

For the Benefit of the Unforgiven

by Lady Strange

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Chapter 1 – Veritas odit moras

Chapter 1 of 5

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A/N: A response to the Potter Place Post-Deathly-Hallows Prompt Challenge using prompts 3, 10 and 18. Some might consider the characters a little OOC. Some organisations and Ministry of Magic departments are made-up.

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Chapter 1 Veritas odit moras

Had both the documents delivered that morning arrived together, I would have been hard put to decide what to do about them. As it was, however, the two disagreeable parchments arrived in quick succession, so making a decision was not so difficult.

I had just stepped into my office at the Department for the Regulation and Control of Magical Creatures, or rather rushed in somewhat dishevelled, with a paper bag from Boots with my breakfast. I was all ready to break my fast sparingly with a dodgy looking sandwich and a bruised apple when a peon from the internal Ministry of Magic Postal and Memo Service arrived delivering the post for my office. I never understood the red tape behind the receipt of memos and messages from other colleagues within the Ministry. Once upon a time, there used to be flying memos that would come speeding down the corridors and flapping into one's in-tray. Now all that has been left behind in favour of the 'modernisation' project whereby a peon sorts the memos in the postal and memo office of the Ministry, and another peon brings it down to the heads of the departments and their staff. While I can see that doing so creates jobs for the wizarding population within the Ministry, I find it rather sad that the Ministry has retrogressed to this extent. The messenger always dispatched with the post and memos to my department seemed to think it a punishment to come downstairs for the post, and who could blame him? His legs are not as strong as they once were.

Poor Finchley Figg, Mrs Figg's brother-in-law, relied on a walking stick and yet the Ministry put him to work as a messenger. Yes, I understand that it is important to keep the aging wizarding population mentally, physically and magically active, but making the infirm and elderly wizards work as peons and messengers that is a little too 'unethical' for my liking. As it was, poor Mr Figg, who looked as though his legs would give out on him at any moment, was demoted from his previous position as Ministry of Magic security guard to sweeping the floors and running errands till he would shrivel up and so expire and so no longer be of any use to anyone. Bah! There was

something very rotten in the new Ministry of Magic if one must always strive to be useful in a way that is visible in the wizarding community. What about silent contributions? Do not they count for something? Was it not more honourable to do what one could for society quietly? Did one really have to hang a placard around one's neck and announce all the deeds one was doing to be deemed ostensibly contributing to the rebuilding of the so-called 'New Wizarding Britain'? Does rebuilding the infrastructure of wizarding Britain require the deployment of aged wizards in tasks that are ill-suited to them? It was all very dodgy to me, and I made a mental note to speak to Administrative and Policy Division later on the issue.

Of course the problem was whether the Administrative and Policy Division would take me seriously. I was born into a Muggle family, and though necessity (and by that I mean the nascent display of magical abilities and my desire for more learning) had forced me to leave the safety of everything to which I was accustomed and seek a precarious living in wizarding London as a privileged employee of the Ministry of Magic. Why privileged? Simply because I was one of Harry-Hero-of-our-times-Potter's merry troupe and thus was given my position. I tell myself that it is due to my abilities, however a part of me seriously thinks that I am where I am because the higher-ups at the Ministry (and by that I mean the policymakers - not the Minister the policymakers are the ones with the real power) do not quite know what to do with me and my penchant for what they deem to be lost causes. In this case, the lost cause would be actually regulating the ownership and licensing of magical creatures be they crups or house elves. "Why regulate?" they often say, "House elves are like Muggle maids-of-all-works. So long as one can afford it, no license or certificate is necessary." These fools, or as I call them in my head elite wizarding wankers still treat house elves as secondary things meant to be bartered and sold rather than creatures with feelings. These confounded policymakers fail to see that I do not advocate the licensing of house elves; I am more concerned with strengthening their House Elves Union where they can voice their discontent and go on strike if they have to. But of course, as with most visionaries, my ideas appear to be too progressive for this present time. So, after once arguing myself hoarse with the old farts in charge of the Administrative and Policy Division over my platform, we reached an impasse. They settled for granting me autonomy in the way I ran my Department, and they would debate my policy proposals with the Minister of Magic instead of tossing out all my suggestions as they usually do with anything coming from my department. Given that I spend most of my time in my office hiding behind the impassive mask of carefully cultivated gravity, hardly anyone dares come down to my department to bother me unless it was Mr Figg with the memos or post.

