up in her mind. He fancied it was similar to drowning. Using his skill, he was alarmed to see she was struggling to address the emotional ramifications of her life as Tom's pet project. She was constantly questioning her own responses and decisions. He wondered if she was trying to judge her past with a completely new set of observation criteria. What she had once seen as reasonable, was now unacceptable, and her new sense of morality derived from her existence as Veronica was appalled. Was she spiralling down into a dark depression, pummeled by her skewed conscience?

"She did resist the potion," Snape continued grimly, shuddering at the recollection of her tongue between his fingers and the blood seeping out across the linen. "It could be some psychological problem as a result of her life after the memory loss. You said that she had been held in an institute."

Dumbledore nodded solemnly. "Combined with the constant Legilimency during her childhood, I believe her mind is in some way less disciplined...no! That's not quite right," he amended quickly and with some frustration. "Her mind is remarkably susceptible to ideas and quick to study them; I believe she has no frame of reference to add meaning and value to what she's remembering." He shook his head and used his forefinger and thumb to smooth his moustache. "It must be like coming into a lesson halfway through and only understanding what the spell can do with no idea about when and how to use it."

"There is no potion I know of to help her with that," Snape said dispassionately. "Madam Pomfrey would be the better candidate, but even then, I doubt she would be familiar with this particular pathology."

"I cannot draw Poppy into this; this is something we must help her with. Ophelia is too valuable an asset to lose." He studied the man opposite carefully, knowing Snape had taken great pains to avoid Grimmauld Place since Ophelia's recovery. However, some things were important enough to transcend personal comfort and peace. "Sirius has been trying to get her to discuss her experiences, but I fear he cannot do this alone."

Snape stiffened and glowered. He had maintained his distance for a reason, and now the old coot was basically assigning him to hold her hand! He had enough stresses and woes without adding to them by reacquainting himself with someone he had grieved for so deeply. Her death had hit him as hard as Lily's. Another thought...one of those nasty notions that like to add to the pain and suffering...emerged from the dismay and dread of Dumbledore's request: without Regulus... he could have what he had forced himself to ignore back then.

"I wouldn't have asked you," Dumbledore continued, "but I believe you are the only one who can reach her."

Snape closed his eyes as the thought gained momentum. He had thought about her for years, fighting the jealousy over Regulus, and he had relegated his affection to the deepest crevice of his mind. But after he had healed her, he once again let those thoughts and impulses run rampant. The part of him that truly craved what Dumbledore had pleaded him to accept reared its head and bared its teeth. He could have it! Without Lily and Regulus, he could easily claim what many a man took for granted: companionship, human contact... affection. The thought of it made him ache from his loneliness. Ophelia had been so close to him...almost as close as Lily...and she had made him feel human when the world was turning him into a monster.

Dumbledore watched the merest echo of Snape's feelings flitter across his pale features. He knew Snape had twisted the truth when he had divulged what he knew about Ophelia to Sirius. His spy had been far too agitated to be merely surprised at Ophelia's existence or distraught about what she had done to Regulus' body: legilimency had confirmed his suspicions. Exactly why Snape had lied or what about, Dumbledore wasn't sure, but he had seen something in the back of Snape's mind... something that the wizard had buried deep within his psyche...perhaps so deeply, he no longer realised he lied. It would be interesting to find out the truth of the matter. But first and foremost, he needed Ophelia fit and healthy.

"We can't trust Black to be the only guardian of her mind, can we?" Snape said finally, his voice smooth as he ignored his unsettled stomach and Dumbledore's smirk.

"Excellent, Severus," he replied happily, relieved that he had secured Severus' aid. "Now that's sorted; what did you find out about Harry's vision?"

Severus harrumphed and moved to place his empty teacup on the desk. "The vision was accurate. Rookwood has indeed been punished by the Dark Lord."

"Rookwood works at the Ministry," at Severus' nod, he continued, "so I will ask Smith to keep an eye on him. It may be significant that Rookwood works in the Department of Mysteries."

"If the Dark Lord *is* after the prophecy."

"Is he aware of Harry at all?" Dumbledore asked cautiously, ignoring Snape's comment.

"I can't discern any discomfort in the Dark Lord, but I can't guarantee *He* isn't aware of Potter's intrusions."

Dumbledore nodded solemnly. "It is imperative that if Tom is oblivious, he should remain so. We can't afford to lose this advantage."

Snape's eyebrow arched. "You still see it as an advantage?"

"Tom seems oblivious of the sharing, so for now, it is an advantage."

"Shall I point out the many downsides to having the Dark Lord crawling around inside your head?" he asked waspishly, incredulous at the Headmaster's blinkered desire to manipulate this particular situation.

Dumbledore started and flashed him a withering look. "When this war is over, then you can consider such things as noble tactics. For now, it is useful."

"Yet you profess to care about Potter?"

The air suddenly felt charged, and Snape's teeth tingled. A wind seemed to have decided to use the office as a shortcut. Snape's hair whipped about his face, and he held onto the chair arms, while Fawkes clucked in alarm. The picture frames thudded against the walls, and loose papers darted about the room; the fire sputtered in the grate, and Snape felt chilled to the bone. As quickly as it started, it ended.

"I cannot afford to care about *anyone*," Dumbledore whispered, his voice tinged with the dregs of his sudden rage. *Not even you*, he thought sadly as the anger dissipated to be replaced with despair. *I cannot risk it.*

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Patience was well established in old Aurors, but after two weeks of watching Rookwood, Smith was getting decidedly edgy. The man...supposed Death Eater...led one of the most predictable and least thrilling existences Smith had ever scrutinised. If Rookwood did sneak off to meet up with Voldemort, then he did it with a skill that confounded Smith, which was unlikely. At work, Rookwood was arrogant and bitter, but clean. Smith couldn't even accuse him of littering. After the initial thrill...the appetiser...of helping Moody, he felt he had been let down on the main course, left with something incapable of satisfying his hunger.

Smith tutted and continued mopping the floor. In the distance, he could hear muted conversations from the canteen and the occasional bout of laughter as Aurors unwound over their dinner. The tension and anxiety within the Ministry was almost palpable; if they hadn't officially accepted Voldemort's return, then at least some of them felt it. Amelia had doubled patrols and created new roles in recent weeks: new jobs to watch for any unusual activity. Fudge had been resistant, but Amelia had a way of making people see sense... usually, very loudly.

For his part, Smith was still focused on Rookwood, and the last place to check thoroughly was his office... And that was the tricky bit. Rookwood worked in the bowels of the Ministry, close to the Department of Mysteries, and getting down there would be... challenging. It was time to test his 'invisibility cloak'... the indifference of the young Aurors.

It was with a large amount of bitterness and some relief that he managed to gain access to the lower levels of the Ministry. Pushing the cleaning trolley no doubt helped. Only one burly Auror had the idea to challenge Smith's presence. Luckily, the Auror was not the keenest of individuals, so Smith had little trouble explaining his presence away. It was unnerving to think that so many treasures and secrets were protected by the indifferent and gullible.

Rookwood had warded his door as per Ministry dictates. Smith smiled. It couldn't be easier. That's not to say the wards were easily broken, just that Smith had spent a long time within these halls, bored and needing something to occupy his mind. Glancing along the corridor, he removed his wand and waved it over the dark wood, muttering under his breath. He felt alive; he felt powerful. It was glorious. Hiding his trolley under a Disillusionment Charm and casting a Detection spell to alert him of someone's approach, Smith let himself in.

The office was remarkably tidy. Rookwood was neat to a fault. His professional eye moved over the small room, taking in the details, both gross and fine. Soot on the floor...scuffed, indicating that he had recently come in via the Floo. There was a pile of papers on the desk, with one leaf sticking out slightly, the corner peeking out from its ordered companions. A barely visible mark on the desk indicated that something had rested there for a time... the varnish dulled by its touch. Numerous sticky circles showed Rookwood's habit of drinking in his office. But the circumference was wrong for the small cups offered in the canteen: the rings were from Rookwood's own mug. Smith passed his wand over the sticky residue: it was coffee and...Smith grinned...alcohol. He knew Rookwood was too good to be true. But drinking on the job wasn't the worst of sins, so Smith kept looking.

Satisfied he had gleaned enough from his visual inspection, Smith started searching the drawers, cupboards and all other nooks and crannies. After twenty minutes, he had found Rookwood's bottle of Firewhiskey, two adult magazines, and evidence that a number of things had been removed from the office quite recently. The approved cleaners for this area worked weekly to clean the offices. Checking their rota earlier, this room had been last cleaned six days ago and was due a sprucing tomorrow: the items had been removed some time this week.

Whatever Rookwood had removed, they had been in place for quite some time: the wall was not as faded under the picture that had once hung there; the mark on the desk of something heavy resting upon it; the dust-free sliver from a small picture on the desk; the odd groove in the base of the bottom drawer; and the fresh scratches on the inside of his cupboard. With nothing incriminating in the room, he ensured that all evidence of his presence was eliminated and left, re-warding the door behind him.

From the shadows, hidden from view, Rookwood watched Smith remove the Disillusionment charm from a trolley and push it away. Licking his lips, he waited until the charms cast by Smith faded before moving. He bypassed his office and followed the elderly wizard. Rookwood had been foolish once before, and the Dark Lord had punished him for it; he was not prepared to allow it to happen again. In fact, he was eager to make amends, and giving the Dark Lord an Order member would be perfect.

Moody had been late meeting up with Smith, and as the time dragged, so Smith's fervour and enthusiasm diminished. By the time Moody sat down at the kitchen table, he was feeling dejected and useless.

"Ye think 'e's usin' the Floo to get to Voldemort?"

Smith nodded and rubbed his hands together, as though to warm them. "Best I can guess," he confirmed dispassionately.

"I can get a trace put on 'is Floo," Moody said grimly. "It may give us somethin', but I doubt Voldemort would be stupid enough to 'ave 'is Death Eaters come straight to 'im." He sucked on his front teeth and pulled out his hipflask. "Most likely leads to an Apparition point."

Smith inhaled slowly. "I thought I could be more 'elpful," he muttered sadly. "Rookwood 'as nowt; ye can't accuse 'im of bein' a bad employee. Ye couldn't even get 'im sacked," he finished bitterly.

"Now don't be thinkin' like that," Moody said sharply. "When did ye become so impatient?" He took a quick sip, waiting for the warming sting to pass through his gullet and into his chest. "Ye know these things take time; ye keep on watchin' and soon enough, yer'll find yer nugget."

"I know," he replied tetchily. "I got 'ungry, okay."

"Well, I know that feelin'," Moody replied just as softly. "But ye can't rush." He suddenly chortled and reached out to pat the back of Smith's hand. "Odd, ain't it?" he asked with a grin. "Us old farts, gettin' all impatient and rushin' round like cadets."

Something flared within at Moody's words. It was sudden and short-lived, but it heated his insides, leaving an echo of it, throbbing in his guts. It was a complicated mix of anger, petulance, spite, despair and intense dissatisfaction. He didn't want to be old; he didn't want to be worse than a cadet. He didn't want to be useless and redundant.

"I 'ear that Ophelia is up and about," he said simply, wishing to change the subject.

Moody's grin slipped. "That's right," he replied softly. "She's quite useful."

"Ye make it sound as though she wasn't worth the 'assle?"

"Oh, she was worth it," he amended with a wry laugh. He sobered and took another deep swig of his Firewhisky, and he looked dis comforted, as though some unfavourable thought was mocking him. "I'm just not sure what we're goin' to do with 'er when she's no longer any use," he spat out.

"She'll find 'er way in the world, won't she?" Smith asked, feeling pragmatic, until Moody let out a harsh bark of a laugh.

"The way Dumbledore 'as been goin' on, ye'd think that she'll finish 'er NEWTs and get a job: settle right back into it all, nice and neat!"

"People got messed up durin' the last conflict," Smith offered cautiously, "and they managed to get some o' their old lives back."

"Not quite the same," Moody scolded gently. "She's 'ad no one and nothin' keepin' her magic on track; she's learnt an entirely new way..." he floundered, waving his hand, as though trying to attract the attention of the appropriate words. "I doubt she'd be able to use a wand."

"She can do magic, though."

"Oh, she can an' all!" Moody readily and grimly agreed, remembering his time on the cliff top. "But it's all...oh! I can't explain it!" he snapped out sulkily.

"Bit like," continued Smith, believing he had an inkling of what his friend meant, "those that can cast a Patronus and them that can't? No amount o' trainin' can help 'em, despite 'em 'avin' a wand."

"I guess," he said, not quite convinced that it was the best analogy. "I think it 'as more to do with the fact that it were Veronica who cast those spells on the 'ill... and Veronica ain't 'ere anymore."

"But Ophelia can remem...oh!" Smith's mouth snapped shut, and he closed his eyes. "The older ye get, the 'arder it is to learn to 'andle a wand."

"Ophelia may think she's sixteen, but 'er body and magic knows she's damn near forty. We may be too late to 'elp 'er," Moody said sadly. "We already know that the later they enter school, the less they can achieve."

"Dumbledore knows this, though?"

"E knows," Moody said bitterly. "And I think 'e's usin' it to keep 'er... compliant, tellin' 'er she can carry on from where she left off when it's all over."

Smith frowned and hastily swallowed his mouthful of tea. "But that's just good sense," he said. "Ye know that sources o' information dry up if there's no gain to 'em for providin'."

"I know that. I just don't like the idea o' pie-crust promises, and I think that what'll fly out o' this particular pie will be nastier than blackbirds."

oooXooo

Her mood hadn't improved as the night drew in, and when she turned over for what felt like the hundredth time, she flung back the covers, tutted and leapt out of bed. It was insufferable. She felt trapped...isolated...from everything. She craved some of the things she was remembering. In those terrible times, she had found moments of true happiness...and the sources of that happiness were beyond this house! It was ironic that after years of being stifled in half a life, she had been freed only to find herself more trapped now. It brought a wry smile to her face. Severus would have found the entire thing hilarious!

Knowing sleep would be impossible, she opened the door and padded down the stairs. She knew the house was relatively empty: the raucous Order members had left earlier. Dumbledore had told her she was here as the Order's ward, so the others would be aware of her and not be alarmed if they stumbled upon her. Wrapped up in another lie, hiding behind another false name; sometimes, she didn't know who she was any more.

All day, she had found herself slipping from one way of thinking to another and constantly checking her responses to ensure they were either appropriate or warranted, even asking herself if she should say anything at all. It had been awful. Her sense of dislocation and solitude had increased; she knew she could never belong with them. And that made her wonder just where she did belong. She felt cold and utterly alone. The voice, Veronica's voice, had always been there, but since she had woken, the voice was quiet. Her lip curled up in disgust; what had she lost in order gain all this?

The kitchen was cold, so she stayed by the hob, snatching warmth from the stove as the kettle boiled. In the glass, she could see her reflection, ghostly within the dark glass. That was what she was: a ghost. Even if she had everything, she couldn't be a part of this world anymore than a ghost could. She scowled. Even her face was unfamiliar; it had not been seen by her for nearly twenty years. The eyes seemed so... alien. Even with Polyjuice, she had known who she was behind the face.

Tentatively, she reached up and traced a finger down the side of her face. It was her; she could feel the fingernail scratching the skin.

"Who are you?"

"I am Kreacher."

The voice startled her, and she whipped around to see an ancient house-elf in a tatty tea towel. He was barely recognisable, with a vicious snarl on his wrinkled face, but when she squinted, she could see the kindly house-elf from her childhood.

"Missy is standing there gawping; is there anything Missy wants? Or can I get to my bed?"

A laugh erupted from her chest, more from surprise than humour.

"Where have you been, Kreacher?"

The elf's face screwed up in intense dislike. "Around the house, Missy. Just as I'm supposed to be."

"Indeed," she said softly, her heart hammering at the hate-filled expression on the elf's face.

Ophelia swallowed nervously. "Don't you recognise me, Kreacher?"

The elf sighed but studied her. For the merest fraction of a second, she thought he'd recognised her, but he snorted and folded his thin arms across his chest. "No, Missy."

You're... you're sure?"

"Of course, missy. You're just one of the Master's friends."

Kreacher spat out 'friends' as if it was synonymous with scum, and the sound of it snatched Ophelia's breath. Winded, she held her abdomen and gasped. It was impossible! Kreacher had helped her tidy up when her magic had faltered and damaged something in the house; he had soothed her when she had cried. Kreacher had held her and read her stories.

"What have you done, Kreacher?" snapped a vicious voice.

Through tear-filled eyes, she saw Sirius storming into the kitchen, his face like thunder.

"Nothing, master."

"Get out of my sight, you filthy creature!"

With that, the elf darted past Ophelia and into the cupboard under the sink; she heard him muttering vile curses before the doors clicked closed.

"He... he..."

"He's foul. Don't let him bother you," Sirius said firmly.

No, she thought desperately, her grip on what she thought she knew becoming scarily weak. Kreacher had been there, near the end; he had held her and shared her pain! How could he not recognise and know her?

"He didn't recognise me," she whimpered.

Sirius licked his lips and looked anxious. "Kreacher's memory is not what it was," he soothed. "I'd attach no importance to his inability to recognise you."

Her breath caught in her throat, and she shook her head. Did it mean that he couldn't remember what had happened? It was impossible to accept that Kreacher couldn't remember. It was terrifying and overwhelming to be the only one who knew what had happened. Kreacher had shared in her times of greatest pain. He had suffered her blows when rage had made her strike him, and he had held her afterwards, comforting her. Kreacher had suffered for his master, for master Regulus.

Regulus!

"Ophelia," Sirius called out as she turned and yanked open the dirty doors.

"Regulus!" she snapped out into the gloom.

Two shimmering dots appeared in the shadowed recess, growing as the elf slithered forward over his bed of rags.

"You remember Regulus?" she asked, her voice cracking with the strength of her need to know.

"Regulus was a good master," Kreacher said, pride bursting from every word. "He knew what it was to be a Black. Not like some."

Eyes wide, heart hammering, blood screaming in her ears, she eased closer to the sneering elf. "And what happened to him?"

A flash of pain skittered across the elf's face, quickly snuffed out by sorrow; he sighed wearily and shrugged his thin and bent shoulders. "He disappeared. Some say that he ran away, but no one knows where he went. All we know is he's dead."

Kreacher's words rang in her ears and echoed in her skull. Sirius joined her, slamming the doors on the elf's face and gently pulling Ophelia to her feet. She allowed herself to be led into the parlour and sank unquestioningly into a leather chair.

While Sirius lit the fire, she curled up and hugged her shins. Outwardly, she seemed quiet and still, but inside, she was frantically scrabbling for purchase while her mind and memories crumbled. Doubt hammered at her. It hewed out huge chunks of what she thought she knew, leaving vast crevices in her mind. It carved out new thoughts, while destroying old ones. Were her memories accurate? Were they right? It was just as it had been in the beginning. In the hospital, she hadn't known what was real and what was dream. The voice, the blessed voice had helped her. It had whispered to her that her fancies and daydreams were real. Now... now there was just doubt and silence. Ophelia began to tremble. Were her memories even real? Was she really in the hospital and all this a delusion?

"Here," Sirius said softly, slipping a cool glass into her cold and shaking hand. "Drink this; it'll help you feel better."

When she leant back and just cradled the glass to her chest, Sirius sighed and sat on the sofa, watching her carefully. Personally, he couldn't see why she'd be so cut-up about the wretched elf not recognising her, but the encounter had obviously distressed her. Running his fingers across his scalp, he wished that he wasn't the only one helping her. He couldn't begin to understand what she was going through, and he had no idea how to help her through it.

"He... he didn't know who I was."

Sirius swallowed and looked into her wide moist eyes. "Kreacher has had some hefty spells cast on him; there is so much he simply can't remember. Please," he croaked, "don't let it worry you."

He watched on as she placed her tumbler on the floor and hugged herself as though her guts ached. If she had cried or screamed, he thought he could have coped, but her quiet withdrawal was terrifying and complicated. He had no idea what to do. A dark thought emerged. It was something that he'd fought to ignore, but her pain was beyond his skill...in truth he had too much of his own, and it had made him selfish. Knowing he was ineffectual in this was another nail in his coffin, but the thought that the one he hated most was the one to save her was the deepest knife in his back. He knew...and loathed it!...that Snape was the one to help her through this.

Knocking back his whiskey and grimacing, he resolved himself to losing the last of the lights in his pathetic existence. Taking her by the hand, he led her back to her room and helped her to slip under the covers. Her eyes were unfocused and seemed lifeless, and fear stabbed his guts. He would lose her either way. She would go willingly into Snape's arms, he was sure, or she would slip further into the mental malaise that the others had seen hovering on the horizon. Far better to accept the loss and pain now, so when the time came, he could focus on the last of his duties: to be all that he should have been.

Author's Notes: Many apologies for the slow update, and thank you for staying with this story. I hope you enjoyed reading.

Chapter Twenty nine

Chapter 29 of 36

Ophelia and Severus are finally reunited, but she is the only one who finds peace from the meeting.

Opening the kitchen door, the smell of coffee hit her nose, and her stomach rolled. From the corner of her eye, she could make out two forms, but she didn't dare look across. *It was the same brand!* She'd know that aroma anywhere. *He still drinks the same coffee?* Her mouth went dry while a sudden sweat cooled her skin. The air felt heavy and expectant, and it entered her lungs sluggishly. Limbs weighted with some unknown feeling, she fought the urge to turn and slip away and relinquished her grip on the handle.

"Ah, Ophelia," intoned Dumbledore cheerfully. "This is quite fortunate, isn't it, Severus?"

Snape could see her tremble in the doorway, and he was gratified that he was not the only one suffering some disquiet. She was almost as he remembered her... almost. She was still ghostly pale, her hair was still long and as beautifully shaded...like rosewood...and she still possessed a delicate, waifish quality. But she wasn't quite Ophelia. He took in the over-large grey jumper...Molly's gift by the look of it...hanging loosely over snug jeans, and he wondered why she wore the trappings of a world she had been severed from. What comfort was there in the attire from a world slipping away from her after Veronica's death?

"Well, the hour is late," Dumbledore said briskly, standing and smoothing down his beard. Two pairs of alarmed eyes latched onto him. "I shall bid you a good night, Ophelia... Severus."

Dumbledore could feel the heat of their gazes as he strode to the front door. When he turned back, he caught sight of Ophelia's frantic expression and he almost hesitated, but such things were needed. Her pain and discomfort needed to be confronted and resolved if she was going to be able to finish her task of confiding in him.

Dumbledore needed her memories, and...he swallowed his nausea...she would be a fine prize for Severus to hand over to the Dark Lord should his loyalty ever be questioned. He closed his eyes on his stinging tears and departed.

Still standing on the threshold, she wondered why she hesitated, why she felt so anxious. She had yearned for this for months. Hadn't she felt in some way cheated to have been left with Sirius and not Severus? She knew why it was hard. He was a Death Eater; she had indirectly worked against him.

But who was Severus Snape? Who was the man who was so welcome in the heart of the Order? Her anxiety morphed into something hot and sharp. Her anger gave her strength, and closing the door behind her, she turned to face the man she thought she'd known. He seemed tense, as tense as he had been that day from a lifetime ago when he had leant against the mantle and watched her destroy Regulus. Those black eyes into which she had gladly drowned were hooded and wary. The skin was pale, paler than she recalled, and his frame seemed leaner. He looked so much older than he should.

For the merest moment, her concern batted her fury aside, but it couldn't hold back the power of her wrath for long. Severus Snape had warned her about being a perfect Death Eater; he had almost begged her to remain loyal to the Dark Lord, and all along, he had been a spy! It hurt. Had he been working for Dumbledore back then? In the potions lab, when he had warned her about her loyalties, had he been warning her that *he* would turn against her? Had he tried to warn her that she would become his enemy?

"You work for the Order?" she asked tonelessly, guarding her emotions and mind against him.

"For some time now," he replied just as plainly.

It was all too confusing. Could she have trusted Severus? The thought she could have had an ally in Severus when her responsibilities were almost killing her was crushing; the pain and angst would have been tolerable if she had had Severus standing by her side. And when Regulus had... died... maybe she wouldn't have run away and all *this* wouldn't be happening now.

And if this! And if that! she thought furiously, scowling and shaking her head in frustration. *A life of ifs and buts is no life.*

He'd seen her shields go up when she'd closed the door. Her Occlumency was no particular challenge to him, but he knew she'd feel him pushing past her defences, so he resisted the urge. But the thought of slipping into her mind and seeking out his answers was impossible to completely dislodge. It was an immense temptation. The last time he'd looked into her memories uninvited, he had seen Regulus; her mind had been saturated with him. He wished he'd never seen the depth of her feelings for the young Death Eater.

But this was a different and more dangerous situation. It had to be handled carefully. He would explore her mind, but not for selfish gains...*although*, he thought with a suppressed smirk, *I will satisfy my curiosity... in due time*...it would be to keep her whole for the Order. His humour fled; the Order expected and took too much sometimes.

She stepped closer until only the table separated them. "And how long is that?"

"Just under fifteen years," he replied honestly.

His answer surprised her, cooling her temper. He'd still been a Death Eater when she had made her escape. This was another disturbing shift in her understanding. Even Severus Snape was not as she remembered. Would 'He' be the same? Would Uncle Tom be all that she remembered and dreaded, or would he be contrary to expectations too? It was a horrific thought! The power of it made her skin crawl; she gagged and pressed her hand against her mouth.

Oh Merlin! Help me! she thought desperately. *What is real? What are the lies?*

She wanted to run. Escape had helped her once, it would help her again. It certainly couldn't be as bad as this! What had she been dragged into? It seemed she had been skinned, everything about her felt raw and exposed. They had seemed so nice and friendly, so sympathetic and supportive, but they'd lied. They didn't want her, they wanted what she knew. Despair...suffocating as it intensified...flooded her. They knew she wouldn't belong; they had no way of incorporating her back into the Wizarding world. It was a sham: a lie to make her help them. She didn't *need* them; they needed her! They needed Ophelia Black, and they'd killed Veronica Speedwell to get her.

Hands gripped her arms, and she was hauled to her feet. Fingers bit into her skin, and the pain skittered out like lightning across her biceps. There was something solid and reassuring about it; it was something she recognised and could deal with. As the lightning turned to a throbbing heat, she used it to focus her discordant thoughts, and as her mind condensed, so her anger was tempered.

He grunted when her foot connected with his shin, but it was more through surprise than pain; a foot and slipper could only do so much... but a bare knee could do quite a lot more. To avoid something nastier, Snape spun her around and pulled her close, wrapping one arm around her upper torso and the other across her midriff. He grinned into her hair when her protests became vocal: Muggles had extended her vocabulary. But he knew something about Ophelia that had stayed with him for twenty years.

"Oculus obscurus!"

She went stiff in his arms, and he could feel her frantic, hammering heart beneath his forearm.

"NO!" she screamed, clawing at her face as her sight was snuffed out. Her breath stuttered and then came in one long, despairing moan. "Please! Severus, please."

She clutched at his arms, her fingers sliding over the black cloth of his frockcoat. He relaxed his grip and disentangled himself from her grasp. Slipping away, making sure that he was just out of reach of her desperate, outstretched hands, he watched her, remembering the flicker of excitement that had tormented him in the crystal cavern.

She stumbled on the spot while her hands moved in the air. When she found the edge of the table, she clung to it, using it to ground her as her terror threatened to blast her apart. Panting and shivering, she leant against the table and softly keened.

"I will end it when you choose to stop pitying yourself," he said caustically, using scraps of anger to support him in his task.

Her head whipped round to his approximate position, and she lashed out, her fingers bent as though to hook him. He winced at the milky sheen over her eyes. With her pale skin and dishevelled hair, she looked like a banshee waiting to wail. But when she closed those useless eyes and parted her lips at the enormity of the curse, she seemed more kin to a ghostly siren than a howling killer.

"This is cruel," she whimpered, her arm falling limply to her side as she slumped.

He silently sidestepped so he was by her left shoulder. "Poor you," he whispered with mock empathy, ducking out the way as she spun round. "What have we done to you now? Hmm? You poor, wretched thing." He watched her features carefully, noting with satisfaction the lips thinning and her cheeks flushing. Anger was what he wanted.

"You're *letting* it happen to you. Such weakness," he hissed.

To prove his point, he gently tugged on a strand of her hair, enjoying her yelp and the way her body twisted to get away from him. Even in the grip of fear, she had a sinuous grace. He felt his mouth go dry, and not for the first time, he had to stop himself exploring the possibilities. She was the only one he had met who could come to understand him. His innards turned cold, and he stepped away. Games were one thing, but playing for something he couldn't win was bordering on harmful stupidity.

"If you want to see clearly, stop looking through woe-tinted glasses. You've suffered, but so have a great many others. Stop hiding behind your past...a past you'll never truly own, I may add...and grasp your future, because from now on, it is the *only* thing you can control."

"You have no idea what I've been through and just what your precious Order has done to me!" she snarled out.

He grinned. Anger had always been her greatest source of strength, but in those distant days, she was slow to burn and could control the heat of it. Now, she seemed to let it rage through her unchecked. Dumbledore was right. Her mind and emotions were tearing her apart.

She cocked her head, as though listening for him, and he watched her battle the fear that was undoubtedly coursing through her. Ophelia had had such reserves of strength... maybe Ophelia wasn't completely lost?

"I'm not here to be a convenient shoulder," he hissed out. "I'm not interested in your tale of woe. I have a job to do, and I will do it with or without your aid."

Those terrible milky eyes seemed to latch onto his. "You're quick to use what you know against me," she snapped out bitterly, as though he had betrayed her.

"I'll use what I know to stop you from wallowing in self-destructive self pity," he replied waspishly.

He was close enough to hear her shallow breaths, close enough to smell the faint hint of eucalyptus, and close enough to see her pulse fluttering in her neck. He was too close. It was incredibly tempting to reach up and trace his fingers down her pale, soft cheek, to let his thumb play across her lower lip, and to lift those stray strands of hair from her slender neck. He knew he wouldn't even think such things if she could see into his eyes; it was unwise to hand power to someone else, especially when that

power was over him. Instead of relinquishing to his wishes, he schooled his mind into smooth impassivity.

A strange smile played across her moist lips, and he felt a flicker of unease. Ophelia, even as a child, had possessed a bizarre sense of fairness, a strange morality. The way she smiled made him think of terrible retributions...hadn't she tried to feed Wormtail to Nagini for the way he had kicked out at the snake?

"Maybe I have a right to feel something over the murder of my only companion."

Gone was the frail waif who had trembled in the doorway. She was defiant and strong. Without the shackles of her damaged memory, she was emanating the personality borne from her recent experiences. It wasn't quite Ophelia, not quite Veronica... it was powerful and unafraid, and it was realising that it didn't need either. It could stand alone.

"I daresay you do, but now is not the time to dwell on things that had to be done."

So many emotions flickered across her face, and her mind was a maelstrom of images and concepts. Despite his skill to slip into her mind, he didn't have the desire to stay and be swept away by her chaotic thoughts.

"Had to be done," she repeated softly. "It didn't *have* to be done. Brewing potions for the Dark Lord had to be done; this... this was a choice. Don't belittle your culpability by claiming otherwise."

Snape frowned and folded his arms across his chest. Ophelia had seemed wary and confused, lost and afraid, and yet now, even while blinded, she was a growing tower of strength. Where was the dispossessed girl who worried Molly and Black? Where was the girl who was terrified of the dark?

He watched her smile. "You always crossed your arms when I surprised you. Are you scowling just like you used to, as well?"

Snape sneered and forced his arms to his side.

"You no longer know me, my dear," he countered viciously, ignoring her wince. "You have no idea who and what I am," he spat out, stepping closer so he could grip her arms. "And you're playing a dangerous game, trying to settle back into your long-abandoned role, Ophelia."

He was fairly sure he should be nurturing the nascent ego, but somehow, it felt just like they were back in Malfoy's basement and he was furious with her for not seeing sense. He felt bile burn a path to his mouth. She had left him when he'd had so much to settle and say. He had been left with the haunting knowledge that she had died thinking him her enemy. And he couldn't stand the idea she thought that of him now.

"I didn't abandon y...my role," she said, her voice hitching.

"Listen to me this time," he hissed into ear. "For now, for right now, what happened doesn't matter." He gave her a small shake when he saw her begin to protest. "It doesn't!" he snapped. "What matters is what you do *now*!" He gazed over her pale features. "Dumbledore and the others care only for the information you possess... never forget that, Ophelia." He inhaled slowly, steadying his twisting insides. "The only way to get through this is to find out who you are and accept it," he uttered softly, rubbing her arms gently and fighting the need to pull her close.

"Just as you have had to?"

There was no anger or contempt in the voice; there was just an understanding that spoke volumes of what she would be willing to accept from him. In the basement, she had taken his vitriol and his temper; she had soaked up his anger and resentment of his life and his duties. She had been the antidote to the venom seeping through his veins as he had worked to please the Dark Lord. She had a skill to empathise with what he was suffering, almost as though she suffered the same.

Damn! he cursed. *It's too much like it used to be.*

If Dumbledore had wanted him to refine the new Ophelia Black, then Snape had failed. Even if he could, he would resist. Ophelia had been his balm, and he had lost too much to let her slip from his grasp again. He released her arms, but she made no attempt to grab him. Instead, those milky orbs followed him as if she could somehow see him through the curse.

"Finite Incantatem."

Her whole body tensed as the curse was lifted, and her starved eyes widened, seeking him out. There was no hate or fear in those chocolate depths when she caught his eye, but her expression was indecipherable.

"You," she said softly, "always did have a penchant for the dramatic."

"I blame Lucius," he replied, daring to lace his words with the merest whisper of wry wit. "He's always been easily bored."

She smiled and tucked a stray strand of hair behind her ear. "I should be angry."

"Perhaps you should," he replied. As discussions went, he wasn't winning points for originality and wit, but he felt he needed some control, some way of drawing out her intentions.

She flashed him a withering look, and he found himself wondering what was going on behind those hooded eyes. Instead of continuing, she walked silently over to the stove and slid two cups along the worktop. Without asking, she set about pouring coffee. His gaze was drawn to the way she held the cuff of her jumper away from the cups as she tilted the pot; the pale flesh on her exposed wrist glowed. He was disappointed when she finished her task and the skin was swamped by the knitted coverall.

With barely a clatter, she placed the pot back on the hob to keep warm and carried the cups to the table. Without inviting him, she sat and lifted the white cup. He followed suit, watching her eyelids flutter as she inhaled the aroma; coffee had never been such fun. Had she drunk her coffee with such sensual delight when they had shared cup after cup in Lucius' cellar?

"It tastes just as I remembered," she muttered breathily.

It was glorious! The bitter liquid rolled over her tongue, each taste bud sighing as it was reacquainted with a long-lost need. It was just as she knew it would be: perfect. All the doubts that had pestered her seemed to evaporate and curl away like the steam from her cup.

Severus had always been able to soothe her. Even when things had started to go wrong, he had been a single light in the darkness, a safe harbour in stormy seas. She didn't have to pretend to be someone else when she was with him. He knew her from old: a scrawny child who had developed under his wing. And he had accepted everything about her: weaknesses, faults, passions and strengths.

The coffee slid down her throat, and she smiled. No matter who she was, Severus would always accept her. Sirius wanted 'little Ophelia' back... but the Ophelia he knew had never really existed. Opening her eyes, she studied the man sitting opposite. She didn't have to draw up false and forced memories to please him, as she did for Sirius. She didn't have to twist her thoughts into what someone else found reasonable. He knew her; nothing she thought or felt would shock or disgust him. The thought was intoxicating. She was free.

ooXoo

Rookwood sat in the canteen, paying lip service to the rabble eating and gossiping around him and snatching glances at Smith as he pottered around, wiping tables and

gathering up dirty dishes. His tea was tepid and tasted flat without his habitual shot of whiskey: oh, he despised everything about the canteen, especially the small cups. Flashing empty grins at his cohort was not improving his mood, and he wished away the minutes until Smith finished his shift.

Deep inside, Rookwood's insides squirmed: a mix of fear and anticipation. The Dark Lord had been deeply appreciative of his information regarding Smith, and Rookwood felt his previous transgression had been forgiven...never forgotten, of course...and for the first time in a long while, he felt the Dark Lord's terrible shadow no longer smothering him. It hadn't taken long for the Dark Lord to decide upon a course of action... and it was typically spectacular.

By the time he had finished his tea, Smith had checked the clock and was packing up his trolley. Rookwood shared one inane joke with the Auror next to him, laughed obligingly and left to catch up with the old man. He caught sight of Smith heading into the lift...his breath snatched in his throat. This was ideal! He'd have no better chance at completing the Dark Lord's orders.

"Hold the lift," he blurted out, lifting a hand to wave at Smith.

Smith looked up, and Rookwood thought he saw the wizard's eyes narrow slightly. He jogged over to the lift and nodded in thanks. Smith nodded back and pressed the brass button to close the doors.

It was six floors up to the main foyer. Rookwood only needed one floor. In his pocket was a pin. The tip had been dipped in a potion, one capable of rendering a man insensate in less than a second. Smith would be unconscious before he had chance to blink. While Smith made a play of wiping the brass panel clean, Rookwood slipped his hand into his pocket, carefully removing the wax sheath from the end of the pin. Perhaps Rookwood should have thought more about a capable and veteran wizard checking a reflective surface. As he withdrew the pin, Smith turned quickly and jabbed the tip of his wand in the younger man's solar plexus.

Winded and feeling as though his abdomen were on fire, Rookwood collapsed, clutching his gut and trying to focus through his tears. Smith glared down, and Rookwood watched the glowing wand tip hovering inches from his forehead.

"That were foolish, Rookwood," Smith said, shaking his head in intense disappointment. "Makes me wonder why we should be terrified o' Voldemort if the likes 'o ye are 'is 'ands in this world."

Rookwood groaned and hung his head. It didn't matter what happened now; either way, he was doomed. The Dark Lord would not tolerate his failure, and the Aurors would not tolerate his disloyalty. On the face of it, letting Smith take him in would be the best option. But as he stared morosely at the floor, he caught sight of the pin clinging to the thick material of Smith's coat. Maybe...

"You're right," he muttered despairingly. "But the others... they aren't as clumsy. Taking me in would save me, do you hear?" He looked up pleadingly. "I'd be free of Him and them."

Smith felt his lip curl up. "Ye're a worm, ain't ye?" he growled out. "What if I don't take ye to Amelia, eh? What if I lets ye go back to 'im," he said with a vicious grin. "Paint ye yellor and 'and ye back, hmmm?"

Rookwood looked panicked and jolted forwards to grip Smith's lower legs. "Please!" he begged. "You can't do that to me. Do you know what He'd do to me?" As he spoke and Smith looked disgusted, he felt for the pin. He didn't have to fake the desperation.

With a snarl, Smith kicked Rookwood away from his legs and pressed his wand against the man's sweating forehead. "Don't beg," he spat out. "Ye made ye bed, and ye 'ave to sleep in it."

Rookwood sagged, curling up into a foetal ball of misery, whimpering into his hands. While he moaned, he arranged the pin in his fingers and counted down to the required floor. He'd have to time it just right... There was the hum as the magic slowed the lift, and there was the gentle shudder as it approached the last floor. He didn't dare breathe, and his throat was painfully dry. When the lift stopped and just as Smith turned to open the door, he lunged with a stifled, despairing cry.