Until that day that fateful day when those two documents were brought to my attention, it had not occurred to me that I might fall on the rough steps of this precarious existence of straddling both the wizarding and Muggle worlds. Oh yes, here I was Head of the Department of for the Regulation and Control of Magical Creatures doing work that ought rightly to belong to a clerk.

It is true that many of the other heads of departments within the Ministry (who are wizards born and bred) frequently use their authority to 'allocate,' shall we say, unpleasant tasks away from themselves to their subordinates. This allows them the luxury of time to dabble in various new-fangled bourgeois pastimes such as golf. While the idea of skiving from work to hit pock-marked little balls with a variety of sticks had never appealed to me, I must own my thorough amazement at their time management skills to waltz into the office at eleven, leave for lunch at half-past noon and never come back to the office until the next day. How the heads of these other departments manage to get any work done let alone organise and keep their staff in hand, I do not know. I only know that I should not adopt such practices. Thus, I found myself reduced to the status of a clerk even though I am head of a Department. The memo from the Economic Review of House Elf Affairs Committee (ERHEAC) invited me to use my erudition to make improvements as I saw fit to a proposed bill on 'improving the lot of house elves'. That annoyed me. While the invitation expressed such a humble request, it was clear that my primary task was to make a fair copy of the scrawled parchment, and in particular make separate copies of the main parts for perusal of the board heading the Administrative and Policy Division. It would seem that my usual scribe was ill. Either that or that nephew of Mundungus Fletcher was somewhere malingering again.

The bill lacked even a definite title. It was unclear whether the proposal sought to arrange for the maintenance of elderly house-elves, or to give house-elves some form of standardised remuneration, or to provide some kind of insurance scheme for house-elves should they be injured or worse in the service of their employers. I gave old Mr Figg my sandwich as I began my perusal of it. I could not help but laugh when I reached the section on how the proposed bill would help improve the lives of the house-elves. At that juncture in the proposal, a mysterious clause claimed to know for a fact that the house-elves' magical ability would be enhanced by the passage of this strangely illogical bill. I knew nothing of house-elves' magical powers, nor do I pretend to, but I own myself fascinated to learn that the fellow drafting this proposal claimed to know that the house-elves' magical abilities stemmed from their worship of some demons, and these demons somehow or the other allow the house-elves to learn their ways and acquire their powers. I had good reason to ponder the veracity of this piece of dodgy research, and was in the process of deleting the whole section and relegating this nonsensical proposal to the rubbish bin when I was interrupted.

I was interrupted by the arrival of another messenger or peon, call him what you will. In sharp contrast to Mr Figg, this newcomer was fat and surly, and wore a very large bowler hat and a short, ill-fitting, pinstriped waistcoat, reminiscent of the kinds favoured by aspiring American criminals in the late 1920s. As he pushed his way forward into my office, I was struck by the very noisiness of his gait, or it might have been the noisiness of his creaky pinstriped waistcoat. In any case, it is often very difficult to tell apart the clumsiness of a person with wild, desperate eyes, and the very closely aligned stripes on his waistcoat, which as you undoubtedly know is the noisiest stripe of all. "Miss Granger? That is, Miss Hermione Granger, one of the golden trio that brought down Voldy-thingy and member of the Wizengamot?"

"Miss Granger will do," I politely said upon receiving the letter he brought me. When will these people learn that though the Ministry of Magic offered positions in the Wizengamot to Harry, Ron, Luna, Neville, Ginny and me, none of us accepted the offers? I hardly think we were qualified enough or wise enough to preside over wizarding matters when we barely understood all the twists and turns of wizarding traditions and laws. I shook at my head at the messenger's encomium and turned my attention to the letter. It was thankfully brief. It came from Wiltshire under the direction of Draco Malfoy, Malfoy Manor where my former schoolmate with his full load of emotional and psychological chips on his shoulders had been residing. It stated that he was very grateful for my assistance in placing his father in an isolated room within the Janus Thickey ward at St Mungo's instead of publicly trying him and incarcerating him in Azkaban. Though Draco expressed his realisation that his father was something of a moral lunatic, he politely thanked me for all I had done to ensure his father was offered the best possible treatment. He continued to earnestly claim that my intervention had saved the family's face and standing in society, and he knew that if it were not for my intercession, St Mungo's and the Ministry of Magic would have no compunctions unleashing his unfortunate father into the community as a sturdy beggar without a license to carry a wand. He ended by thanking me once again for arranging for the release of his father to his residence earlier that day, and asked if he and I could meet for tea sometime.

Why did Draco Malfoy bother to thank me for such a simple task? The wand carrying license law had only been recently implemented and that had nothing to do with me or my so-called intervention. It was implemented for the purpose of keeping an eye on the magical community, and though I was opposed to the law on the grounds that it was policing the magical usage of one's citizenry, I could not prevent its passage. Furthermore, my 'intercession,' as Draco had called it, was nothing more than my personal objection to treating others cruelly. At that time, there was a widespread outcry to publicly try all former Death Eaters, and despite Harry's testimony that Narcissa Malfoy had aided him in bringing down Voldemort, the newly established Wizarding War Crimes Tribunal would not countenance anything less than incarceration at Azkaban for all Death Eaters. On my part, I was aware that Lucius Malfoy's actions under the service of Voldemort are deemed as war crimes against wizarding Britain under the Internal Security of Wizarding United Kingdom Act. Certainly, I was aware that Lucius Malfoy is very much the wizarding equivalent of an educated, reasonable-sounding racist. But that did not give either the Aurors or the Wizarding War Crimes Tribunal permission to use them cruelly and torture them. I do not condone senseless violence. I did for Lucius Malfoy the exact same thing I did for every other soul-diseased wizard who was on the side of Voldemort and who had clearly repented for their past deeds I strongly put my foot down on rough interrogation techniques and came down harshly on proponents who wanted to put the whole lot of Death Eaters and their families to death. When I was captured and shoved very rudely into the Malfoy dungeons, I distinctively recalled Lucius Malfoy looking very apologetic, like a wounded animal trapped in a corner desirous of helping others but which had to out of necessity lick its own wounds first. Moreover, I had heard from Harry Potter after the great battle at Hogwarts that Narcissa Malfoy was also suitably contrite. Who could blame Lucius and Narcissa Malfoy when all they wanted to do was protect their child? Was it not natural to love their own in this case their son? I know this sort of love for one's own tends towards nepotism, but I cannot find it in myself to fault parents for wanting to protect their children. What could Lucius and Narcissa have done given that their home was practically like a headquarters of sorts to that deranged, corrupted and deluded fellow we call Voldemort?

Though the thought of Lucius Malfoy as a sturdy beggar was fairly entertaining and I secretly applauded Draco's linguistic flair for daring to write of his father in such a manner, I wondered how I ought to respond to him. I considered, briefly, doing nothing. However, so doing would only mean I would have no choice but to go through the rest of the ghastly proposal I had been hitherto perusing. Very well then, I would pen a reply to Draco in the politest of terms declining his offer of tea. His fiancée was a notoriously possessive witch; as such, I had no wish to create any misunderstanding between himself and Pansy Parkinson if we were seen having a tête-à-tête at one of the cafés near the British Museum or Diagon Alley. So, I set about replying to Draco's epistle. Before the second messenger, who was undoubtedly in the employ of the Malfoys, left, I donned my best societal disposition, and wrote a response to his young master. I stated that it was very kind of him to remember me, that I was quite recovered from all the horrors of the war, and that I was only serving my principles in seeing to his father's rehabilitation. Additionally, Harry Potter ought to be the correct recipient of his thanks for it was Harry who had vouched for them in a backhanded display of appreciation for that which Narcissa Malfoy had done for him in the Forbidden Forest after Voldemort had cast the killing curse on him. If anything, Draco should be more appreciative of his parents' love for him.

Once the parchment was crossed, sealed and handed to the fat, burly manservant, I dismissed both him and Mr Figg and concentrated my efforts on the ridiculous proposal one of my lesser subordinates had the gall to forward to me. It was an erratically drafted proposal, a sequel to the establishment of the House Elves Union we had enacted. However, there was no visible follow-up to link it to the earlier Union Act, and the fascinating claims as to the source of house-elves' powers were left unsubstantiated.

Having had quite enough of it, I took myself off to Diagon Alley and went to one of the second-hand bookshops where tomes on wizarding history and on magical creatures could be acquired cheaply. I selected one volume claiming to detail a close magical, biological, and historical account of house-elves, and repaired to a café, where I sat at my usual place by the window reading and enjoying my first decent meal of the day. Then I made my way back to the office.