"Ah!" was all Smith managed after the pin pierced his trouser leg and before he slithered to the floor.

Breathing hard and wiping sweat from his upper lip, Rookwood lifted Smith's limp hand, pressing the pin against the palm and curling the fingers around it. He cursed as his sweat slickened fingers were unable to hold the pin and Smith's hand. Licking his lips, he tapped his wand against the slender metal pin, causing it to grow to the size of a wand so he could grab hold. Closing his eyes, he said farewell to what could have been his escape from it all and activated the Portkey pin.

ooXoo

"Dumbledore is thinking of setting up a potions lab in the cellar," Snape said, breaking the comfortable silence. "It'll be a secondary site for me to complete potions for the Order...I can't use the school lab for the more adventurous potions."

Ophelia swallowed and lowered her second cup of coffee. "I still have skills," she offered tentatively, knowing that Severus demanded the utmost respect for the subject and would only tolerate inviting people to help him.

He arched an eyebrow and smirked. "Even after all this time?"

She bristled. "Indeed!" she retorted sharply. "You should see the height I can get on a soufflé."

Severus did something he hadn't done in a long while. He laughed. "I have some minor potions to brew for the Order," he said with a grin. "You can help me with those, as you're doing nothing other than cluttering up the house."

She smiled and exhaled slowly. It was almost impossible to recall a time when she had felt so comforted and whole. Even in the basement, she had had demons leaping about her. But here, the only monsters were the ones she created and nurtured. It was just a shame that 'here' seemed to demand Severus as a qualifying factor. She knew that when he left, the familiar wraiths would come and pluck at her mind and memories again. Hopefully, potion-making would keep them at bay in the times when she was alone.

The sight of him tossing back the last drops of coffee caused a lump to settle heavily in her gut. She had once joked that he wouldn't let Death take him before he could finish his cup of coffee. Severus was about to leave.

She followed him to the door, feeling the house press around her as she left the sanctuary of the kitchen. In the gloom of the hallway, Severus was an indistinct shadow, and she felt the urge to reach out and pluck at his coat to confirm he was still there. At the door, his white hand on the knob was both startling and heartbreaking. The thought of him leaving was making her giddy. She relinquished to her urges and placed her own hand over his, preventing him from twisting the handle.

Slowly, she lifted her heavy head and looked up. His eyes were lost in shadow, but she could see the smallest pricks of light to help guide her needful gaze. In the darkest moments of both her lives, she had sought for some connection to another, directed by the haunting memory of one embrace: Severus' embrace. She wanted to fall into his arms and be soothed, just as she had been when they'd rested together and watched crystals splitting light.

He cupped the back of her head and pulled her close, sliding his arm around her shoulders and pressing his cheek against her temple. Sobbing, she wrapped her arms around his chest. The hand that had been trapped on the cold handle quickly sought her warmth and curved round her slender waist. Euphoria swamped her. She felt safely cocooned, and she buried her face in the folds of his jacket.

It was a gentle embrace, the sort between friends. And he struggled to maintain it. He longed to satisfy feelings that had been long ignored and pull her against him, bury his face in her hair and smell her skin. How long had it been since he'd had someone in his arms... and not the bought affection he'd succumbed to when he was mad with loneliness?

He was almost there, his hand was tightening in her hair, and his nose was behind her ear...

"Get your hands off her!"

It would be hard to imagine that Snape would have anything to thank Black for, but causing Ophelia to jolt away from him may well have constituted the first favour the mutt had ever done him. He looked up at Black fuming mid-way down the stairs and summoned a sneer.

Ophelia slipped into the corner opposite Snape and glared at Sirius. "You can't stand the thought of me needing his company, can you?" she spat out, taking both men by surprise.

"He's a snake, Ophelia," he said sternly. "You'd do well to stay away from him," he added vehemently, walking down the last few steps and yanking the door open. "And he's leaving!"

"I'm a snake," she said softly, highlighting it by loosing a string of sibilant hisses that would have made Nagini proud, or blush. She circled Sirius, who was trembling with rage, and stopped by his shoulder. "I could see it when we talked," she hissed into his ear. "I could see how much you hated the thought of me and Severus." Black remained silent, but a muscle began to twitch under his left eye.

"Snape is leaving," he repeated softly.

Ophelia glanced across at Severus, and she saw him tilt his head ever so slightly. "I am done here," he said simply. "Dumbledore will give you a list of potions to start work on."

She smiled weakly and nodded. "Goodnight, Severus."

Then he was gone. The door slamming into its frame seemed to echo mournfully in the long hallway. Sirius hadn't moved, still facing the wall, his arm slowly lowering to his side, and Ophelia felt her world closing in.

"Dumbledore says you need him," Black said carefully, keeping the anger from his voice. "For that reason, he's welcome in this house, but he is not welcome to touch you like that."

"It was a hug, Sirius," she mumbled listlessly. "You and I have shared a few."

Hands gently gripped her shoulders, turning her around until she found herself face to trembling face with him. His blue eyes shimmered in the weak light from the kitchen. "It may have been that for you," he whispered, "but for him, it was more." He licked his lips and smiled fondly while fear coiled in his eyes. "He's grieved for and recovered from losing the Ophelia he knew."

Gods! It was painful being so understanding. All he had wanted to do when he'd seen Snape's expression over her shoulder was to punch him in his crooked beak of a nose and hurl him into the street. He knew what Snape had been thinking. But for her sake, he'd accepted Snape's role in her recovery, contenting himself to hurt the bastard later.

She didn't say anything, and he couldn't deduce her frame of mind or emotions; she simply removed herself from his hold and climbed the stairs. Waiting at the foot of the stairs, he watched her disappear from view and heard the door to her room click shut. With that, he spun on his heel, tugged open the door and looked along the glistening road. Rain was drumming a steady tattoo against the road and parked cars. The streetlamps glowed like orange moons, and amber rivers ran in the gutters. The ends of the street were a blur, shrouded by the downpour, and Snape had either Disapparated or been swallowed up by the night.

Chapter Thirty

Chapter 30 of 36

As Ophelia gathers herself together so the world around her begins to unravel.

He held the dirty cloth...more rag than handkerchief...in trembling fingers. He had always had the idea it was more than what it was... and treasured it. It was impossible to remember when he had acquired it, but he knew, knew beyond doubt, it had belonged to his master Regulus. The green embroidery had long since pulled free from the off-white material, but tiny holes disclosed the letters that had once been there: R, B and O.

The 'O' had been a mystery... still was, although something nagged at the back of his mind, a feeling which intensified whenever the dark-haired witch spoke to him. She had expected some response, some recognition from him, and it disturbed him. It disturbed him in ways that having the Mudblood filth and Pureblood traitors in the house couldn't. Smoothing Regulus' hankie flat on his pillow, Kreacher tried to latch onto the feeling of recognition that had caught him off-guard in the kitchen when she had pleaded to him about her identity.

It was foolish, but for the length of a breath, he thought he knew her. A name had almost leapt to his lips. Elves weren't supposed to forget; they were supposed to remember and serve. The idea he had failed to serve was burrowing into his mind like maggots seeking rotten flesh. But she was with the Order; she was a traitor, just like Sirius and the others, so why should he care about failing her? If only that flutter in his chest and the nagging sensation would be so keen to dismiss her.

Kreacher traced his gnarled fingers over his keepsake and inhaled slowly. He had known someone... from ages ago. On the cusp of recollection, he thought he could hear someone crying. Straining to hear, he closed his eyes, but the sound slipped away. Sighing softly, he pummelled the pillows and lay down to sleep. Tomorrow was going to be a big day.

The thought of tomorrow was enough to incinerate any feelings about the strange, broken witch. His lips thinned into a grim smile. Tomorrow saw the start of things returning to how they should be: no Mudbloods, no traitors and no shame upon the House of Black.

ooXoo

The thought of returning to Hogwarts seemed to squirm unpleasantly in his mind, as though he were in danger of introducing something foreign and dangerous within the comforting and solid walls. On the threshold to Hogwarts' grounds, Snape paused and pondered his dilemma, resting his forehead against the wrought iron gates. Everything had seemed in some way tied to Hogwarts: the terrible and the beautiful. Ophelia, on the other hand.... He'd never really had something to lure him away from his home, and he felt in some way... unfaithful.

His pale hands gripped the metal, and he stared up at Hogwarts hulking against the black sky. Lights peppered the dark building, their glow softened by the slight fog creeping in. Hogwarts was his bastion, his home, and his reason for being. Everything he cherished had been or was cradled within her grey stone. It had been safe and comfortable for so many reasons... once. He sighed and closed his eyes. It had been so because there had never been anything else outside to satisfy his needs.

But was that it? Was it as simple as just having something else, something better? Swallowing his bitterness, he glared up at the dark form. Why hadn't he seen it before? The castle had been deceitful, promising there was nothing else other than its stony hold to shelter him. She'd dished out pain and pleasure, light and dark, and convinced him that his portions were fair. He moaned softly and felt sorrow crush his chest. Choice was a luxury no longer afforded him. Until the war ended, he had only one place to leave his heart.

Sneering, he pushed on the bars, feeling the hinges protest, as if they sensed his reluctance and felt in some way marked by it, trying to shun him, just as he had. With one strong heave, the gate swung open with a plaintive squeal, and Snape forced himself to forget the warmth and life he had left behind at Grimmauld Place. Stepping into the grounds, he let the gate swing shut. It seemed the castle leered at him, as a greedy and selfish lover would gloat over the control they had. Shaking off the feeling of powerlessness and entrapment, he upped his pace and headed for Hogwarts' embrace.

ooXoo

She knew now why she had felt numb after Sirius had evicted Severus. If she had felt like this then, she would have hurtled after Severus into the rain. How odd she could see so much and yet be blind! Perhaps Veronica had left her with something after all: twenty years of observations on human interaction and an objective overview of Severus and Ophelia. Her sixteen-year-old self may not have noticed...indeed, hadn't noticed...but now, she could see it. Those furtive glances, the time sharing coffee and the restraint in his form as they brewed together suddenly spoke volumes. She smirked into her pillow like the cat who not only had the cream but also the supplier's name and address.

She had taken his curtness and distance as being his nature, not understanding that his feelings for her had changed as she had. It explained quite a lot about their last months together: his anger over Regulus and her loyalty to him. Severus had been jealous. She could recall mentioning her feelings for Severus with Narcissa...she smiled sadly at the memory of her cousin...and how she had never considered her feelings being returned. On reflection, it was laughable that she'd been so blind to it all! Hadn't he been all hot and bothered in the crystal cavern?

In her bed, she stretched, luxuriating under the covers and in the sudden power she felt coursing through her. She had power over Severus Snape, and it felt divine. A chill trickled down her spine as some deeper part of her mind doused her with cold reality. Severus Snape was a Death Eater; he was cold and dangerous. She had seen firsthand some of the things he was capable of, and she knew his moods were dark and deep. Swallowing, she gripped her pillow and curled up. She found herself mildly perplexed at how... *compelling* that made him.

ooXoo

Sirius sat nursing his cold tea when a cold Lupin stomped into the kitchen. He lifted his head to watch the sodden man peel off his jacket and drape it over a chair-back. They shared a morose look before Sirius dragged his bones from the chair to make his friend a cup of tea. It seemed that the events of the night before had sapped his strength, leaving him physically weak and emotionally despondent. Even Lupin's wearied sigh couldn't inspire anything in him. He never would have thought that helping his cousin would be so challenging.

Now that thought elicited something! It slashed through him, hot and sharp. Why in Merlin's name she should respond to that hook-nosed, slimy, greasy Death Eater when he was here, offering her the warmth and love of her home that she had been denied for two decades was beyond belief. He slammed the teapot back on the hob at the thought of helping his cousin and all its surprising consequences. It was laughable that his most-hated enemy was doing more for her than he could, and it also hurt.

"You okay, Padfoot?"

Sirius inhaled slowly at the tenderness in his friend's voice. It was a soothing balm against his stinging bitterness.

"Yes," he managed to rasp out.

"It's just that you've given me five sugars and forgotten the tea."

Sirius jolted and glanced down to see the pile of sugar at the bottom of Lupin's mug.

"Damn!"

Movement in the corner of his eye heralded Lupin taking the cup from his hands to scoop out the excess sugar. With swift and precise moves, Lupin rectified the tea problem and linked arms with Sirius to lead him back to his chair.

"It's okay," he said while Sirius collapsed onto the seat. "Last time you were this distracted, you put bladderwrack in Slughorn's potion and very nearly took Potions off the curriculum for a month."

Sirius' lip quirked. "It was one hell of a bang."

"That's just what Slughorn said before dishing out a month's worth of detentions."

"He let me off after two weeks," Sirius said with a grin. "It didn't take long to get the potion off the ceiling and out the rafters." Lupin's eyebrows shot up above a sceptical gaze. "Okay, so I cheated and didn't use the toothbrush."

They paused to sip their tea; Lupin looked like he'd tasted nectar, and Sirius shuddered. Powered by his need for a decent cup of tea, he left Lupin and made himself a fresh cup.

"How is Ophelia?" Lupin asked of Sirius' back, ignoring the spine stiffening and the grunt. "It's been several months now since she woke from the potion." He tactfully ignored the second, more disgruntled grunt. "Molly said that she's having a tough time of it."

He could have held onto it; he wanted to. The anger and bitterness were ready to be wielded, but he couldn't, not when Lupin looked like hell. And at the end of the day, what did it matter? It wasn't as if he'd expected his little cousin to be reborn. He sighed and turned to face his friend.

"She'll do better now," he said softly. "Dumbledore has asked Snape to help her."

Lupin lowered his cup and frowned. "I see."

Casting a quick glance up at Sirius, he saw the tension etched into the grey and unshaven face. Lupin sipped his tea and thought about Dumbledore and his motives. He had suspected something when Snape had come to Ophelia's aid. It wasn't that the enigmatic wizard had accepted the task and done his duty; it was the way the dying witch had responded.

"How are things with the pack?"

Lupin sobered instantly and grimaced. He would rather have discussed Ophelia's attraction to Snape with Sirius and risk personal injury. "They don't trust. Not that I blame them," he added. "The promises being made to them by Voldemort are very tempting...hell, if I didn't have the Order, then I'd be tempted." He ran a thin hand through his greying hair. He didn't want to talk about this, but the words were pouring out of him. "It's hard. The Ministry are starting to round us up. They say that our reluctance to register as dangerous creatures is proof of our moral degradation, in that we don't care about *decent* Wizarding folk."

"What rubbish!" Sirius snapped out harshly.

"Is it?" Lupin replied bleakly. He knew he should be quiet and smile, drink his tea and go to bed, but this was like some abscess beneath his skin, and it craved lancing.

The empty look on Lupin's face made Sirius uneasy; the sensation twisted his guts and snatched his breath.

"Yes," he said firmly.

"Some packs are proving them right," Lupin hissed out softly, shrinking in the chair. His eyes went wide, as though the words terrified him, and he focused on some dark and distant memory. "They have no control, and they... they..."

Lupin bent over, clutching at his mouth, his eyes screwed tightly shut. Strange mewling sounds emanated from him, and he started to rock back and forth, the chair creaking in ominous sympathy. Fretful, Sirius launched from his chair and sped round the table to grip his friend's trembling shoulders.

Lupin tried, for some unfathomable reason, to push him away, but the strength Sirius had thought depleted returned with a vengeance, and he held onto Lupin until the man calmed and allowed himself to be held, to be comforted.

"You shouldn't have to do this," he whispered. His throat tightened around his despair and desperation. He tried to swallow, but he couldn't. *Was this what it had been like before?* he thought wildly. *Had it been this terrible and soul-destroying?* He scrunched his eyes up. He recalled days of glory. He had spouted crap to Harry about the Order: how it had stood valiantly against the forces of a Dark Wizard! He felt sick. He had made it sound so gods-damned noble.

"I know," Lupin moaned, clutching tightly at Sirius' tatty gown. "But there is no one else."

He said it so simply. Sirius blinked and felt his mouth drop open. It shouldn't be that horrifically simple. *There should be choice*. The thought crashed around his skull. *Lupin, everybody, should have a bloody choice whether to suffer or not.*

His hurtling thoughts headed upstairs towards the old guest bedroom to ruminate over the new guest. She hadn't had a choice either. The Order had decided, and so it had been. Who else would be sucked in to serve the Order...*Harry!*

"He's but a boy," he muttered, his voice stifled by the terrible conclusion.

Despite his protestation, he knew it wasn't enough to spare his godson. Nothing seemed enough. He looked down upon Lupin's head, the face still buried in the folds of his clothes, and gently stroked the damp and dishevelled hair. Everyone was suffering due to what they had to do... and... and he was suffering because he couldn't do anything. The irony was just too vicious.

Sirius felt the scream pour into his throat, it rumbled angrily just behind his tongue, and then it erupted. Again and again it spewed out, each hastily in-drawn breath fuelling the next eruption. He slumped to the floor, clutching his head, and as the screams continued, they echoed like manic laughter: the kind he'd heard and tried to forget from his time in Azkaban.

Another string of screaming laughs pierced the house. Freedom from that terrible prison had managed what the walls themselves hadn't. Freedom had driven him mad.

ooXoo

Kreacher had woken early; Black's bitter and frantic laughter had banished sleep as effectively as any nightmare. Knowing that he wouldn't be missed, he'd followed his so-called master's orders and left the house. It went against every elfish fibre in his body, but he abandoned the household he had sworn to serve. Twitching and nauseous, he had travelled to another who had some claim to the Black name. It was a tenuous link, but one he had found sturdy enough.

The witch smiled pleasantly and knelt down on a luxurious rug before a magnificent fireplace. Her long, black hair fell in waves about her pale, oval face, and her dark eyes glittered in the firelight. The elf bobbed nervously, not accustomed to such attention, and tugged on his soiled smock.

"You have been most helpful, Kreacher, and we know how much you *want* to tell us all about those blind fools and their pathetic plans but cannot due to your unfortunate bondage to that traitor Sirius Black." Her voice was soothing and compassionate.

"Yes, Miss Bella," Kreacher said quickly, conveying his gratitude that his mistress was so understanding.

"There is one more thing you can do for us," Bellatrix whispered breathily, her eyes wide and wild, but Kreacher was only thinking of serving his mistress; her intentions and motives were not his concern. "It is important that Sirius Black does not interfere with a plan to benefit all the noble houses. When the time comes, you must ensure that the traitor cannot do anything to prevent us from restoring the House of Black to its rightful place."

She watched Kreacher's face as he drank in her words, how his eyes glimmered with pride and awe, how his mouth hung open in eager, desperate loyalty. "You must think of a way to keep Sirius Black occupied and to stop anyone from talking with him; do you understand?" The Elf nodded vigorously. "We suspect the Potter brat will try to reach him; you must tell him that Sirius has gone." She reached out and gently patted Kreacher's shoulder. "Can you think of something to keep Sirius out of the way for half an hour at the very least?"

Kreacher frowned, and then his face lit-up; he bounced on the spot and smiled maliciously. "Master has a hippogriff in the attic; he is fond of the beast. Kreacher could hurt the foul thing."

Bellatrix smiled, and Kreacher flushed with pride at pleasing his mistress. "Perfect! You could at that."

"Oh yes, Miss Bella," he said, his voice laced with disgust. "Vile beast it is! Free to roam, to drag his claws across the floor, making such a mess with all that straw."

"Yes, yes!" snapped Bellatrix, her patience drying up as Kreacher bemoaned his domestic duties. "It's about time Sirius is punished for his disloyalty and our family honour restored."

"Oh, Miss Bella," Kreacher cried out, holding his hands and grinning with glee. "It is!"

Bellatrix beamed and gently patted the old elf on his wrinkled head. "Excellent, Kreacher," she said brightly. "You still serve the House of Black as faithfully as ever; Aunt Elladora would be so proud of you."