Once back in the confines of Ministry of Magic, I stepped into my office only to be greeted by a very harassed looking Mr Figg, whose beard appeared more unkempt than it had been in the morning, and an equally harassed looking Harry Potter, his hair looking remarkably thinner than it had the previous day.

"Hermione," began Harry, cutting to the chase. "Where have you been?"

"Out," I answered vaguely, flopping into my seat and watching the ballerina in the snow-globe at desk shrug sympathetically at me. Quickly opening my mouth before he could reproach me for not attending Ginny's Quidditch match with the Harpies, I continued nonchalantly, "To what do I owe the pleasure? I was under the impression that today was your practical field examination for your Auror training programme. You should be out in the wilds of the Isle of Man or Burma or somewhere."

Harry was very pleased that I remembered his schedule and whatnot, but had little time to praise my presence of mind for reminding him that he really ought to rejoin his team before the examination began. "Finchley here hobbled into the Auror Department informing me that there's been a strange letter for you."

"Strange? In what sense?" I asked, extending my hand to the nervously twitching old wizard. "My department is celebrated for its strangeness. Why look at me!"

As Mr Figg handed me the errant letter accused for its alleged oddity, I spotted the neat curlicue hand on the top that read:

Miss Hermione Granger

c/o Ministry of Magic

Director,

Department for the Regulation and Control of Magical Creatures

United Kingdom

Mr Figg, who was shifting his weight nervously from one shaky foot to the next, spoke. "I couldn't trace it, Miss Granger. There's a charm placed on it. It's untrackable. We couldn't even track the owl that delivered it. It just swooped into the Postal and Memo service office and dropped it in the post basket for your department."

"Could it be," I replied with a long suffering sigh, "that this is a private correspondence between myself and one of the house-elves? There are some house-elves who fear recrimination if their employers get wind that they are writing for assistance from the Ministry." I turned the dove-grey envelope around so that I could better examine the seal. It was not from any wizarding family I knew of. Perhaps it's a commemorative one or a newly commissioned one.

It was Harry's turn to make a show of exasperation as he thumped my desk, frightening the ballerina in my snow-globe. "Then why is it vibrating with magical energy? It's not house-elf magic, but wizarding magic. I checked. Finchley worried that it was an unauthorised letter and came to the Auror Department. As you know, it is protocol to check the Ministry post; you never know, we might be having a bomb scare on our hands."

"Should I be flattered someone wants to explode me?" I questioned tartly. "Or are you about to reveal that you tried opening my private correspondence?"

He nodded and had the good grace to look abashed. "Moody always counselled Constant Vigilance when he was around. And besides, Dumbledore would say it is better to be safe than sorry. If someone tried to blow you up, the Ministry might be blown up as well. We have enough threats from rogue wizards claiming to be Voldemort without having to deal with internal threats to the Ministry as well."

I rolled my eyes and gently cut open the seal on the envelope. Harry was beginning to annoy me with his 'Big Brother' ways. "Dumbledore is not the saint you paint him out to be. For heaven's sake, sit down Mr Figg before your legs give way. As I was saying, Mr Auror-to-be, Dumbledore bent the wizarding laws and the rules at Hogwarts beyond the point to where many would have said they were broken. He died a relatively easy death by arranging for Professor Snape to kill him instead of allowing the curse on his withered hand to finish him off. You might even say he died unpunished. Why are you following the example of such a wizard? Doesn't Dumbledore's presumptuous habits act as a cautionary example to you?"

My former schoolmate and sometime friend gave me a look as if to say my own interpretation of the events in that fateful year where we defeated Voldemort was terribly flawed. "I am only looking out for you."

"Apparently," I smirked on removing the crisp black sheet from the envelope, "the sender of this missive knew you would have done what you did. Otherwise, he or she would not have placed a repelling ward on it preventing anyone but the recipient from opening it and reading its contents. Such a ward only yields when it comes into direct contact the magical energy of the recipient. That in itself should tell you the sender must be acquainted with me. You're worrying over nothing."

"Then why is the paper black?" challenged Harry, looking to Mr Figg for support.

"Your unease is unnecessary," I said smoothly, flicking my eyes up at him. "It is merely a social invitation from an acquaintance. If you will excuse me, I have work to do. You had better return to work Mr Figg, before the people upstairs start wondering about your whereabouts, and you, Harry, had better go before your examiner decides to fail you, and poof no certificate to verify that you have completed the Auror's Course."