The elf seemed to vibrate with joy; his thin mouth was split into a grin, and his small eyes twinkled merrily. Bellatrix laughed out and stood, her eyes alighting upon Lucius, who was studying the House Elf, his expression wooden and indecipherable. He seemed to sense being watched, and his sapphire gaze met hers; was that disgust flittering across his fine features? Not about to let her mood be quenched by Lucius' envy of a loyal elf, she thought about the chaos that was waiting to be unleashed. She shivered at the thrill, and her body thrummed in anticipation: months of planning and plotting almost ready to be fulfilled. She had never felt so alive, never felt so powerful. All that her master strived for was almost within her grasp, and it would be her hand that handed it over to the Dark Lord...no one else's. She would secure her master's victory and be adored.

Chapter Thirty one

Chapter 31 of 36

Molly helps Ophelia realise what she has always wanted and needed.

The feather stayed resolutely on the table; it was obviously siding with gravity. Exhausted, cross and fearful, Ophelia dropped the wand onto the table and pressed the heels of her palms against her stinging eyes. She hadn't been particularly successful the first time round as an eager first-year, either. A smile tugged at her lips, and the gloom lifted a little. Her hands dropped to the table, and she glared at the stubborn feather. It promptly began to singe from sheer embarrassment. The smell was both vile and wonderful.

Her mind drifted back to those days after her recovery. When things had become unbearable, hadn't she been able to impact upon her surroundings in a powerfully destructive manner? When pushed to the limits of her fractured mind, she'd been able to retaliate in inexplicable ways. She sighed and closed her eyes. Destructive magics had been her forte; the Dark Lord had commented and revelled in her natural capacity for the darker side of magic. Could it be that people were destined to be bad, and magic knew?

The thought distressed her. She had hoped her life and its bizarre and terrible path had moulded her, not that she had merely followed the rut her magic had dropped her in. It precluded the possibility of redemption. But then what of Severus; was he evil? And what of Narcissa and Lucius? Were they trapped in their magic's machinations, or had they made a choice?

Slowly, she picked up the discarded wand. Her thoughts flowed hectically, crashing over old memories and ideas like a thundering cataract. It was impossible to see the individual facets in the chaos, and she was left with the deafening sound and billowing clouds. All she could make was the shape and the power of it. It was glorious and terrifying.

Just like her thoughts, rivers followed a set route, their flow dictated by the geology and geography of the surroundings, but rivers, no matter how small, could carve their way through anything, slowly dictating a new path. And if there was enough water, they could lay waste to their controlling landscape.

Ophelia lifted the wand and focused on the burnt feather. "*Wingardium Leviosa!*"

The wand tip glowed and the feather twitched. Sweat cooled her back, and her muscles ached from the effort of concentrating. After a few minutes, her held breath escaped from pained lungs, and she sagged. The feather gently rocked, mocking her efforts.

It was easy to be angry...easy and necessary. The heat of it scorched away the chill in her bones and evaporated the gloom. This time, she channelled it, turning it into defiance, giving it purpose. So what if she couldn't do it! She knew she could do powerful and dazzling things; she'd almost bested Moody on the cliff top all those months ago, and she had generated elegant charms to protect her home. No, she was a witch, but she had to learn to accept her limitations. Besides, in a war, she'd opt for burning rather than lifting.

Perhaps she'd known from the start, long before she'd pinched Sirius' wand. It may have been disturbing and frustrating to be so inept with wand magic, but she hadn't been surprised by it. Severus had been right...as if she had doubted him...Dumbledore only wanted what she knew; there was no chance for her in the Wizarding world...not as a squib with no qualifications. Her future was of no concern to him. Again, she wasn't surprised. Yet despite this, she liked the group of wizards and witches she'd met.

With the resurfacing memories, she'd experienced bitterness at having it restored, wishing to have it all taken away, but now, in the cooler light of acceptance, she was glad to know. Knowledge had lanced a suppurating wound and allowed it to start healing. Maybe Veronica was a part of her, now silenced as they existed more intimately, and she would always be deep inside, gently guiding her thoughts and passions. Ophelia hoped that was the case.

She rolled the wand between thumb and forefinger, wondering why she'd placed so much import on being able to wield it. Inhaling slowly and standing, she accepted why. It had been the last barrier to re-entering the world she'd abandoned. She'd had to know where she could belong.

Sirius was still dozing in the tatty leather chair when she sneaked back into the parlour. With his pale features softened by sleep, she could see Regulus: the likeness was more pronounced through their shared trials and torments. His thin, bony hands twitched in his sleep, and a flicker of something danced across his face. She paused, waiting for his breathing to settle before slipping the wand into his inner breast pocket. She left him to his sleep, but knew she wouldn't settle. Instead, she opened the door under the stairs and walked down to the basement.

It was more a cellar than a basement, so it had no small windows...the only source of light being the gaslights dotted around the room. When she had first seen it, she had felt chilled. Four thick, stone columns supported the upstairs, and each one had an old, long-forgotten sconce and a shroud of dusty cobwebs. The floor had been laid with rough slabs of stone...decades of detritus lurking in the uneven gaps...and water pipes rattled and clunked against the bare brick walls. Across from the stairs, a wall was devoted to a cobwebbed and almost empty wine rack.

Now, the cellar was clean and a polished work bench laden with potion equipment rested in the centre. The wine rack held the potions that had been brewed, the wine had been relegated to the floor, and the damp that had chilled her had been ousted... along with the spiders and their webs.

It wasn't as homely as Lucius' basement, but it was close enough. Severus had connected up a small stove near the stairs to heat at least a small part of the heat-devouring cellar and to warm their drinks and any food they took with them. Molly had found two comfy chairs and a small coffee table in one of the rooms, and when she'd seen Ophelia eyeing the things hungrily had silently repaired them and carried them down. Ophelia couldn't help but like Molly... especially when a hot chocolate would suddenly appear down in the cold.

The cold was grudgingly useful, as it helped with potion-brewing, but when her mind was no longer intently focused on her brewing, she loved to curl up in a chair, sip her drink and enjoy the heat from the stove. She wished Severus could be with her, but his duties were such that those moments were rare.

Everything she needed was in a small, charmed cupboard: milk, sugar, tea, coffee, cream, hot chocolate... regularly and discreetly filled by Molly. She smiled and pulled out a packet of chocolate biscuits. Soon, a pot of coffee was warming on the stove, the aroma beginning to escape, challenging the cellar's musk. There was a range of potions to be made for the Order; some were maturing in the wine rack, and ingredients were being prepared for others, but a few could be started now. Wolfing down two biscuits, she wiped her hands and began to gather the ingredients.

It was bliss... it was soothing and healing. She was doing what she had loved doing as a child... up to her elbows in a cauldron and creating something. The smell of the flame under the cauldron, the feel of material in her hands, the heat, the gentle and precise hand movements, the subtle fragrances billowing out from the bubbling potion: it banished her doubts and fears.

~X~

He had known before the silent house mocked him. He'd known in his bones and in his guts. Standing in the small kitchen, his laboured breathing and discombobulated

equilibrium after his frantic search only supported what his instincts had foretold. Smith was gone. The old bastard had gone and done something stupid. Outside, the wind moaned, and the house creaked in despairing sympathy.

Moody swallowed hard and sank into the chair that had become his due to the frequency of his visits. He should have seen it. Smith had been impatient and rash. Hadn't they discussed being cautious and patient over tea in this very kitchen? The circular stains, glistening slightly in the weak evening light, evidenced such an event, but obviously, the rings were the only thing that had left an impression.

Moody slammed his hand down on the table, yet he would have felt more satisfaction if it had been Smith's stubborn jaw. He'd have felt happier, too. Smith had been following Rookwood, as per Dumbledore's orders, but that had been two days ago. The Death Eater was canny, but surely not a match for Smith? He drummed his fingernails on the table. When the sound began to irritate him and the emptiness of the house smothered him, he had to accept that Smith wasn't the Auror from old: he was now simply old. Standing in a flurry of cloth and wrath, he stormed from the house and into the grey dusk washing out the colours of day. Somewhere, Smith was in trouble.

~X~

Someone was in the cellar. Long ago, he had walked into another basement to find someone messing in what he considered his territory. The trespasser had done more than just rummage around with his property; she had crept into his very being, leaving traces of herself in dark and lonely places. He often wondered if it would have been wise to have ignored her, just letting her drift through his life like so many people had.

She was bent over the cauldron, her hair tucked behind her ears as she peered into the contents, accurately gauging what the potion needed. He crept from the stairs into the gloom and moved silently around her. Her movements were precise and graceful, each movement timed to perfection. His eyes were drawn to her slender and nimble fingers as she sliced a shrivelfig. His mouth went dry, and his guts twisted. He knew what he wanted... had known since Dumbledore asked him to help Ophelia. No... that wasn't quite true. He'd known since Regulus had shown him.

Severus shuddered in the shadows. Regulus had been a good little Death Eater, attending meetings and doing his duty, but the Dark Lord had doubted that one so young could be trusted. After the Mark had been burnt into his skin, *He* had asked Severus to determine Regulus' loyalty. Slipping into the boy's mind had been challenging, and Severus recalled being impressed, but soon enough, he was sneaking through memories like a snake through long grass.

Their conversation had turned towards Ophelia, and he saw her in Regulus' mind. He saw the quiet conversations in the boys' dormitory, witnessed the plotting and their aims and realised they worked to destroy the Dark Lord. He felt the echo of Regulus' emotions as they shared his birthday and later felt the darkness of the Dark Mark seeping through his veins. The images shocked and terrified him. Ophelia had placed herself in immense danger. He was furious beyond words and fearful beyond description.

"Severus, are you alright?" asked Regulus with something approaching sympathy. "You've gone pale."

"I'm perfectly fine," he snapped, wiping a hand across his moist upper lip.

His heart hammered painfully, and icy fingers danced down his spine. He wanted to grab the stupid boy by the throat and squeeze the life from his body. His fury demanded a target. But Snape had had to control his emotions and actions for years, and he reigned in his desires. He knew by revealing Regulus, he would be revealing Ophelia, and that was unacceptable. It took less than a breath for him to decide to let them plot in the dark; after all, what could they do? Mere children against the Dark Lord! So, despite the seeds of disloyalty and his wrath, he decided to keep what he knew to himself. He didn't care what happened to Black, but he did care about what happened to Ophelia. He would watch and wait. He had some influence in the Death Eater ranks, and he would use it to protect her. Regulus was damned.

Severus straightened and reasserted his Occlumency; maybe he could find out what they planned and arrange to scupper it before it drew unwanted attention. He continued with gentle conversation, using specific words to trigger certain memories and thoughts, constantly searching the mind before him for clues and answers. Through this, he saw Regulus' own deep concern for Ophelia and felt his heart clench in sympathy...perhaps the brat wasn't at all like his brother...as he touched the aching dread felt by the youth. Regulus loved Ophelia, and in his own way, he strived to keep her safe.

Severus knew he had leverage, and the thought eased his troubled mind. Should Regulus' actions threaten her, Severus could use Ophelia against his foolhardiness. It meant deceiving the Dark Lord, but Severus Snape had been doing that for years. He knew his mission was done, but Snape was reluctant to leave the images of Ophelia. The fascination was foolish, yet he couldn't resist delving further.

Through hasty plotting, fevered rows, playful banter and shared despair, he saw her glistening face. His breath snatched and his pulse jolted. Hair clung to her damp and glimmering forehead while the rest spilled out over the pale pillow. In the gloom, her eyes were dark, hooded by swollen lids. Soft cheeks were reddened, and her trembling mouth was parted, allowing her tongue to flick out over plump, glistening lips. The skin on her bare shoulders seemed to glow, except for a red crescent where shoulder met the soft shadows outlining her delicate neck. Her face was glorious as she experienced the flush of rising tensions and passion.

Snape felt his chest tighten at the memory. He had to leave; he had no control, motivated by needs and feelings he couldn't master. If he stayed, Regulus would know what he'd done and know what he knew. It was dangerous. But damn it, he wanted to see more! Ironically, he wasn't ousted by Regulus, nor did he find the strength in himself to flee. It was Ophelia. As her eyes fluttered closed and her head pressed into the pillow... as her mouth opened in a silent cry and her body arched, the image caused Severus to stagger, thus breaking eye contact.

"Look, Snape, you really look like crap! You shou..."

"I'm fine!" he ground out bitterly before walking away. He couldn't stand being close to Regulus; the boy had something he yearned for, and it pained him. It wasn't anger, as such, and it wasn't jealousy. It was a dread. He dreaded that love would do what it had done before... take someone he loved from his life. Swallowing past a hard lump in his tight throat, he slid from the room. He needed to think, he needed space, and he needed to hide his feelings once more.

Years, even decades later, his thinking and its conclusion would pique Dumbledore's curiosity. In his friend and spy, he would see the lies created by Severus to hide something, some fact regarding Ophelia Black. He had lied to himself in a bid to deceive someone else, but in doing so had corrupted his own recollections: he didn't love her and she loved the Dark Lord. It was the only way he could function and she could live.

So when he watched her drop the thinly sliced shrivelfigs into the cauldron, he saw a woman he wanted and desired, and he felt uncomfortable with the power and the sense of urgency it inspired. He'd seen his so-called brethren respond to their wants and greed, taking what they wanted. He couldn't descend to that.

He left the basement, hearing her snuff out the flame under the cauldron, and he intended to leave the house before she left the basement, but he found himself face to hairnet with Molly. He had always respected Molly, even if he detested her tendency to mother, and he felt a flicker of concern at her haggard and sleep-deprived state. Heavy bags under her reddened eyes made her look older than she should, and he could see how her hands trembled slightly. Despite her obvious exhaustion, she mustered up a smile.

"Hello, Severus. Care for some tea before you go? Or how about something warm in your belly?"

He tempered his scowl and gave a curt bow. "Thank you, Molly, but..." the door clicked shut behind him, and he caught a whiff of eucalyptus.

"Oh, good evening, Severus."

He turned and straightened. "Ophelia."

"I was about to put the kettle on; would you like something, Ophelia?"

"At twenty past one in the morning?" Ophelia queried softly, her eyes darting over Molly's face.

"Is there a time restriction on a hot drink?" she snapped back.

Ophelia smiled sweetly and suddenly darted out a hand to grip Severus' arm in a death grip. "We'd love a drink, Molly."

Severus inhaled to protest, but the pressure around his forearm intensified, promising pain if he argued. Instead, he allowed himself to be led into the kitchen and placed on a chair. When Ophelia looked at him, he made sure his glare conveyed the level of retribution he'd be seeking.

She sat down next to him and leant closer so her mouth was close to his ear. He resisted the urge to tremble when her breath ghosted over his skin. "I've missed you." A smile tugged at his lips. She flashed a smile and then looked over at Molly. "Severus and I have some potions to finish; could we take tea downstairs?"

"Of course, dear," she replied sweetly. "Best not be working too long, though; you both need your rest."

Ophelia watched Severus' eyes narrow and his lips thin, and she was surprised at the flicker of anger across his pinched features. Before she could comment, he twisted in his seat to face her.

"Do not take liberties with my time," he hissed angrily, seeing her flinch. "I came here to collect your potions...that is all!" His eyes bored into hers, and he had mixed feelings about the confusion and discomfort he saw.

"Molly," he called out, "make mine white with two sugars, please."

"Right you are, dear."

He nodded at Ophelia and swept from the room; when she looked back, Molly was smiling kindly at her. For some reason, Ophelia felt a blush creep up her cheeks. She smiled back and began to fidget with a loose thread on the cuff of her jumper.

"Severus is a good man," Molly said firmly. Ophelia usually wouldn't need the affirmation, but she had the fear that she'd just upset him. "Shame that he seems so lonely."

From anyone else, it may have come across as concern for another's emotional well-being, but from Molly...with her impish smile and propensity for passion...it came across as a declaration that someone needed something much more satisfying than a hug. Ophelia's blush intensified, rising from somewhere around her knees.

"Take it from me, dear," Molly continued, her voice thickening further as she began to weep, "you have to take what you can when you can, and when you have it, keep a bloody good grip on it."

Ophelia opened her mouth to reply, but Molly turned sharply and busied herself with the tea, sniffing discreetly. Before she could think of another topic of conversation, Severus returned with the scowl still etched on his face. He stopped when he saw her expression; it was somewhere between sorrow and determination. He glanced across at Molly and saw her wiping at her eyes. He quietly sat down next to her.

They sat sipping tea and talked of inconsequential things until Molly said she was going back to bed. Severus escorted her to the bottom of the stairs and made sure she reached her room before returning to Ophelia.

She was still sitting at the table, holding her mug against her chest and staring at nothing in particular. There was a fragility in her frame that he hadn't seen since the early days of her recovery. He wondered what had happened between the two women in his absence... or if his fatigue had made him too harsh.

Without speaking, she stood and placed her half drunk tea in the sink, tucking her hair behind her ears and resting herself against the worktop. He followed suit, seeing it as his cue to say goodnight and return to Hogwarts. As he turned from the sink, her hand on his arm gently halted him. He looked at her questioningly.

Molly's words had echoed in her skull like a doomsayer's curse. Instead of hearing a plea to take from life what she could, she heard the things she'd never have otherwise. It had been a colossal effort to distract Molly into some semblance of cheerfulness, and when she'd left to go to bed, the weight of those words crushed down. Her mind went back to the attempt at casting magic. She'd decided to accept her limitations and focus on what she could do... and she was good, very good, at her variant of wandless magic. With her decision, there had been a sense of liberation and strength, and she had seen where she belonged. But Molly's words had thrown her back into the chaos of losing her way.

When Severus had returned, her insides had squirmed unpleasantly. Everything suddenly seemed to hinge on Severus... it always had. When her life had been suffocating, she had sought out Severus to give her air. When she'd needed peace and balance, she'd fled to Lucius' basement. It had always been Severus. Combined with Sirius' observation, her mind was throbbing with the possibilities. But... what if she'd been right all those years ago, and Severus was beyond her grasp.

She couldn't stay next to him, so she moved to empty her mug. Severus merely followed her, keeping close and increasing her anguish. She knew where she belonged...with Severus...but she wondered if she would ever fit in. Could she be happy living half a life? Severus began to move away, and her loneliness made her decision.

His eyes had always fascinated her. They could be as hard as flint and as soft as liquid ink. She could be thrilled and soothed by a simple glance. And now, she was lost in them, desperately looking for a safe harbour. Severus gave her no help, and she knew he wouldn't. She'd only ever know if she acted. So she did.

Perhaps Molly had said something to worry her, but Ophelia had been different since he'd collected his supplies. Over tea and talk, her responses had been crisp and careful, and then she'd collapsed into herself. Now, her hand burned his arm and her gaze was piercing and searching. Slipping into her mind would have been easy, but he'd learnt that there were things beyond people's eyes that were better not known. Instead, he waited. It didn't take long.

She lunged forward, her eyes bright and hungry. He had the time to inhale and raise his eyebrows in surprise before her soft mouth pressed against his. She took advantage of his shock by slipping her tongue past his teeth. Her hands wound around his neck, the fingers diving into his hair, gripping and twisting in their urgency. And that was what it was... urgent.

His mouth opened for her, letting her in, and his hands held her shoulders, pulling her closer. The kiss was clumsy and hard, but there would be time later to taste and explore; for now, it was a race for release between snatched breaths and senseless sounds with more meaning than words. The wet softness of her mouth on his was enough to stopper his thoughts, and he longed to continue, but he was in Black's kitchen with Black's cousin. Closing his eyes, he eased away. She followed, not wanting to lose his warmth and the opportunity.

He studied her face; it was flushed, and her eyes were dark. Those delicious lips were swollen and red from their kiss, and through them, her breath came in rapid gulps. Her hands still gripped his hair, his scalp burning pleasurably from the pressure, and her thighs pressed warmly around his from where he had pushed his leg between hers.

"I'm not doing this in Black's kitchen," he growled out, pressing his forehead against hers. She almost bested his resolve by nipping along his jaw line. "Although... the look on his face... would be worth... the hexes."

"Where?" she demanded hotly, tugging hard on his hair to expose his throat to her lips and teeth.

He pulled away. "Have you ever done a Side-Along Apparition?"

Author's Notes: Many thanks to Falconfalmorgan for beta reading the story, especially after this has had to be relegated to a dusty shelf for so long. Also, apologies to those who have been reading this story. I hope you can accept that life can be very demanding and consuming. Thank you.

Chapter Thirty two

Chapter 32 of 36

Standing tall, Smith meets death on his own terms, and Molly pushes Ophelia to make a move.

He knew he was dead. He knew the moment he'd opened his eyes and saw what they'd done. Oh, for a few minutes, his brain had tried to hide it from him, but Smith had never been one for denying the truth. Unfortunately, facing death with his eyes wide open wasn't as important or as soothing as he hoped it would be. He still felt a pillock—but at least his demise would be interesting.

He wished he could lash out to expel some of the burning frustration, but the drug was still oozing around his body, sapping his strength. It wouldn't have helped, anyway; the chain around his ankle looked suitably heavy. All he could do was let his gaze drift around his cell.

It was small, only just long enough to let him lie flat, and if he could extend his arms, then his hands would touch both walls. It was a broom cupboard. There were wooden notches in the wall where the upright brooms would be nestled so the bristles were kept clear of the floor—no flier worth his salt would tolerate his bristles getting bent out of shape from resting on the floor. There was a small, slatted window up above to allow for proper ventilation, and the door was solid—half a foot thick wooden panels inlaid with iron—to prevent unruly brooms breaking free. Unfortunately, that also meant it was sound-proof.

Not that he'd be calling for help. Only the cream of society could afford broom cupboards, and that meant he was most likely the guest of a pure-blood, which all in all suggested he would be getting no help. A conclusion further enforced by the fact that the chain around his ankle was attached to the end of one the brooms—a Nimbus 2000 by the looks of it: devilishly fast and nimble. So, he knew he was dead; he just hadn't physically caught up, yet.

That isn't to say he hadn't tried to escape or send some message to his comrades... to Moody. Whatever Rookwood had stuck in him had also affected his magic, and although he was adept at wandless non-verbal magic, he could barely summon the magic to disturb the dust motes in the air. His Patronus—despite his recollections of his beloved wife—failed to even glow reassuringly, and his efforts at untangling the chain had just resulted in a headache.

Moody would have to find out the hard way.

oXo

She felt something soft mould around her back and shoulders and the hard weight of Severus above her, pressing her deeper. Puffs of dust assaulted her nose, but they were lost in the smell of his musk and excitement. Apparition always left her breathless, and the heady combination of travel and Snape were pushing her beyond what she could control: it was terrifying and liberating. The spell deserted them, and their limbs wrapped around each other, gravity crushing them together.

Her hands slid up his back, as if to ground her, and up into his hair which fell in soft, slick strands between her fingers. His face was in shadow, but she could see the glint in his eyes, and she couldn't stop the shiver his gaze elicited.

Just as she felt herself begin to burn in that stare, he turned his head and flicked his tongue over the soft flesh on her inner wrist. The move surprised her, not only for its seeming uniqueness but also for the response it inspired in her belly. When he dragged his tongue languidly over the spot he had just tasted, she groaned and twisted beneath him. But then he stopped; save for his chest heaving with deep breaths, he was frozen.

Was he waiting for something? Had she done something to cause him concern? He was watching her intently. Those black eyes, those chips of onyx, were scrutinising her face as though searching for something specific. A frown marred her sweat-beaded forehead, and she brought her hands round to cup his stern face.

Her thumb slid down in a gentle arc to brush the corner of his lips. He jolted at the contact, jarred out of the fugue that had gripped him. His pale lips parted, and the tip of his tongue caressed the pad of her thumb. It was gentle; it was slow. It was erotic beyond words.

Her breath snatched and her guts rolled. She had no idea what to do, yet urgently *needed* to do something. Her last experience had been Regulus; then, it had seemed so straightforward, but now... She pushed her thumb into his mouth, earning a groan and the exquisite pleasure of seeing his eyes flutter closed. Warm lips closed, trapping her digit, and Severus' tongue curled around it.

His own hands brushed along hers until he could grip her wrists. While sucking and gently dragging his teeth over her thumb, he pulled her other hand down towards the pillow, holding it fast beside her head. He could hear her breaths... feel her breasts brush against his chest. When her thighs shifted, he was overwhelmed with lust. He'd waited, longed for this for twenty years... agonising over and relishing images of her plucked from another's mind. He wanted to eradicate the memories of Regulus; he wanted, needed, her mind to be full of him.

"Severus..."

He was selfish and greedy. He'd waited, he'd longed... he'd grieved, and then he'd denied. Now he had what he wanted and needed. She was here, trembling beneath him... sighing his name.

His name!

It came as a whisper, as a sigh, as silk against skin. His name had never seemed so evocative and passionate... so promising and sensual. He shuddered at the sound. Beneath his palms, he could feel her pulse fluttering wildly. From her trembling lips, he could hear breathy moans, and his gaze was drawn to the shadows playing across her pale skin. He let her thumb slip from his mouth, nipping it before her hand fell to the pillow, where her fingers desperately plunged into her hair, gripping it.

"Ophelia..." he muttered, lingering over the 'o' so her name was like a gasp.

Those dark eyes closed and her mouth fell open; Severus smirked and wondered if her name from his lips had affected her as profoundly as his from hers. He repeated her name, drawing it out, teasing her with it. She squirmed and pressed her head back into the grey pillow. The hollow at the base of her throat demanded attention, so he delicately traced the edge of a collar bone from her shoulder to that delicious shadow. Beneath his fingers, he felt her shiver, goosebumps blossoming across her skin.

She mewled like a cat, arching her back and grimacing as if in pain. He knew that pain. He knew the ache and the throb and the burning heat that a single touch could engender. It was hell, and it was divine.

He took advantage of her agony and dipped his head to taste the flesh on her neck. She eagerly obliged, tilting her head, allowing him access to ease her suffering. Her skin was smooth and warm beneath his questing lips. Tendons stood taut as she strained, and he bit and licked his way from throat to ear. The soft, rounded lobe slipped between his teeth, and he gently suckled, relishing the weight of it against his tongue.

A hand suddenly gripped his hair, twisting painfully, and he let slip a snarl of appreciation. A nail raked across his scalp, and a moan burst from his chest. He bit down on the tasty morsel, earning a squeal and a harsh tug on his hair. Severus released his treat and lifted his head, seeking her eyes. In the gloom, they looked as dark as his own, and in their depths, he searched for approval... permission... desire.

She was confused... confused and frustrated beyond reason. He kept *stopping!* His face was carefully bland, which she knew meant his mind was awl. She could see the mania of his thoughts in his eyes. It was difficult to focus on them without drowning, but she bullied her mind until it stopped thinking how nice he smelt, and how his hands burned her skin, and how she could still feel his trail of kisses and nips along her neck. She'd seen something similar a long time ago. In a crystal cavern...

It was impossible to examine the memory, and constructing a stratagem to deal with Severus Snape was even more ludicrous, given that her body ached and her brain was slowly melting. Not that she was sure she could do it when not inebriated on lust and longing. But through the need and the urgency, a long-fettered instinct reared its head and broke its chains.

oXo

Smith heard the footsteps. They were coming for him. As a romantic young Auror, he'd seen his death in battle, curses and spells exploding around him as he fought to the last, dying bravely and with honour. As a jaded old man, he just wanted to die with as much dignity as he could muster. It was all he had. The door swung open smoothly and silently. Life was rarely as dramatic as one imagined. But when he saw the masks, he knew life was as nasty and as pain-filled as one feared.

"Come on, old man," sneered the farthest of the two Death Eaters. "You're needed outside."

To his surprise, he was helped to his feet by the other wizard, who used his shorter stature to drape Smith's arm comfortably across his shoulders. The other masked man grabbed the Nimbus and walked out, the chain clattering unnervingly against the stone floor as it slithered out.

He was led out to a tiled courtyard. Torches cast their warm, flickering, golden light, and the gathered Death Eaters cast their long shadows. They formed a semicircle before him, and in the centre stood Voldemort. The chain was placed carefully at Voldemort's feet, then the two escorts slipped to the edges, their duty done.

"Auror Smith... Onesiphorus," Voldemort whispered smoothly, as though greeting a comrade.

The sound of his name caused a stir in the standing wizards. Smith let his gaze drift slowly over them, taking in as many details as possible. It was all he could do, really. That and die like an old Auror. Merlin! He'd make them dread killing an old Auror.

His gaze returned slowly to the Dark Lord: He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named. Smith would be damned if he was going to be cowed by a former classmate—one who had failed to beat him in Defence against the Dark Arts! It may have been easy to beguile these... *children*, but it was harder when someone remembered all those things you did as a boy at school.

"Mr Riddle... *Tom!*"

Outrage unfurled, and he felt his lips twitch in triumph. He'd make his murder hard for them. One wry laugh from Voldemort quelled his followers.

"Very good, Smith," he sighed. "I knew you wouldn't disappoint me. Just as I know that you'll play your part in this... drama with exceptional skill."

At this, another broom was presented. Smith watched as one of the masked men stepped forward and magicked an equally thick and heavy chain into being. He wasn't shocked when it was attached to his free ankle. He had been right: his death would be interesting... and also messy.

"You may not be aware," Voldemort continued conversationally, "but there was once a man—your namesake—who made a pilgrimage for the sake of his faith—much as you have done, if faith and duty were synonymous."

Again, the gathered wizards stirred... eagerly and with predatory interest.

"I know of St Onesiphorus," Smith muttered disdainfully—he'd allow them no fun at his expense.

Voldemort blinked slowly and then sneered as he realised he had very little power over the Auror standing before him. The man knew what was coming, and yet he stood tall.

Smith attacked him with the only weapon he had left. "I don't know what's after this, " he growled, "but I go there with grace and peace, and there ain't nothin' that ye can do to make me fear ye or cause me to bow one inch to ye." He leant forward and pulled back his lips, the scar twisting his face into a fearsome expression. "Ye fear it, dread it... ye fret to stop what must 'appen to all men at the end of their span."

The curse arced through the air, hitting him squarely in the chest, snatching his breath and sending him crashing to the floor. His scream lodged behind his firmly clenched teeth. He wouldn't *give* them anything: not his life, not his dignity, and not his screams.

"I do not fear Death," Voldemort hissed into his ringing ears. "I will be its master. You will not fear Death; you will fear me."

Smith spat out bile and turned his aching head towards the Dark Lord. "No one can escape Death," he croaked. "'E's a canny 'unter, and 'e'll find ye as sure as ye will be brought down."

Voldemort inched closer, so that his lips were against Smith's temple. "Death could walk at my side and not do so much as caress my shoulder."

Unseen, Smith grinned triumphantly. Tom would never change: he had been proud then, and he was proud now. Smith used it.

"Ye arrogant toe-rag," he gasped. "There ain't no power to stop 'im."

In his ear, Voldemort laughed softly. "There is. Every *child* knows of it. But even without it, I cannot be touched by Death. I have no need for whatever is 'after this', for there never will be anything other than this for me... for you."

"Ye will die, and ye'll die incomplete."

Voldemort pulled away to look Smith in the eye. There was the smallest flicker of doubt in the scarlet depths, but it was quickly snuffed out. "You are a clever Auror. How many others know, I wonder?" The smug smile fell back into place. "No matter; not even my Death Eaters know what or where they are. The destruction of one has done me no harm—as you can plainly see!—and I have more important things to occupy my time. I will not concern myself, and you will die: alone, useless and unknown."

Voldemort stood, turning to his Death Eaters, who, sensing their time had come, darted forwards. Harsh hands grabbed at Smith, hauling him to his feet where his eyes latched onto the two riders mounting the brooms. Despite it all, Smith grinned. He would die an Auror. With a wave of Voldemort's pale hand, the riders lowered on their

brooms and hurtled into the night.

oXo

He traced the outline of the wound. Ophelia had healed the others when they'd returned to Grimmauld Place, but he'd hidden this one beneath his cuff. Watching her face as she had applied the salve had been a delight—the way it flickered between sympathy and pleasure. He knew—and rumours would be circulating Hogsmeade in the morning of just how severely the shack was haunted—that she'd taken pleasure from what they'd shared, just as he knew that she would have the same thoughts and questions that had plagued him as a young man. Whereas, he had had no one, she had him to reassure her, make her know that despite how it looked, he had found a deep release through what she had done. He couldn't quite explain why he desired, needed, it to be this way... he just did.

His fingernail grazed over the sore crescent on his inner left wrist, and he inhaled sharply. The red curve reminded him of what they'd shared, of the relief and connection she offered... and the joy she inspired. The sharp sting reminded him she had provided him with everything he had needed. Her parting kiss—sweet and gentle against his chapped lips—had assured that all was well between them. They had become lovers. The thought warmed him as he extinguished the candle and slid under the duvet.

Miles away, Ophelia felt herself ache in delicious places. Even in the kitchen, she could still smell him... them. She wondered if the scent was haunting her, or if she actually carried it with her. Her lips curved up into a wicked smile at the thought of Sirius sniffing around her; would he figure out who had claimed her? The thought, for some reason, delighted her. Maybe that was it? Severus had marked her, claimed her: made it clear where she belonged. And in his way, he had assured her that he belonged to her.

Despite the thrum of her nerves and the tingle across her skin, she was exhausted. The kitchen was as she had left it. Her eyes lingered over the portents of her evening—the askew chairs and the empty mugs on the drainer. Her angst at Molly's words seemed so long ago, and her own fears and dread had reduced to the echoes of a bad dream: she felt foolish for being so terrified. She straightened the chairs and moved to rinse out the mugs. When she looked up, she caught her reflection in the window. She didn't question who looked back at her, nor did she turn away. She knew who she was, and she found that she was content with the knowledge.

Author's notes: At last! I can only hope I am forgiven for the delay. Pending beta approval on the last chapter, this is now complete. For those who have stayed with this: thank you. I hope you enjoy it.

Chapter Thirty three

Chapter 33 of 36

Events begin to stretch and challenge the Order. Minerva is struck down by Umbridge's Aurors, and Moody finds out what happened to Smith. At Grimmauld Place, there is a moment of levity and respite between Molly and Ophelia.

Molly wiped the tears from her cheek with the back of her hand and sniffed loudly. Through watering eyes, she looked up and away from the source of her torment and caught sight of Ophelia standing in the garden.

"She'll catch her death!" she muttered, noting the fine but determined drizzle drenching the courtyard.

Clucking under her breath, Molly swiftly decided that the old-fashioned way was that way for a reason and dropped the knife into the sink as she pulled her wand free. Looking down, she glared at the onions and sliced her wand through the air. The glistening white orbs fell apart into small, neatly chopped cubes.

Directing the chopped onions into a bowl, Molly quickly freshened herself and the kitchen up and removed her apron. Oddly, her urge to get the woman in from the cold rain fled when her hand gripped the door handle. Earlier in the month, Arthur had almost accused her of 'interfering', insisting she be careful around Ophelia. His words had been quite wounding: *as if I'm a meddling busy-body!*

But there had been something in his advice. She remembered the strange look in Ophelia's eye when they'd bickered over a Cottage Pie. Frowning, she forced her hand down until the door clicked open. Ophelia was more settled now; she certainly smiled more over the last few days. It was silly to be worried, but... Her hand slipped from the handle. Was this something she should involve herself with?

It was quite understandable to be wary of her—Ophelia had been a devotee of the Dark Lord and his arts—and there was something about the young woman which seemed to deter any kind of relationship. Not that she was rude or unhelpful. Ophelia, in recent weeks, had been a Godsend, helping her tend to the Order members who had trudged through, either hungry or in need of healing. Whatever Molly had asked her to do, she had done. Neither could Molly sense any bitterness or resentment in Ophelia for doing such tasks.

While she pondered, she walked back to the window. Her boys knew she could see a lie a mile away, and it wasn't through Legilimency; it was because she used her eyes and watched. In Ophelia's stance, she saw someone lost in thoughts, trying to find a way through. Molly shuddered at what could be going through the witch's mind. Not that she had much to help her construct any ideas. Ophelia was a mystery, one that Dumbledore had made almost impossible to solve.

Behind her, the house was quiet. It was designed to hold silence and concentrate it. At the Burrow, the smallest sound echoed joyously from room to room, but here, sound was trapped, smothered... deadened. Suddenly, Molly craved sound, some noise that life was still going on and that she was a part of it. In the end, it was selfishness that broke down her reservations.

"Ophelia, dear," she called from the doorway, pulling her cardigan around her, shielding herself against the fine rain. "Come in before you catch cold."

Tea has always been an important support and prop: a brew and a ceremony that could mend wounds, heal rifts, soften mood, ease tension and put the world to rights. There was something so homely and unthreatening about it, and it was a familiar ritual, ignoring boundaries and bringing everyone to a common level. In times past, it had been a soothing action to keep her mind sane as the world collapsed, and now it helped to create a small cocoon where two women could sit, drink tea and gossip.

But Ophelia wasn't drinking. Her appetite for tea was as remote as her mind. Molly watched those delicate pale fingers gently drum against the mug and how her compressed lips moved, as though they were desperate to declare some amazing truth. And then she saw it. She saw through Ophelia's lie. It was difficult to hide her smirk. At last, Molly felt superior.

oXo

Arthur paused. He knew that laugh. It held undertones to make him blush and overtones keyed to inspire caution. When a woman laughed like that, it was at the expense of men. He hung his coat up and smiled gently despite his concern. It was good to hear laughter in this house, and it thrilled him to hear it coming from his wife's throat. As he

walked to the kitchen, he wondered who was sharing such levity with Molly. As his hand touched the handle, realisation made his scalp tingle and palms sweat. Oh Merlin! He'd never be able to look Ophelia in the eye again.

"Good evening, Molly... Ophelia." That wasn't so bad; Ophelia had the good grace not to smirk. He bent down to kiss Molly on the cheek and noticed how her lips quivered and her eyes sparkled with lascivious glee. He straightened and coughed gently. *No*, he mused, *this wasn't bad at all*.

It was a very strange but lovely turnabout. The last time he'd seen them in the kitchen, there had been a nasty tension in the air, and he'd felt obliged to diffuse it before it escalated into something terrible. Now, they worked together to prepare dinner. It was as though the house had been given a good airing. And it soothed Arthur.

A fresh cup of tea was placed before him, and he was surprised to see Ophelia smiling down at him; he returned the smile, thanking her and easing forward to pick up the welcomed drink. Over the rim of the mug, he watched the way she moved around the kitchen and leant in to listen to Molly. A smile played around her lips, and her eyes, when he had caught them with his own, reflected a newfound gaiety and lightness. He turned his attention to Molly, who was basking in Ophelia's attention and presence. Oh, he knew what had made his wife laugh like that and what now bound these two women; he just wondered who had brought it about. The mug stopped on the way back to the table and his eyebrows twitched upwards when his mind offered a candidate. He eased back in the chair and smirked, hiding it behind the *Daily Prophet*.

Dinner had been the happiest she'd had in a while. Arthur had followed Molly and treated her like one of the family, and Sirius had seemingly caught their good mood, adding to the feeling of camaraderie. Molly chatted about her children, sharing her joy and concerns, Arthur divulged his love of all things Muggle, and Ophelia found that she could excite and dazzle him further—until Molly shushed them. Between forkfuls, Sirius joined in, sharing some of his ideas and glowing with some newfound energy and purpose. Obviously, the last few days with Remus had lifted his spirits. Ophelia didn't mention the cries she'd heard, but they seemed to have released a torrent of pain, leaving Sirius lighter; he had found some relief, and she was glad.