With that injunction, the two men muttered something under their breaths and left me to my own devices.

"What am I to make of you," I murmured to myself as I lent back into my seat, tapping the black sheet lightly on my nose. It smelled like cedar wood and bergamot. From an old moneyed family no doubt, otherwise it would not have the faint smell of musty books. Why would someone send me such a missive? Well, to be honest, it could not be called a missive, for it was short and concise. In a sense, I had not been prevaricating when I told Harry it was a social invitation. The black sheet was an undated, unsigned letter with no return address. "Very curious," I said on rereading it. The very elegant silver writing contrasted with the ebony of the invitation card with these words:

Dear Miss Granger,

I have followed your private work on behalf of creatures regarded as less than human with admiration. You are cordially invited to dine at seven o'clock this evening to assist me in an intimate matter of some urgency. To arrive at the destination, remove the silver crest portkey attached to the end of this card. I shall be expecting you. To convince you that I have no intent towards you, I have written this in Veritum ink, which is incapable of forming falsehoods on paper.

One who has followed your career

Once again, I wondered as to what I should make of the note. Who had sent it? What was his or her purpose? Was it part of some elaborate entrapment plan? Why else would the writer use veritum ink? The ink of truth, as some call it, will blot out lies if they are written, and from the blot, the writer's true intent will be revealed. Indeed, a quick investigative charm on the silver ink of the paper did not reveal any malicious intent. If anything, it let slip that the writer was weighed down with heavy thoughts and

strangely enough, deeply distressed. The seal, which I was to use to arrive at my destination, fascinated me. It was a heraldic emblem with a pair of lions looking up at a crown and an old-fashioned cursive letter emblazoned underneath the crown the shield of a noble family. Judging from the craftsmanship, I would place it in Tudor times. This was getting more interesting by the minute. There were one or two wizarding families who descended from the nobility of England, Scotland and Ireland. I did not know enough genealogy to say this with certainty, but I suspect it to be coat of arms of the Earls of Huntingdon because I could just make out the faint tiny words of the motto underneath the silver lions. *'In veritate victoria'* it stated, as if urging me to trust the sender. Although commonsense bade me ignore the invitation and its unknown sender, my curiosity was piqued. As with most people when intrigued by something, I began thinking about what I could do to unravel this mystery. While thinking along those lines, my mind wandered to considering how should I go about protecting myself if I decided to accept this invitation. I stopped myself in mid-thought with a frown. Was I insane? I had no bleeding idea as to the identity of my mysterious correspondent and here I was contemplating actually accepting the invitation!

The only thing I knew which was next to nothing was that I hardly knew what to make of it. An invitation to dine with a scion of one of the noble families in the land, albeit removed for many generations, was nothing to be taken lightly. If I was right and it was from the descendent of one of the early Earls of Huntingdon which was possible given that Maud, Countess of Huntingdon under first creation had a daughter with magical powers then I had to think twice before ignoring the invitation. The earls of Huntingdon were not for nothing, arguably the most famous men in wizarding Britain. If memory served me correctly, I remember Professor Binn lecturing about Maud of Huntingdon in his history lessons on the wizards who had shaped Britain. This Maud married Simon of St Liz, the first Earl of Northampton, and her daughter from that marriage, also named Maud, was gifted with magical powers. She was persecuted by her brothers for her abilities. Declining their wise decision to enter a nunnery, she went into hiding, in a place known only to her closest friends. Her brothers were enraged. They threatened death upon her friends and even sought to offer bribes. None of her friends would betray her. It was not until she met her first husband that she came out of hiding. I remembered being impressed with Maud's friends at the time of Professor Binn's lecture. A part of me was still very impressed by Maud's friends. A human being can usually rely on one's enemies to be constant as Maud's brothers were constant in their desire for her to either enter a nunnery or die. But to find the same constancy in friends, Maud must have been a very blessed witch. I know this because I speak from experience. When Harry and I were wandering in the wilderness (as I call it) during the time when we were hunting for horcruxes, Ron for reasons best known to himself ran off and left us in the lurch. The Death Eaters were always right behind us, constant in their pursuit of us. Ron however was vacillating between his own feelings of inadequacy and guilt at leaving us behind. Ron's behaviour was most certainly not a display of constancy. To own the truth, I still have some doubts as to Ron's ability to be constant. He had not only abandoned Harry and me in the wilderness, but he has also consistently abandoned me whenever I make plans for us to go the ballet, opera, theatre, or spend a quiet day at the museums. Yet I am expected to automatically make time for him to accompany him to the Quidditch games of his favourite team, and humour his tastes. If I were not fond of him, I would not have bothered with him. After all, why should a female pay any heed to a male who refuses to participate in the activities she enjoys but assume she will make time for his favoured activities? Perhaps I am nitpicking where Ronald Weasley is concerned. He claims he cares for me, and it is not like I will be getting any other offer, so I might as well make do. If one wanted constancy in the wizarding world one should look at Severus Snape. Now there was a man who was constant to the memory of the woman he loved, and who was constant in his word. He had always kept his word to Albus Dumbledore, and yet some sectors of society still persisted in viewing him as a vicious character without conscience or morals. They should really wake up and see him for what he is a fiercely loyal person to those whom he considered friends with a penchant for doomed causes. Men like him were as extinct as dinosaurs. That was one of the reasons why modern witches like myself are left with men like Ronald Weasley. I harrumphed at the irony of my situation. Where this lucky Maud de St Liz had the constancy of her friends, my boyfriend was the sort of fellow who would run away from a task he found distasteful.