Ophelia surprised herself by sharing some of her stories; she told them of Mrs Mathieson, of her life in Whitehaven in a one-bedroom Council flat, and her constant need to find something that she couldn't define. She knew now what it was, but she kept that secret to herself... Molly knew though—her smirk said as much.

The meal was rounded off with coffee, and soon, they went their separate ways; Ophelia was none too surprised by Arthur and Molly's rapid departure, and she giggled at the blush Arthur flashed when she caught his eye on the way out. Sirius had excused himself soon afterwards, leaving Ophelia to the pile of dishes. The sudden emptiness was quite daunting, but she accepted it. She knew she wouldn't be empty again.

oXo

"How is she?" Dumbledore asked even before Snape had straightened from the fireplace.

Severus dragged a hand through his hair and faced Dumbledore's almost frantic anxiety. "She'll be fine; Poppy is transferring Minerva to St Mungos in the morning."

Severus watched him sink into an armchair and stare up at him with a pained expression. The shadows seemed to grow around them, swallowing the very air in the sitting room. Outside, rain battered at the small leaded windows, and a wind howled down the chimney.

"I doubt it reflects the severity of her injuries," Severus soothed. "Umbridge was eager to question Minerva, so Poppy arranged the transfer to help frustrate her plans. Although..." he added quietly, his throat constricting with emotion—he could still see the stunners striking and sending her arcing through the air, "I believe the rest will help Minerva's recovery; at the school, she'll feel compelled to return to her duties sooner than is wise."

Dumbledore scrutinised the wan face before him and knew that Severus had feared the very worst—they all had. He glanced down to his own trembling hands: he had too. It had been inevitable. He knew this, but knowing it would happen and then seeing it realised in the attack on Minerva were two entirely different things.

"I cannot stay long," Snape said urgently, interrupting Dumbledore's thoughts. "Several Death Eaters have been assigned the task of breaking into the Department of Mysteries." Dumbledore stiffened and Snape swallowed. "From the level of agitation within the ranks, I suspect they'll do it soon: over the next few days."

They both paused; they knew what it meant. Voldemort was after the prophecy. While they studied each other's faces, seeing the shared realisation, Dumbledore saw Snape's cheek spasm and noted a corresponding, sympathetic tremor in the dark man's hands. He quickly dismissed querying it; he knew how the Cruciatus could linger, its pain echoing in abused muscles. The Dark Lord had once obviously remembered Snape's incomplete rendition of the prophecy, and as he now pondered it, so his body remembered the Dark Lord's retribution.

"I'll keep the Order at the ready and alert those who'll be watching over it."

Dumbledore stared at the hearth long after Snape had disappeared in a green flash. He knew the Order would want to take the opportunity to destroy Voldemort; they would hasten to the Ministry, but Dumbledore knew one bitter truth they didn't. Harry had to kill Voldemort... and to do that, he had to die. The thought stole his strength and composure, and he crumpled up in the chair, dry sobs wracking his body. The only thing they could do in the coming days was make it as difficult for Voldemort as possible until Harry was ready.

oXo

Moody left the elevator, a deep scowl firmly in place. Rookwood had gone on sick leave, and no one had seen Smith for days. It galled him that no one seemed to care about his friend's absence. No one should become so invisible that their disappearance caused no concern; no wonder Smith had been so hungry.

His metal leg clanked against the tiled floor of the foyer, and he hoped it echoed right down the very bowels of the Ministry. He hoped that each footfall rang out his anger and disappointment; he hoped it shamed them into action. Such was his anger that when a hand landed on his shoulder, he whirled around with a sneer, his eye swivelling grotesquely.

The owner of the hand stepped back, looking pale, but she'd known Moody for a long time and quickly restored her decorum. She'd been a receptionist at the Ministry for nearly fifty years, and she had dealt with Wizarding society at its best and worst: very little shocked her for long.

"Sorry, Maud," he mumbled apologetically.

"I've never seen you so riled," she replied cautiously, her keen, hazel eyes taking in his stern features and tense stance.

"Toothache," he lied smoothly.

"I'm surprised you still have some of your own teeth left," she quipped, ignoring his mock grimace.

"There's a lot of the original me left, ye know," he grumbled. "They weren't *that* good." He ignored her amused smirk. "What is it that yer want, Maud?"

Her smile evaporated, and she lifted a cream envelope. "It came late last night," she said tightly, part in frustration and part with burning curiosity. "It's charmed so that only you can open it."

"Ye could tell that just by lookin' at it?" he asked innocently.

"Let's just say that a few of your fellow Aurors will have to use their teeth to cast spells for the next few hours." Moody smirked, and she tried to school her face away from reciprocating. "I tried to trace it, but it failed."

Moody's humour slipped away. "Thanks, Maud."

She knew that he meant more than just for delivering the letter; the Ministry didn't have a policy of tracing letters. He carefully took it from her fingers, but she didn't let go. Surprised, he looked up into her concerned eyes.

"Be careful," she whispered.

He nodded gratefully. She knew how talented she was, and the letter being untraceable had no doubt alarmed her. He winked and grinned. "As I told ye, they aren't that good."

She smiled weakly and let him go.

Moody didn't know why, but he went to Smith's house. He turned on the lights, made a cup of tea and sat down, sipping the hot liquid and staring at the letter. It scared him. He feared what it contained because he was damned sure that it had something to do with Smith.

The cup was empty, and he could prevaricate no longer. Picking it up, he examined the envelope carefully, casting spells to elucidate more about it. It was remarkably plain—too plain. Traces had been magically stripped from it to make it as anonymous as possible. Placing it flat on the table, he used his wandtip to unseal and open it up. Something glinted in the light, and underneath, he could see the loops and curves of a written note.

Sick with nerves, he levitated the contents out: a handwritten note and a glass phial. His magical eye told him that the phial contained a memory—it was stained a subtle pink, indicating that it had been ripped from its host. Crushing down his despair, he focused on the note.

The Order will fall... just as this one has.

Short, sharp... sickening.

He needed anger... he needed hate. Without something, he'd never touch the phial.

Smith's face loomed up, and with it came the needed emotion. With a scream, he grabbed the memory and Disapparated. His cry heralded his arrival, shocking Dumbledore from his thoughts of Minerva and the prophecy.

"Get that damned Pensieve of yers," he yelled.

Dumbledore said nothing. He simply waved his hand and kept his eyes fixed on Moody's wrathful face. From a small cupboard, the grey bowl flew smoothly to the coffee table. Moody fell to his knees, and Dumbledore slipped down next to him.

There was the merest hesitation, then Moody poured the silvery contents into the bowl, where they swirled and coiled as unpleasantly as his guts.

"Alastor..."

A blazing, blue eye fixed him in place. "Don't dare ask *if* I want yer 'elp... ye're goin' in with me, ye conniving bastard, whether ye like it or not."

Shapes emerged from the grey mist: Smith, standing tall; a curve of masked Death Eaters; and the Dark Lord. Their gaze followed the chains attached to his ankles and brooms, before seeing the shared horror reflected in their eyes. The memory continued to unfurl, and the tiled courtyard rolled out, the tall spruces lining the distant paths bloomed, and the star-speckled sky covered them like a blanket. In the distance, they could make out the rounded domes of a forest. It was common to many Manor houses; it could be anywhere.

Moody and Dumbledore also caught sight of faint echoes over the image, as though other memories were superimposed. It explained the pink tinge to the liquid memory: this part of the memory had been forced out to join the one that had been intentionally extracted.

"You may not be aware," Voldemort declared, punctuating the heavy silence, "but there was once a man—your namesake—who made a pilgrimage for the sake of his faith—much as you have done, if faith and duty were synonymous."

Moody's scowl deepened as he shot daggers at Voldemort. Around them, the Death Eaters muttered and shifted expectantly.

"I know of St Onesiphorus," Smith responded bitterly.

Moody's anger momentarily withered as shock took control; a whimper escaped his throat. He'd hoped he'd been wrong about the chains.

"I don't know what's after this," he continued in a low growl, "but I go there with grace and peace, and there ain't nothin' that ye can do to make me fear ye or cause me to bow one inch to ye."

Moody let out a vicious snarl and clapped his hands together. "Ye hear 'im," he hissed, slapping Dumbledore on the shoulder. "Gods, Smith, ye're a mad sod."

"Ye fear it, dread it... ye fret to stop what must 'appen to all men at the end of their span."

They watched as Smith was knocked to the ground, where he writhed under the Cruciatius. Moody stiffened, pointing a trembling finger at the oblivious Dark Lord.

"Ye cannae make 'im scream," Moody roared. "'E'll never give ye the satisfaction."

Spittle flew from Moody's lips as rage and fierce pride ran amok within him. Smith had been granted his wish: he was dying an Auror, and the Dark Lord couldn't beat him.

The curse ended, and Voldemort swooped down upon the prostrate Auror, his breathing hard and rapid.

"I do not fear Death. I will be its master. You will not fear Death; you will fear me."

"No one can escape Death," Smith croaked. "'E's a canny 'unter, and 'e'll find ye as sure as ye will be brought down."

They almost missed what Voldemort whispered into Smith's ear, such was the roar of blood in their ears.

"Death could walk at my side and not do so much as caress my shoulder."

From their vantage point, they saw Smith's triumphant grin, and his allies silently applauded him.

"Ye arrogant toe-rag," he gasped. "There ain't no power to stop 'im."

Voldemort moved away and laughed softly. "There is. Every *child* knows of it. But even without it, I cannot be touched by Death. I have no need for whatever is 'after this', for there never will be anything other than this for me... for you."

"Ye will die, and ye'll die incomplete."

Moody and Dumbledore stepped closer, eager to hear what was said; it had been orchestrated by Smith, after all—his dying wish that they know.

"You are a clever Auror. How many others know, I wonder?" The smug smile fell back into place. "No matter; not even my Death Eaters know what or where they are. The

destruction of one has done me no harm—as you can plainly see!—and I have more important things to occupy my time. I will not concern myself, and you will die: alone, useless and unknown.”

They had the time to see the chains pull taut, and then their world became a confusing mix of soaring shapes and shadows. Despite standing still in Smith’s memory, they felt sick from the dizzying scene as it hurtled past them, their minds tricked into believing they were pulled along with Smith.

Moody wept as he caught sight of the approaching trees. From ahead, he heard the Death Eaters laugh, and then they dove between the boughs. He couldn’t block out the horrific thumps and thuds as Smith was dragged through the forest, hitting branch after branch after branch. Dumbledore had to delve down for reserves he doubted he possessed to keep from collapsing. They couldn’t go on, and they marvelled that Smith had suffered this and not cried out. Just when Dumbledore thought to end it, the riders pulled up into the sky, lifting them free of the treetops. They purposefully slowed so Smith could see what they were doing.

“Oh Merlin,” breathed Moody, his rage dying in his chest as he watched the very last moments of his friend’s life.

He looked down at the battered, bruised and broken body. He longed to reach out and hold him, to cradle him, to tell him all the things that old Aurors and friends do not tell each other. Smith was unrecognisable when his eyes finally blinked away enough tears for him to see clearly.

It was coming closer; soon it would be over. In the corner of his eye, he saw the brooms diverge and the chains moving apart in opposite directions.

Then, he heard it. What he had thought was the wind was gathering together to form words.

“Moody...”

Stifling a sob, he focused, leaning closer to catch his friend’s final words.

Smith cried out, using the last of strength to say what he longed to say. “I... di... die Auror.”

Then the chains pulled.

Dumbledore collapsed into the chair. Above him, he could hear Alastor breathing heavily and the creak of his boots as he swayed on the spot. They could still hear the wind screaming, the snapping twigs, the groaning boughs and each heavy impact. Above the smell of smoke from the fire, they caught the subtle smell of sweat, dirt and sap. It would haunt them for years.

Moody finally managed to cling to something: duty.

“Smith ‘elped us learn a bit more than we ever ‘oped to,” he ground out, forcing the words past his constricted throat.

Dumbledore closed his eyes and inhaled slowly. “He isn’t aware of the destruction of his Horcruxes.”

“Aye, and he’s confirmed that ‘e’s after the Hallows.”

After an uncomfortable pause, Dumbledore stood and waved his hand. Two glasses emerged from the air to hover between them. Moody reached inside his coat and removed his hipflask. He swallowed and blinked away a tear, then poured two healthy measures. The wizards took the tumblers and raised them high.

“To Smith,” Dumbledore uttered thickly.

“To the best and maddest of us all,” Moody said through clenched teeth. “E died like an old Auror, and Voldemort will grow to dread it.” He downed his whiskey in one, fiery gulp. “May ye have that peace, ye brave bastard. Ye earned it,” he added with a sob.

Chapter Thirty four

Chapter 34 of 36

Sirius’ fears are realised when Harry is tricked into rushing to the Department of Mysteries. Lupin and Ophelia have to deal with the consequences, and Dumbledore seeks some peace of mind.

The next morning was sombre. Molly had used the Floo to inform them of Minerva’s hospitalisation following her assault as Aurors tried to arrest Hagrid. Sirius and Remus had been sanguine, recalling Minerva’s strength, but Ophelia saw their concern in their shared glances and silence. Ophelia chewed her lower lip and tucked a strand of hair behind her ear. She was glad to escape to her room to mull over her own thoughts. This was war. She’d experienced it before and suffered its demands and greed. As she sat on her bed, watching the clouds drift past the window, she wondered how she could feel so hurt and yet so understanding of what had happened. Minerva had come close to dying...the thought brought tears to her eyes...but deep down, she was hard: people died in war.

By mid-morning, she sauntered down to the lab to finish a batch of potions. The thought of work lifted her spirits, and she considered making a potion for Sirius, so he could visit Minerva. It would be easy enough to make Polyjuice. Her work occupied her until just after lunch and her stomach growled its impatience. Storing the full bottles in the rack, she turned off the camping stove and wiped down her workbench. Casting a critical eye over her workplace, she moved to the kitchen to make food.

Sirius joined her, the aroma enticing him in from the parlour. He smiled and sat down.

“Smells good,” he rumbled.

“It’s pumpkin soup,” she supplied. “I suppose you’d like some?”

“Wouldn’t dare to insult the cook by saying no.”

“Very smooth,” she chided good-humouredly.

The soup was delicious, and they ate in companionable silence. It seemed that they’d become accustomed to their new personas and roles. Sirius knew that his little Ophelia was gone, and Ophelia had relinquished her destructive grip on the idea that Sirius had been responsible for Regulus’ destiny. It was a start to a new relationship. Sirius asked for seconds, but before she could dish out another portion, a strange, screeching howl reverberated around the house.

"Buckbeak! Stay here, and I'll go see what's wrong," he said with a smile.

A few moments later, Sirius darted into the kitchen and skipped over to open up a cupboard and pull out the first-aid kit. He caught her questioning look on the way out and shouted out his answer as he pounded back to the bottom of the stairs.

"Cut on leg... needs bandages!" He stopped on the bull-nose and fixed her with a pointed look. "If I'm not down in five minutes, come and rescue me." And then he was off, taking the stairs two at a time.

"He won't hurt you," she called out. "He knows who gets him his ferrets." That and the hippogriff was actually fond of Sirius.

She started to clean away the dishes, listening to Buckbeak clawing and pawing the attic floor, as well as his occasional screech, but it was odd that it sounded so much like a harsh laugh. Shrugging, she slipped out of the kitchen and into the hallway. Her eyes caught sight of something, but when she looked again, she was left staring at the elephant-foot umbrella stand at the bottom of the stairs. She rubbed her eyes and peered into the gloom, but there was nothing to see.

The food, the lab-work and the stress of the morning conspired to exhaust her, so she climbed the stairs to her room and settled down to nap. A smile curved her lips. She loved the freedom to just curl up under the covers and close her eyes on the world. It was a luxury she cherished.

oXo

Later, angry voices drifted up from the hallway; alert and curious, she scurried to the top of the stairs, but shied away when she saw some of the Order crammed into the narrow hallway. She could see Sirius, red and shaking with rage, held back by an agitated Remus, while the others were stoppered behind the struggling pair. A young witch with purple hair looked on with a pained expression; a tall, dark-skinned wizard looked on impassively, and she could see Alastor Moody, pale and exhausted, glowering at the scene before him. They all seemed to share a dark look and then slipped past the two wizards and headed out of the door.

"You have to stay here," Lupin pleaded, his voice edged with desperation.

"Bollocks to that!" Sirius roared, ripping his friend's hands from his shoulders and pushing him away. "This is my godson we're talking about!"

He shrugged off Remus' attempt to grab him and stormed over to the door, yanking it open hard enough to bang it against the wall, but an outraged Lupin seized him around his shoulders and dragged him away.

"Someone has to stay here to tell Dumbledore about Harry; he doesn't know what's going on!" Lupin shouted in his face, pressing his squirming friend into the perishing plaster. "Sirius! Please!" he begged softly, beseechingly.

"Is that it?" Sirius demanded furiously, spittle flying from his mouth and his eyes blazing. "I'm a messenger boy now?" He pushed savagely at his friend, causing him to strike the side of the stairs heavily, the back of his head hitting the wood with a dull thud.

Remus reached up to clutch the back of his head, grimacing in pain, while Sirius panted, his fists clenched tightly.

"Sirius..." he said softly, obviously distressed and sympathetic, but Sirius seemed oblivious.

"Kreacher!" Sirius bellowed. "Kreacher, get your worthless hide here!"

Ophelia inched down the stairs, her breath bated, she couldn't follow what was transpiring. Who was Sirius' godson, and why was he danger? She'd never seen the Order so agitated, nor had she ever seen Sirius and Remus fight; it stirred up old dreads and despair. Her eyes widened as the old and thin house-elf appeared, bowing before Sirius, his lips curved up in an obsequious smile.

"What does Master want?" he asked.

"Tell Dumbledore that Harry has gone to the Department of Mysteries, and the Order has gone after him."

"Yes, Master," the elf replied slyly, his small eyes glittering with malicious glee.

"Happy now, Moony?" Sirius asked viciously.

Lupin nodded unhappily and followed Sirius as he charged out of the house, his face twisted into an ugly scowl.

Ophelia quickly descended the stairs, her eyes latched onto the shuddering elf. At first, she was concerned, thinking that Sirius' harsh tone and manner had upset the aged elf, but as she approached, she saw that Kreacher was actually laughing. She rounded the bottom of the stairs, seeing his spiteful and hate-filled face. He saw her, his eyes widening and his little shoulders slumping. His lips moved soundlessly, and then he clutched at his hair and swayed on the spot. She stepped closer, her hand outstretched to touch the almost hysterical elf. Despite his lack of memory and the fact that he had taken pains to stay out of her way, she still recalled his many kindnesses. But his laugh and expression had chilled her.

She swallowed, and her fingers slipped over his pale and wrinkled skin. Kreacher let out a howl and scurried away into the kitchen; she followed and saw the cupboard door shut as he slipped under the sink. She hesitated; that had always been his sanctuary, and she had always respected it, but now she needed some answers.

The hinges screeched as she pulled open the small doors to reveal the tatty nest he'd built for himself; where were the plush pillows and the soft covers that he'd treasured? Were these scrappy remains all that he had? She saw him burrowing beneath a pile of ripped and stained towels, and she reached in to grab at an ankle; the elf shrieked and kicked her hand away. Wondering if he remembered how she had slapped him, she felt a flicker of shame and bit her lip as she withdrew her arm.

"Kreacher did as he was told," he mumbled from the shadows. "Kreacher is a good elf."

"Of course," she soothed. "You've always been a good elf, Kreacher."

"I did it for my master," Kreacher declared frantically before shrinking back at hearing his voice echo in the cupboard. "Did it for him... for him. For the house of Black."

Ophelia bit down hard on her lower lip; something was festering in Kreacher's mind, and it was oozing out in his desperate words.

"Kreacher," she said gently, "please come out."

She licked her lips and sat back on her haunches. "It's Ophelia, Kreacher," she uttered tremulously. "I used to live here, a long time ago."

The elf made no sound, but she was aware that other sounds had stopped. Kreacher was listening attentively. A few minutes slipped by, but the elf still refused to come out, and she wouldn't abuse her power and order him out.

"You served Regulus well, Kreacher," she said, her voice cracking. "He was very proud of you."

In the gloom, she saw the bundle shift, and his head popped up from the twisted fabric. He tentatively began to crawl out, and then his focus darted over her shoulder; his eyes widened, and with a shriek, he withdrew so quickly that his body hit the back wall of his cupboard. She turned, and her throat went dry at the sight of a very angry Dumbledore.

"Ophelia, please leave, I wish to speak with Kreacher." His voice was calm and level, but his blue eyes seemed to shimmer with a simmering fury.

"What has he done?" she asked while standing, instinctively placing her body between him and the cupboard.

"That is what I wish to determine, Ophelia; now, please go."

"Is this about Sirius' godson?" She licked her lips nervously; she had no idea what had made Kreacher so vehement or Dumbledore so angry, but after decades of enforced ignorance, she had the desperate urge to know.

"I will not ask you again."

His voice was quiet and his tone gentle, but it seemed that it carried some undeniable power, and her feet propelled her through the kitchen door and out into the hallway. Confused, she returned to her room; who was Sirius' godson, and what was the cause of such furious consternation? What could Kreacher have done to warrant Dumbledore's wrath? What had Sirius rushed off to do, and why was Lupin still unhappy with a perfectly reasonable alternative? She would ask Sirius when he returned and then take the time to discover, from the shattered remains of their previous existences, exactly who they were.

oXo

How he got back to Grimmauld Place, he would never know, but he was in the kitchen, holding a steaming cup of tea and trying not to feel. In the background, he was aware of people milling around, hearing their hushed whispers, and noting the discreet distance they maintained. He tightened his grip on the mug, relishing the warmth that seeped into his skin and the pain that connected him to this place.

His mind went over the image of Sirius falling backwards, his expression trapped in a surprised grimace, and then slipping past that tattered, fluttering fabric. He recalled grabbing and holding a frantic Harry and then steeling himself to say that Sirius was gone, that he was dead. He had tried to stop Harry from running after Bellatrix, he was sure that he had held the boy tight enough, but some treacherous thought bubbled up like oil, black and foul, and he wondered if he hadn't *let* Harry slip free to wreak his revenge upon the witch. He hastily lifted the mug and took a deep, scalding sip.

One by one, the Order members left, their mumbled mourning echoing forlornly and uselessly in the hallway; no one needed to be told, no one needed it to be defined. By the time the door closed for the last time, his tea had gone cold, and a murky film had developed atop the still liquid. He stared at it, trying to ponder the mysteries of cooling tea rather than think about the awesome thing that was Sirius' death.

He had heard Dumbledore explain what had happened, he had listened to his description of how Kreacher had connived and helped to seal Sirius' fate and how it was mere good fortune and Snape's quick thinking that had prevented Voldemort from succeeding. He had listened, and all the while he had slowly died, he should have been more demanding, more forceful, instead of allowing Sirius to leave the house.

He didn't dare move, he didn't dare lift his head, if he did, he feared he would fly apart, that he would shatter, explode. But he couldn't let this ruin him. Very carefully, he stood and carried the mug over to the sink to pour away the tepid tea; he watched how the sepia stain spread across the white basin before paling as it thinned and slipped down the plughole. He rinsed out the mug and placed it on the wooden draining board. Slowly, he turned and looked around the gloomy kitchen; chairs were at odd angles, their former occupants hasty to leave and tend to their own wounds and agonies. The door was open, and he could see through to the front door, and a small thought, a small hopeful thought, forced its way past the selfish numbness and offered itself as some brave but deluded comfort. He thought that at least now, Sirius was free.

He screamed and howled. He grabbed the clean mug and threw it, hearing it smash against the doorframe. His anger still needed some outlet, and he shoved the table aside, the screech of table and chair legs against the tiled floor akin to his own pained howl. Some guttural instinct was taking hold, some ancient and primitive need flooded through him, he was hurting and he needed to ease it. He pulled jars and tubs off the worktop; the china pots smashed, and their contents spilt or oozed across the floor. He yanked out the drawers and flung them across the kitchen and then, in an instant, his anger fled...the sticking drawer that had baffled Sirius was held in his trembling grip, refusing to slip free from its runners.

He recalled that day with vicious clarity. He collapsed against the worktop, his breath coming out in one, long, shuddering whine. He squeezed his eyes shut, and his mouth hung open as he slid down the unit and onto the floor to weep amongst the coffee grounds, sugar and shattered pottery.

Arms lifted him up, and through puffy and exhausted eyes, he saw a familiar face. Her face was white and her eyes wild, but her hands were gentle. She pulled him close, and he fell into her embrace, needing the warmth, needing the connection. Without a murmur, he let her guide him out of the devastated kitchen and upstairs. He listened contentedly and greedily to her words of comfort while she lowered him onto the spare bed and tucked him in. Such was his need that when Ophelia moved away, he gripped her wrist, keeping her by his side.

She studied Lupin as his eyes fluttered closed and the tight hold slackened. She hadn't resisted when he'd grabbed her nor complained about the pain as his fingers tightened; she knew what it felt like to be so desperate... to fear being alone more than death itself. When his hold relaxed and his breathing evened out, she pulled off his shoes, her forehead furrowing at the sight of his heel peeking through a hole in his threadbare socks. It was quite chilly in the bare room, so she padded to her own room down the hallway to collect a blanket. Her ears strained for noises in the hallway, and she glanced down at the front door, hoping that it would open to reveal Sirius.

She had so many questions and unresolved fears, but she'd get nothing out of Lupin tonight, so she resigned herself to waiting. She tucked him in and went back to the kitchen, taking in the mess. Food splattered and smeared the floor, some of it clung to the walls. Drawers lay broken, their contents strewn across the kitchen; chairs were knocked over, and the table rested on three legs, the fourth snapped and sticking out at an odd angle. A terrible dread was solidifying in her gut, and to keep it a bay, she began to clean the kitchen. She tried to ignore the feeling that she was destined to clean up everyone's mess.

oXo

Dumbledore felt drained. He sat in his office, staring at the empty chair that a seething Harry had sat in, and tried to order his feelings. The sun was streaming into his office, and behind him, Fawkes floundered in his pile of ash as he learnt, once again, how to perch. It was a terrible weight that crushed down upon him, and one that he could never unburden; it pained him that he was placing others under the same, inescapable weight. He ran a trembling hand down his beard and watched the sunlight coruscate on the shattered remains of his possessions. An idea was germinating in the mire of his troubled mind; he needed something, some symbol for himself that the 'Greater Good' was worth it and not just a euphemism for reasonable and justified acts of tyranny.

It was so simple, and that dark part of him that planned and plotted was satisfied that there would be little to lose through this act of selfless generosity. He stood and stepped over to the fireplace; Fawkes chirped enquiringly, and Dumbledore smiled at the baby phoenix. He collected a handful of Floo-powder and folded himself into the fireplace. Lifting his clenched hand and winking at his familiar, he flung down the powder down and disappeared.

oXo

The kitchen sparkled. The broken drawers were stacked as neatly as possible on the table and the damaged leg repaired with some twine that she'd found partially submerged in a pile of brown sugar. The contents of the drawers that weren't beyond repair were arranged neatly on the worktops, and the rest of the detritus had been swept up, cleaned up or wiped up and thrown away. She was trembling with exhaustion, but her mind was abuzz. She had worked furiously, pausing every so often to listen for the front door opening or some sound indicating that Lupin was awake. In those moments of awful silence, she had stood still, her senses straining and mind whirling. Where was Sirius? She had woken at the sound of Lupin wrecking the kitchen and there was no clue to what had precipitated his rampage, no subtle explanation, and no remedy for her frantic mind; just that terrible emptiness and looming horror that Sirius wasn't here.

She tried to distract herself by scraping up the hardened, syrupy mix of sugar and coffee from the tiled floor, but it seemed that her attempt just ground both sources of consternation deeper. She flung down her damp cloth and fell against the kitchen cupboard, her head resting against the smooth wood and her legs tucked under her. It would be too cruel if after all her efforts to adjust to the life she had worked so hard to flee and forget, she should lose those who would have made it all worthwhile. She had spent days thinking about Sirius, Severus, Dumbledore, the Order and countless others who had shone in her life. Her brain had ached as it pondered all that she'd cast aside in her selfish moment of weakness and all that she had done to secure it.

At times, she had wept and wailed, and at others, she had been comforted and laughed. But Ophelia had no delusions that she was the witch she could have been; too long in the Muggle world had sapped much of her skill, and she knew Voldemort would not spare much thought to such a broken thing as her. She shuddered against the cupboard; if he knew what she had done...she tried not to think about what he'd do. She swallowed the painful lump in her throat and closed her eyes on the tears. Her life as a Muggle may have left her feeling fractured and lacking, but she had been useful... and safe. Now that the Order knew what she knew, what use was she? All this pain...the agony of losing them...for what? A life of fear and hiding. She could return to the Muggle world, oblivious and happy...

But there was Severus... and the friends she'd made. There were still unanswered questions about her early life: her mother's death... and her father, but after forty years, she wasn't sure that the answers were as important as they had once been.

oXo

Minerva clutched her bruised ribs and hobbled across the ward to the bed opposite hers; on the white sheets slept a pale and unconscious witch, her hair, usually purple or pink, was matted and brown and splayed out over the starched pillow. She reached out and gently stroked the pale cheek, alarmed at how cool and clammy it felt beneath her fingers.

"Tonks?" she asked in a whisper. "Nymphadora!" she demanded louder, suddenly realising that she could have screamed in the empty ward.

She hadn't expected a response, but the lack of one still sent a chill down her spine. There was a faint shimmer of magic over Tonks' chest, and she knew that some charm kept the young witch's lungs working. Biting back on the despair and the sudden fear, she smoothed the wayward hair as best she could and wondered what had happened that should put her former pupil in St Mungo's in such a state that spells were keeping her alive. She struggled but managed to pull a chair closer to the stricken witch's bed and settled into the uncomfortable seat to begin her vigil.

In the silence, her mind swirled around the recent, painful revelation and incidents. The Ministry of Magic was slowly evolving into a defensive creature, lashing out at all who threatened it, imposing restrictions and countless other legislations that seemed so innocent in themselves, but were an ominous portent of the stranglehold the Ministry sought. She pulled a folded blanket from the bottom of Tonks' bed and draped it over her legs, trying to fend off the chill that had settled in her bones. She shuddered and tried to block out the dreadful images growing in her mind; Tonks was an Auror, and any number of things could have happened; no need to think that the Order was in peril. Resting her head against the hard chair back, she stared into space, her ribs still aching from spell damage and fighting the fatigue that continued to pester her. She had never felt quite so old.

A hand on her shoulder gently brought her back from her doze, and with a mix of chagrin and protesting muscles, she turned to look at who had woken her. Dumbledore smiled fondly at her, his blue eyes reflected such warmth that her pains melted away, and she felt her lips quirk up in a soft smile. She inhaled carefully and straightened in the vexingly uncomfortable chair. She gave the sleeping Tonks a long stare, and sighing softly, she noted that her condition had not altered.

"Nymphadora is stable and will stay here for a few weeks, recovering," Dumbledore supplied helpfully, noting Minerva's concerned stare. "The others are the walking wounded; Miss Granger gave Poppy some concern but will mend, and Mr Weasley has been put under observation for the next few days."

He spoke lightly; perhaps the events had numbed him, or maybe the fact that so much could have been lost and wasn't had elated him. Minerva sat silently, her eyes wide, breath coming in short, painful pants, fingers gripping the blanket's edge and her heart beating frantically.

"Alastor is enjoying taking Lucius Malfoy and several other Death Eaters into custody, and at long last, Minister Fudge can no longer deny that Lord Voldemort has returned."

"Albus, what happened?"

He turned his sapphire gaze upon her, and she saw such a torrent of pain and sorrow in their depths that it shattered her resolve, and she began to weep, hot tears running down her cheeks to drip from her chin.

"I have been foolish," he whispered thickly. "I thought that I knew what was right; I protected when I should have nurtured."

He closed his eyes and staggered away from her, his hand clutched against his face, hiding and stifling his anguish. He turned his back on her, and she watched with a breaking heart as the pain of his grief bent him double. Standing, her pain forgotten, she moved to hold him, her heavy arms wrapping around his shoulders. She felt his hand slide over her own, and his cold fingers gripped her hand as if it was the only thing stopping him from drowning in a maelstrom of despair.

Holding him until he straightened and slowly turned to smile appreciatively at her, she felt her hands slide down his arms to be captured in his grip and given a reassuring squeeze. She looked up and saw his pale face and his eyes, red and glittering from tears that he had refused to shed and his lips pursed together to hide how they would tremble. He was breathing hard to control his raging emotions, and she continued to hold his hand tightly...she could feel his body shaking under the strain.

"I knew that I should have explained... I should have trusted," he said bitterly. "I have asked so much and given so little in return, and now, it may be too late."

She couldn't understand what he was saying, but she could easily discern that something terrible had occurred. Swallowing nervously, she once more asked the question she dreaded having answered.

"What's happened, Albus?"

It seemed to take a great deal of effort for him to focus on her face, and then he gave a deep shudder before telling her of the awful events that had transpired.

"I knew the link between Harry and Tom was dangerous, that it was only a matter of time before Tom used the connection to his advantage. I never envisioned that he would use it quite so terribly effectively."

While he spoke, Minerva dragged another chair over and guided him into the seat before resuming her uncomfortable pose, her fingers still held in his hand.

"He created a scene for Harry, a scene where Sirius was being tortured and close to death in the Department of Mysteries...how foolish of me to think that I could have protected them both. Harry did what he could to verify the awful truth, and Kreacher supplied the last detail that would secure Harry's flight. Severus was afraid that Harry had indeed slipped free to rescue his Godfather, and he alerted the Order as soon as he was able."

Minerva was sobbing into her hand, using the blanket that she had earlier thrown aside to mop up the copious tears and muffle her dread. Terrible thoughts seeped through her mind, dreadful scenarios and awful images; she wasn't sure that she wanted to hear anymore, but those dreadful scenes made it an imperative. She crammed the pale blue blanket against her lips and braced herself.

"Sirius told Kreacher to inform me of what had happened and that he himself had left to rescue Harry. I was desperate and angry; I drew out the truth from the treacherous elf and sped to join them. You cannot imagine my fear and terror!" Shuddering, he paled further and seemed to struggle to breathe; Minerva gasped as his hand tightened painfully around her fingers. "I saw them; I rushed to stop them and..." He tried to smother his moan, but a bizarre mewling sound managed to erupt from his throat. His head lolled to the side, and his lips drew back as if in pain, and then, he let a sob free, the pressure too much to contain. "I saw him! I watched him die."

Minerva shook her head in disbelief, her mouth open and her lips twitching. Harry couldn't be dead; he just couldn't be. Her mind went blank, and only the sharp pain from her damaged ribs confirmed that she was able to feel...a harsh reminder that this was no nightmare.

"Sirius is dead; killed by Bellatrix LeStrange. I watched as he fell past the Veil; gone, lost, so terrible, so avoidable, so ... so foolish," he finished furiously.

Minerva took a desperate lungful of air; she had feared the very worst, and in that moment of hearing another name, she had felt relief; now, she was drowning in shame and despair, letting the horror and pain of Sirius' death creep through her. Next to her, Dumbledore rested his head in his hand, and she heard him breathing erratically.

She wanted, needed, to hold him and have him hold her, to derive some comfort and support while the war battered and slashed at them. She wanted to relinquish her persona as a strong-willed woman and be human for just this one moment; she wanted to weep and scream, howl and be allowed to display her suffering. But she was cursed with a pride and pragmatism that went bone-deep, and instead of succumbing, she straightened.

"What about Harry?" she queried gently.

Dumbledore gave a stuttering sigh and lifted his heavy head. "Harry is remarkably unscathed," he said shakily, "but I fear that the events of this evening will have wounded him deeper than we can see or heal." He inhaled deeply and stiffened in the chair, his eyes staring straight ahead. "He is very angry with me, and I cannot blame him. I would have suffered his anger gladly rather than see the disappointment in his eyes that I was not the strong and wise man that he once considered me." His voice was empty and lifeless. "I have told him what he needs to know, in the hope that he will come to understand why I couldn't bring myself to tell him and possibly learn to forgive me for my weakness." His shoulders slumped and the cold fingers around her hand went limp. "He has lost almost everything, and there is so very little that I can do or offer."

"Give him what he needs," she said softly, smiling weakly.

He finally turned to look at her, his eyes lacking twinkle and sparkle. "And what is that, Minerva?"

"You say it often enough; give him love."

Dumbledore blinked very slowly and then sighed. He lifted her fingers to his mouth and kissed them gently, affectionately. "Thank you, my dear."

Despite her trembling lips and painful ribs, she smiled at him and wondered why he distanced himself and felt compelled to deal with such tremendous and crippling grief alone: didn't he realise how much he was loved? She gave his hand a gentle and comforting squeeze, noting a tension in his shoulders and his lips set in a thin line.

"There is something that I have to do," he said simply.

Minerva frowned and studied the sapphire eyes boring into her, pleading for understanding, shining with gratitude and reflecting the affection that he held for her. She had known Dumbledore for nearly eighty years, and she had never had cause to doubt his judgment or intentions. She smiled again and nodded, pulling her hand so that her fingers slipped free from his grasp.

"I'll stay with Tonks," she said, her eyes twinkling with a mix of mischief and mirth. "It'll make a refreshing change to have the peace and quiet."

He stood and smoothed down his ruffled beard, a familiar and comforting gesture. Minerva looked up at him, and they looked upon each other, seeing the same emotions flickering over their faces and that underlying hope that now Voldemort's return was no longer a myth, the world would turn in the right direction.

"Take care of yourself, Minerva; Hogwarts needs you."

With that, he turned and strode purposefully out of the ward, preparing to gratefully wash a part of his conscience clean.

Chapter Thirty five

Chapter 35 of 36

Ophelia and Lupin are still reeling from Sirius' death. Dumbledore offers Ophelia a choice... but will her pain and grief make her decision for her?

Lupin hesitated by the kitchen door, his fingers grazing the brass door handle, his stomach rolling unpleasantly. Since he had vented his anger, frustration and misery, he had been cocooned in a soft numbness that was both welcome and a worry. He knew that beyond the door, she would be waiting with questions, and he found that he dreaded unwrapping himself from the emptiness and allowing all that anguish and pain to flood back. He licked his dry lips and steadied himself.

She jolted in her seat when the door clicked and swung open; Lupin stood in the doorway, looking haggard and listless. The urge to pounce, to leap at him with questions and demands, to scream out her impatience and the torment she'd suffered through being patient rose up inside her. Instead, she breathed shakily and drummed her fingernails against the mercilessly scrubbed and spotless tabletop. She offered him a weak smile and watched as he lumbered in to sit in the chair opposite her. Ophelia's heart thudded painfully against her ribs; her eyes ached and felt huge as she stared at him, expectantly and fearfully. She almost howled in frustration, Lupin sat so morosely, staring at the grain pattern and breathing in a slow, steady rhythm.

"Where's Sirius?" she asked carefully, aware of the man's slumped shoulders and the way he rocked gently in his seat.

Lupin lifted his head, and she gasped at the desperation in his hazel eyes. "He's dead." His voice was contradictorily calm and quiet, and she shuddered when his words finally sank through her disbelief.