As I am not one to run away from things I disliked or feared, I then resolved upon accepting the strange invitation. I say that because Mr Figg hobbled down to my office yet again; this time with a memo from Ron informing me that he would not be attending that evening's BBC Proms concert with me as he earlier claimed he would because the boys wanted to go drinking in celebration of finally becoming full fledged Aurors. Yes, Ronald Weasley was that sort of a man. No matter, I would accept the dinner offer of this nameless host and have a fine time trying to outwit him. It would definitely be more amusing than trying to explain the Tannhauser opera to Ron on a Friday night.

NOTES:

'Veritas odit moras' is Latin for 'truth hates delay', and is a quote from Seneca.

Boots also sells food and titbits the last time I was in London. American readers may like to think of it as a British CVS.

Ministry of Magic Postal and Memo Service is a made-up wizarding department in the Ministry of Magic.

Author's notes:

Written for the Potter Place/Petulant Poetess Post-Deathly-Hallows Prompt Challenge. Some might consider the characters a little OOC. This non-fluffy story depicting the bureaucracy of the Ministry of Magic and Hermione's thoughts are based on the following Potter Place Post-DH Prompts:

3. Snape had the anti-venom for Nagini's bite on him. Only he's too weak to give it to himself... Who finds Snape and helps him?

10. It has been two years after the war. Hermione is Head of the Department for the Regulation and Control of Magical Creatures. She also receives an odd letter and a Portkey, requesting to see her: no name, no address. Who sent it and why?

18. Draco finally realises how much the trio has done for him, and he contacts one of them to express his gratitude. What happens is truly unexpected... yet not unwanted.

Chapter 2 – Veritas odium parit

Chapter 2 of 5

Two years after the defeat of Voldemort, Hermione is enjoying a successful, if humdrum, career as Director of the Department for the Regulation and Control of Magical Creatures. One day, she receives a strange invitation. The mysterious sender of the invitation wants her to investigate the disappearance of Severus Snape. She accepts the challenge. This is the resultant tale.

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Chapter 2 Veritas odium parit

At half-past six in the evening, I was staring at the invitation while sitting at my dressing table in my flat. I wondered as to the sort of sustenance my host would be offering me, and whether he or she would be inclined to kill me the moment I arrived. Just to be safe, I would have my wand at the ready when I portkeyed to the rendezvous spot. Thus resolved, I straightened my simple navy blue robes and checked my hair bun, before gripping my wand in my left hand, prying off the silver insignia from the black parchment card and incinerating the anonymous note. As I did so, I felt the familiar Portkey sensation of being dragged away by my bellybutton and saw the images around me swirling like an uneven splash of colour.

When my feet found themselves on solid ground again, I saw that I was before the tall structure of a medieval keep, staring straight at its heavy doors. My brain told me, rather unnecessarily, that I had gotten myself in a fair predicament. I had allowed my vanity to get the better of me and I had Portkeyed to a stone building that looked like the sister of the Tower of London with no one knowing whither I had gone. While backing away slowly from the edifice and mentally kicking myself in the arse, the doors creaked open. Instead of hitching up my robes and running away or Apparating home like a normal sensible witch, I remained rooted to the ground. My infernal curiosity was determined to see who or what had opened the door. Keeping myself calm by tightening my grip on my wand and reminding myself that a level head would extract me out of whatever horrors awaited me, I waited for something to happen. Shuffling footsteps were heard, and soon, the ambling figure of the fat, surly manservant who had stopped by my office at the Ministry in the morning came into view carrying a candle.