She shook her head and mouthed silently, her fingernails biting into the table's varnish. It couldn't be! It just couldn't! Her stomach flipped, and she felt a wave of sickness rush up, burning as it went. Her throat trembled and ached from the effort of holding back her sobs, and her vision blurred as hot tears filled her view. Beyond the distorting tears, she saw Lupin give a great heave and cover his face, and he gave several sobs before slumping over the table, his hands clutching at his hair.

"How?" she asked thickly, her mind still reeling.

Slowly, he straightened, pulling out a tatty handkerchief to wipe his wet face. His breath hitched a few times before he inhaled carefully and, in neutral tones, told her of the struggle in the bowels of the Ministry, of how Bellatrix had cast the Killing Curse and how Sirius had fallen past the Veil. She listened in disbelief, watching the crushing waves of despair and rage roll towards her, savage in their fury. He told her about the Order and about Harry Potter, about how a baby had deflected the Killing Curse cast by the most terrible wizard to have lived, and thus granted the Wizarding world fifteen years of acceptable, if dubious, peace.

He told her as much as he knew in one giant purge, and now that he had started talking, he feared stopping, feared that lull where his emotions would catch up to the horrors of what he had described. He wept as he disclosed to her his fears and regrets, his anger and hate, his guilt over betraying Sirius a second time in allowing him to rush off to meet his death. He grimaced and thumped the tabletop as he confessed and expressed his fury at Sirius's pigheadedness and arrogance. He collapsed in upon himself, unable to continue, his voice smothered by sobs, and his thoughts scattering under the terrible impact of Sirius's murder.

"Thank you," Lupin mumbled as Ophelia handed him a mug of tea. He carefully sipped while she settled in her chair. The warmth of the drink plummeted to the pit of his empty stomach, which growled encouragingly; he felt hungry, but the thought of eating made him feel sick. His eyes felt gritty and sore, and his head felt thick and heavy. Across from him, Ophelia looked as bad as he felt with her blotchy cheeks, red swollen eyes and mournful countenance.

"I'm not sure what to feel," she whispered from behind her tightly-held mug. "It just doesn't seem real."

Her dark brown eyes shifted and latched onto Lupin in the hopes that he would help her understand it all. In his hazel depths, she saw the same hurt and bewilderment, the same pained confusion. She glanced away and drank her tea, its taste and its warmth were uncomplicated and familiar, and she savoured it.

Her mind had been in turmoil, and she had suffered a range of emotions, but now, she was numb, her thoughts scorched away like morning clouds. She heard Lupin's mug grate on the table surface and the occasional sigh slipping past his lips. There was so much to say, she knew it, but she couldn't find the words; she wanted to move but doubted that she would ever stop, and most of all, she wanted to understand but knew that she was hopelessly lost.

The sound of the front door opening roused them from their dark musings, and they peered down the hallway, some cruel, futile hope bursting through their chests. They sagged and felt foolish when Dumbledore stepped into the hallway. Watching as he carefully hung his cloak on the hook and straightened his robes before striding purposefully towards them, they wondered what dread news he had that made him move with such determination. Out of instinct, they both stood to greet their old headmaster.

"Remus; Ophelia," he said warmly, extending his arms as if to embrace them both.

"Care for some tea?" Ophelia asked tentatively.

"That would be lovely, my dear," he replied softly, his blue eyes scrutinising her face. "And over tea, we shall have a talk about your future, Ophelia."

"My future?" She swallowed and nervously licked her lips, her eyes darting to Lupin's impassive face and then back into Dumbledore's azure scrutiny.

"I have a few things to attend to," Remus said swiftly, flashing a warm smile at Ophelia. "Headmaster," he said as he stood to take his leave.

"Remus," he replied gratefully.

The kitchen door clicked shut behind Lupin, and Ophelia busied herself, pouring tea.

"I have given the matter a great deal of thought," said Dumbledore. "I asked you to assist us as best you could—to give us an advantage. You have done all that I have asked of you, Ophelia, and words cannot express my gratitude." He paused and smiled up at her as she placed a cup and saucer on the table before him. Taking a sip, he waited until she returned to her seat. "Given the nature of your forced return to the Wizarding world and in light of recent, tragic events..." his voice cracked, and he stopped to squeeze his eyes shut and regain his composure "... I feel that I must highlight your choices regarding your future." He took another sip of tea, the cup trembling in his hand. "It is within my power to fulfil your plea from twenty years ago and do what you once begged of an Auror."

She had held her breath, and at his offer, she expelled it in a series of wails, her eyes brimming with tears and shaking her head in disbelief at the gift he was offering.

"This time, it will be perfect. There will be no memories to haunt you. You will remember your life in your Council flat, your job as a waitress, and you will only know and do what a Muggle called Veronica Speedwell would know and be able to do."

"But, the war!" she mumbled bemusedly.

"The war will rage on whether you continue here or return to Whitehaven; it will be no shorter or longer for your decision."

Tears rolled down her cheeks, and she bit her lip; how easy it would be to accept and forget that she ever knew pain. She hugged her stomach as if to keep herself whole, to stop her flying apart at the thought of it. What would she lose?—the pain of losing loved ones, the agony of guilt and betrayal, and the constant fear. She would be free of that. But she would lose and forget the fleeting love she had shared with Regulus—keeping her sane during a mad time. Physical pain made her gasp. She would lose the love that burned within; she would forget Severus.

"You do not have to decide now, Ophelia," he said consolingly. "Take the time to decide what is right for you and then, when you are ready, give me your answer."

She stood and followed him to the door where he cupped her cheek fondly, and she smiled at the affection that the touch conveyed. "You have done more than enough," he whispered. As he moved away from her to step onto the street, the sunlight reflected off a silvery trail running down his cheek.

Fawkes raised his head as the fireplace burst into life, spewing out Dumbledore. He trilled a welcome and lifted his bald head, eager for those fingers to soothe him. Dumbledore smiled at the young phoenix and stroked under his familiar's beak. How similar this was to his meeting with Ophelia, new lives beginning from the ashes of the former, and he wondered how the future would treat Veronica Speedwell.

oXo

There were things she had to do, things she needed to know before she made her decision. After the trauma of her returning memories had eased, her mind had gone back to those confused recollections of her mother. Dredging up distant memories, she tried to piece together the puzzle that was her early life. But it was so difficult, her mind just wouldn't or couldn't delve any deeper. The only haunting and damning recollection was of her mum, weeping as she lay on her bed, her fair hair splayed over the pillow and her body trembling with each sob. The newspaper that came with the owl lay strewn over the floor, and she had tidied up just like her mummy had always told her to. On her return from stuffing the crushed bundle of papers in the bin, a flash of green light had reflected off the walls in the small hallway.

Even now, she could not fathom what pushed her mother to the point where she had cast the Killing Curse upon herself, and with her memories restored, that same pained bafflement and bitter sense of betrayal raged through her. How could she have done it? There was no denying she understood her mother's need to flee, but she was struggling to discern an excusable reason for taking her own life... for leaving her. And then there was the question of her father; it had risen its head a few times during her school years; the other students had tormented her about her lineage, and despite her cool aloofness, she had burned with curiosity. Her aunt and uncle had been unable to answer her. She had contented herself, delved into the comfort of her family and cleaved to the one who had so looked like her mother—Narcissa!

She was sure his identity would never be discovered now, and what did it really matter after all these years? She had lived, plotted, fought, suffered and loved without him; she could cope without him. But! Sighing, she looked up at the mottled ceiling and willed away the pointless hope fluttering in her belly. And then there was her promise to Regulus, the promise to help him complete his vow, and the unspoken oath to avenge his death. Could she cast that aside and scuttle away like some insect hiding from the light? Thoughts twisted and twirled in confused cycles, and she found it impossible to fathom any reasonable logic from the chaos; should she stay and help or take Dumbledore's offer?

Adding more confusion and despair was Narcissa: would it be wise to rekindle that special bond that had existed between them? Could she trust Narcissa? It pained her to think that the woman she had loved as a sister was also the wife and sister of devout and dedicated Death Eaters. Logic stirred, and she considered the situation; it would be the height of idiocy to put either of them in the position of maintaining secrets... Dumbledore would find the security breach unforgivable, and the Dark Lord would destroy Narcissa after ripping out all thoughts and memories pertaining to her betrayal. No, it was better for Narcissa if she continued to believe that her little cousin had died.

And what else was there keeping her to this life? It was almost an alien place to her now. As a Muggle, she would have all the freedoms that that life bestowed... and none of the pain of this one. So tempting! But the underlying guilt that she was yet again deserting those who needed her raised its ugly head, and she felt some obligation to stay with those who battled the wizard she wanted to see dead. Forehead puckering, she felt something twist in her chest... to see the Dark Lord destroyed; wouldn't that

be worth staying around for?

She rolled onto her side and curled up. Then there was Severus...

Chapter Thirty six

Chapter 36 of 36

Ophelia made her choice, and the Order come to terms with it.

Ophelia had left Grimmauld place. Dumbledore's offer had been presented and she'd made her choice. Everyone was dealing with the consequences. Molly looked stressed at losing her friend and support, and there was just something constantly... *missing* from the sombre house. Those visiting for care and food also noted her absence but came and left quietly, as if sensing the pain associated with it. Combined with Sirius' death, the Order's headquarters was a cold and grim place. It was made worse by the uncertainty over the ownership of the Black household. It all came down to Kreacher: where would he go when the Will was fulfilled? In readiness, the Order were preparing to leave, seeking a new haven.

Before her arrival, Snape had never felt inclined to stay...only when she'd been there had he even felt the urge to visit...so now, he left as quickly as possible and visited as infrequently as permitted. The knowledge that it was possibly Potter's house made it more stifling and depressing... if that were possible. He knew Molly tried to stop him to ask him about her, but he was adept at sneaking away. Soon, she would trap him...Molly was tenacious...and he knew he'd have to have a good answer ready; until then, he kept his thoughts and feelings for Ophelia safely enclosed; they were his, and he'd share them with no one.

In retrospect, Ophelia had made the best decision she could have, given her skills and weaknesses. Snape doubted anyone would argue she'd acted without thought or out of pure selfishness; although, he knew everyone would miss her to one degree or another. Oddly, Snape remembered Moody grasping her hand as she prepared to meet Dumbledore to discuss the final arrangements, saying his quiet farewells to her.

During her last evening in the Black house, she had worked quietly by his side as they fulfilled the last of the potions and tidied away the work area, closing the lab...it wouldn't be needed once she left. He had expected tension or awkwardness, but he found the work instead soothed him, steadying him for the lonely work ahead.

"I leave tomorrow," she said bluntly, clarifying the plans she and Dumbledore had discussed.

Severus inhaled and carefully stoppered the phial he was holding. "You're returning to Whitehaven?" He knew the answer, yet wanted to hear her voice.

"Yes."

He sighed under his breath. Her answer dissatisfied him; he wanted more. Now that all this was coming to an end, he wanted to wrap himself up in her words... to draw out all he could from her to sustain him. He wanted to glut on her.

"Dumbledore has told you of the risks involved with the Greater Lethe Water potion, yes?"

She inhaled, and the blade paused on its way through the stalk. "I already knew the risks," she affirmed with mild bitterness before completing the cut with a sudden, angry slash. "I once thought about using it."

He nodded and pinched the bridge of his nose. She was being... difficult, and he was fumbling with small talk. "You may be interested to know how many of the Order will miss you."

The knife grated against the chopping slate as she released it and turned to him, her mind guarded and her eyes searching. He fancied that she was peeling back his mind, but he knew she could see what he'd meant written on his blank face. It was both worrying and comforting to know she could read him so clearly. There was no need for explanation or clarification... no need to reason or excuse. He swallowed. There was also nowhere to hide from her.

Her mouth opened, but the words seemed to die on her tongue; her brow puckered, and then she snapped her lips closed, tucking hair behind her ears. Snape fought his smirk: he wasn't the only one who could be read easily.

"I never thought I would feel so..." she shook her head and rubbed her brow "... relieved to be a part of the Wizarding world again and so anxious and saddened to be leaving it."

The cauldron sputtered softly, and distant pipes gurgled, filling the sudden awkward silence. Snape scrutinised her profile, trying to see any hint that her mind could be changed, that her sorrow would compel her to stay.

"Before you ask," she said tightly, "we discussed all the available options."

"I would have called you a fool if you hadn't."

She relaxed at his sharp tone, as if the familiarity of barbed comments restored her confidence and cleansed the atmosphere. With a sharp harrumph, she plucked a cloth from the workbench and wiped sap from her fingers before stepping over to the stove.

"Coffee?"

He nodded and joined her, sitting down as she busied herself with mugs and tins.

"I have a gift for Molly, but I'll be gone before she gets back."

He heard the hidden question and stifled his groan before it could erupt and spoil this moment. "I'll arrange to deliver it for you." Her eyes flashed and her lips thinned. "I'll deliver it for you," he amended.

A faint smile ghosted over her lips. "Thank you. It's an arrangement of violets."

A frown furrowed his brow. He knew she wasn't cold, but the sentimentality of it suggested something more than just following etiquette, and the choice of flower was unusual. The fact that she had shared the information also made him wonder at their significance... she had *wanted* him to know.

The rest of the evening had passed in a blur and depressingly quickly. They had said their goodbyes, repeating them as if trying to organise them in their minds before committing to the act. Ophelia had been the stronger and had turned on her heel, flashing him a nervous and tentative smile.

Before her foot hit the bottom step of the cellar stairs, he lunged forward, grabbing her elbow and spinning her around. Her hands rose instinctively to press against his chest. He plunged his fingers into her hair, cradling the back of her head and pulling her face closer.

The kiss was fierce and demanding, taking and giving everything. Their hands grabbed and pulled, held and glided over each other, taking in the contours, memorising what they would soon be forced to yearn for. And then Snape was gone.

Ophelia sucked gently on her sore and bloodied lower lip, staring into the empty cellar and trying not to let his absence crush her. She'd made her choice, and Severus would have to work with it.

The next day, he had surprised Molly by not fleeing from her approach. It was gratifying in a way to see her hesitate and flash him a puzzled, almost suspicious glare as she neared him.

Before she could speak, he withdrew his hand from within his frock coat, lifting up Ophelia's parting gift. Whatever Molly had intended to ask or demand fled, as her eyes alighted upon the delicate blue flowers. Snape kept his face passive, but the tears welling up in her eyes confirmed his need to find out what the hell the flowers meant to them.

Carefully, reverently, Molly accepted the flowers and flashed him a sad smile. He nodded and began to turn on his heel, but her hand...a vice of iron...stopped him dead. Her face was firm, and he thought threatening, but when she spoke, her voice was tinged with affection.

"I'm not going to ask, although I bloody well want to," she whispered, her grip loosening enough to let the blood back into his hand. "Just... if you should see her," and Snape saw her eyes narrow slightly over the word 'if', "tell her that we... that she'll always have a home with us, should she need it."

Snape was not naturally a cruel man, so he bowed and patted the back of her taut hand. "If I see her, I shall willingly tell her."

He hoped that his promise would lessen her grip, but she pulled him closer so he couldn't miss her next words. No wonder the twins quailed when he threatened to tell their mother what they'd done.

"Take care of her."

Snape sighed and settled back into his chair, shifting his thoughts away from their last night at Grimmauld Place and Molly's fearsome order. Tomorrow, he would be teaching his new Defence against the Dark Arts syllabus. His lips twitched as he recalled the look on Potter's face when the Headmaster had announced the new staffing arrangements. It would warm him on cold nights. The smile died... there would be many.

oXo

"Come in, dear," said Mrs Mathieson, her voice tinged with relief. "I was getting worried," she scolded gently while helping her guest out of the thick, woollen coat. "You said that you'd be back yesterday."

"I was delayed by the train strikes," she said with mock impatience.

"Oh well, you're here now," Mrs Mathieson said firmly, closing the topic. "I'll make some tea."

She pattered into the kitchen, her aches and pains a little less now that she had someone to look after, and she hummed a happy tune as she gathered together the things for tea. Only one thought pestered her, nagging at her, and that was the sense that Veronica was somehow calmer and more at ease; those shadows that seemed to cling to her had evaporated. She smiled and wondered if Veronica would ever tell her about her trip to Cumbria all those months ago and what had happened to give her such peace. She checked the tray and bustled back into the living room. Veronica was seated on the sofa, staring out of the window.

"I see the Council still haven't fixed your fence," she said with some irritation.

"Not got the funding, they say," Mrs Mathieson said pragmatically. She poured the tea and passed the cup and saucer to her young friend before sitting next to her. That serenity was baffling her, but as she'd never seen such contentment in the younger woman's eyes, her curiosity would have to be mollified.

"I'll pop along to see them," she said. "See what I can do."

"Oh, there's no rush, dear," Mrs Mathieson said hastily. "I haven't seen you for a while, and I'd rather catch up."

She took another sip of tea and carefully watched Veronica as she smiled and relaxed. There was something in the way she moved and smiled... in the way her lips twitched and her eyes glistened. A smile curved her dry and age-thinned lips. She may have had a hard life, but she'd also had a rich life, and her thoughts meandered down the same road that a witch named Molly had travelled months ago. Veronica had a young man, but something suggested the young man was not something she'd share.

"I want to hear about your new job. I've never seen you so happy," she said, choosing the easier conversation.

"Not much to tell, really." Her frown eased and she sighed, glancing across to Mrs Mathieson's eager face. "I help to... relocate people." She leant back and a shadow flickered across her face, but then it was gone, and she flashed a smile. "I help them get accustomed to their new life."

It was true enough; and it felt glorious to be doing so. Families, survivors, refugees, haggard and exhausted from the war, came to her, and she found them a safe haven in the Muggle world...who better to do so?! She helped integrate them into a strange world, knowing the pitfalls and fears of it, guiding them as they adapted. Dumbledore had been wrong to assume that it was one life or the other. Nothing could have made her give up what she had gained, but she had to find purpose, and she had.

"Oh, dear," Mrs Mathieson uttered softly, her features agonising over her next words. "I wish someone like you had been there for you when you needed such a caring hand."

Ophelia's eyes widened, and she laughed. In a way, there had been: Veronica. And although Veronica was long gone...or perhaps, so much a part of her that there was no distinction...she had helped in uncountable ways. It was Veronica who had pushed Ophelia back to the Wizarding world, knowing her deepest fears and dreams; without that voice, she would have settled in the Muggle world, never seeking the echo of an embrace: Severus' embrace.

"I'm sorry to laugh," she said through weakening giggles. "But, I did...I just never realised. And I had you, dear Mrs Mathieson..." she declared with absolute affection "...don't think that you weren't a caring hand."

Mrs Mathieson flushed and flustered, not sure how to respond to the beautiful compliment. Hiding her surging emotion, she sipped her tea.

"The only down side to my new job," Ophelia sighed, "is that I'm not here as often as I'd like."

"Don't fret, Veronica. I'm very happy for you, and you should go out and live your life, doing what makes life worth living. And I'm so very pleased that you're seeing your future and reaching for it."

The old lady felt her heart clench, and tears stung her eyes; the woman she thought of as a daughter was finally starting to live. She smiled, her lips trembling, and reached

out to lay her hand on Veronica's forearm. The past should sit lightly, not be examined at every turn at the expense of embracing the here and now; it shouldn't replace living. As an old woman, the past was all she had; some of it comforted and some of it hurt, but she had never wasted time living in it. It had pained her to see a vibrant and caring woman suffocate in her own past rather than claim the light she deserved. Especially when that past was fractured, incomplete and more haunting than it should have been.

"It's as I've always said, dear: there are things we forget, things we should forgive, and if we're lucky, we'll not suffer those things that are better not knowing."

Author's notes: A massive thank you to my long-suffering beta, Falconfalmorgan.