He gave no indication of surprise at my arrival and from his behaviour, I gathered I was expected. Instantly, I came to the conclusion that Draco had set up this elaborate rouse to thank me for that which I did for his father. Rather clever of him, I admitted grudgingly to myself as I followed the manservant into the antechamber and thence the dining parlour. Judging from the décor, I would say that the interior was distinctively Jacobean. A part of me was relieved to know that I was in still in England, that is, I was relieved until stepped into the opulent dining parlour. Someone was already seated in the high backed wingchair waiting for me. That could not bode well. Draco would have better manners than to remain seated when I was announced into his presence. He would at least have turned around to acknowledge my presence, but my host whoever he or she was, remained seated.

Mastering my apprehension by approaching the seated figure cautiously, I eventually relaxed somewhat when I saw long, tapered fingers offset by an emerald ring in the design of an ouroboros. I could just make up the emerald eyes of the heavy silver snake on my host's finger when my attention was swiftly drawn to the visage of my host.

Thinly pursing my lips at the unwanted surprise of seeing this particular wizard, I flashed him a disinterested look and raised a brow at the figure whose steeped hands rested on his pale lips. Lucius Malfoy was still more or less the same wizard that I last saw two years ago. However, his time in isolation had changed him. He seemed not to notice my presence, for he sighed heavily and closed his eyes. Was he reflecting on his past actions and the consequences they had wrought on his family? If so, it seemed as though his reflections and regrets were taking a toll on him. Indeed, I noted that his formerly long, lustrous platinum blond locks had been cut short in the style of his son, and swept completely away from his prepossessing face so as to cling neatly to his scalp. While he still had that certain commanding air about him, his brow was creased with unspoken anxiety. Contrary to his appearance before the war, he was haggard now. Even his garb, which was formerly ostentatious even by wizarding standards, was altered. His present garb for the evening lacked the marks of a wealthy man, but was by no means drab. No, it was now more sober rather than sombre. As soon I sat down at the table across him, the glassed-over look in his eyes dissipated and looked up at me with a nod.

"I thank you for joining me under these circumstances. I regret the deception undertaken to lure you here, but it was necessary," he began in carefully moderated voice. "I felt certain you would not have seen me otherwise."

Instead of dignifying the veracity of his assessment with an acknowledgment, I flashed him a cold glance. "I should have known it was you. The insignia on the Earl of Huntingdon's coat of arms had a cursive M emblazoned on it. May I enquire why you have arranged for this meeting, deploying an untraceable letter and unregistered portkey?"

His eyes met mine in a tired though meaningful way. "I never thought I would find a use for this estate in Northumberland. I inherited it from my mother on her death. She was descended from Maud de St Liz, and was a fine figure of a witch." His lips twitched into a rueful smile at the memory of his departed mother before his eyes hardened once again. "Miss Granger, I do not and will not pretend to be ignorant of all that you and your *friend* have done for me. It was very good of him to vouchsafe for the thoughtfulness of my wife and my son's character. It was also very good of you to arrange for my confinement at St Mungo's. It was infinitely preferable to Azkaban." He clasped his hands tightly together as if still plagued by the memories of his time in that prison shortly before the outbreak of the war. "My son, who was to arrange a meeting between us, informs me you will not see him, so I have taken my own steps to arrange for this meeting."

"Mr Malfoy, your praises and thanks are quite wasted on a jaded witch," I said with an air of calm authority as I disliked the turn of his conversation. I have had enough of people coming up to me, asking to shake my hand for being one of the golden trio to bring down Voldemort. Truth be told, I was sick to my stomach of hearing such things.

His lips quirked into a smirk as a nerve in his temple throbbed delicately. "Really? You must edify me then." He paused to take a spoonful of soup that had materialised on the table. "You are not quite the sort of person I am used to dealing with."

"And I am not used to being spoken to in such a manner. Pray, Mr Malfoy, would you kindly edify me as to why I feel like I am in a Roman amphitheatre waiting to be devoured by some beast?"

"So, is that how you see me a beast, eh?" He commented in an enigmatic tone. "I will not devour you, or threaten your life, or Crucio you, if that's what you are thinking."

"Then why am I here? Convince me this isn't some entrapment," I responded, turning the wineglass in my hand.

"I might say the same of you, Miss Granger. I cannot fail to notice that your left hand is still holding onto your wand in your lap."

Lucius Malfoy and I then exchanged intelligible looks of mutual respect and distrust with half smiles.

"It is the only natural reaction to have when I feel like I am about to be ambushed from all sides," I said cautiously sniffing at the wine in my glass, "like a Christian in a Roman amphitheatre, waiting to be torn to shreds."

"Now that you remark on it," he interposed, his gaze still locked on me, "We have much to learn from the Roman theatres. Roman Emperors used to put on plays in theatres so well built that the words would echo about, so as to impress their policies on the people." He paused and took a sip of his wine. "Or if the censor failed in his duty, agitators could put on work to rouse the rabble. Which sort of theatre do you think this is one where the rabble rousers do their worst or one where I impress my views upon you?"

"It depends," I replied, mocking him with what I hoped was a cynical look. "I do not know what you want from me."

"I gather you are acquainted with the fact that Severus's body was never recovered. It is lamentable that some of *your lot*..." He wrinkled his nose disdainfully as he emphasised the last word. "Well, some of your lot believe that certain Death Eaters were none too pleased with discovering his role as a double-agent and destroyed his body."

"Do you mean to insinuate, Mr Malfoy, that Professor Snape's corpse is somewhere out there?" I quizzed.

"You apprehend the matter quite keenly, as my son said you would." His lips curled into an almost cat-like smile. "You see, Miss Granger, I have followed your career with much interest, and in so doing, I uncovered a delicious titbit. I have heard that as well as heading the Department for the Regulation and Control of Magical Creatures and declining a seat on the Wizengamot, you are also something of an investigator."

At which point, I raised my brow suspiciously at him.

"By which I mean," he continued unaffectedly, "your interest in delving into cryptic subject matters has led you to make several new discoveries."

Of course this was true, for I had a keen interest in esoteric wizarding philosophy, and have conducted extensive research in the interpretation of wizarding common law so as to clear up some legal matters for the Ministry shortly before my elevation to my current position. "Are you going to tell me that your possessions were purloined by

person or persons unknown? If so, I suggest you lodge a report with the Auror Department."

"Oh no," Lucius Malfoy stated blandly. "Not anything from the family collection or anything entrusted to the family. Something far more significant was taken from me, *videlicet*, my good name."

I regarded him closely so as to master the laughter that was threatening to spill from my throat. Somehow I managed to keep myself in check and eye him gravely. "As a former Death Eater, sir, you *already* do not possess a good name."

"Nonetheless, my good name has been taken away, and my wife is understandably upset. The taunts that Narcissa had to endure this afternoon when she returned from visiting the graves of her sisters were unwarranted," he said calmly through clenched teeth.

"Your uxorious devotion is very moving, I am sure," I answered, meeting his eyes frostily. "But you only have yourself to blame for the loss of your good name. Moreover, even if someone did, as you say, take away your good name, I do not see how they could do so without your good body being present at the time."

"I take it that you did read the slanders published in this morning's issue of the *Daily Prophet*?" he asked.

I shook my head firmly as he twisted the ring on his finger.

"I see," he murmured before pointing his wand at a side cabinet and levitating the newspaper on it towards me. "You might be interested to learn that my good name was tarnished today by an allegation that I did away with Severus's body."

The offending article was duly perused, and I was overcome with disgust at the piece. However, I did not allow myself to show it. "What do you expect to do about it? I am not part of the Office of Law at the Ministry."

"That is where you can help." The earlier smirk on his face was erased and replaced with one of genuine concern. "Of course, I would never dream of asking someone in your... exalted position to act as a private investigator, but I know of no one else whom I can trust," he said lowly in something of a purr. "Draco has spoken of your what-did-he-call it... discretion. So I am leaving things up to you. As a member of the Ministry with access to all the relevant documents and people, you will be well-placed to learn of anything. I will pay you a token sum for this service. My belief is that..."

"I haven't said I have accepted your terms yet, Mr Malfoy," I reminded him, rising from my chair.

"What if I told you I believe Severus to be alive?" he interjected hastily, his gaze beseeching me to assist him.

My curiosity was instantly piqued. "Go on," I said quietly, flicking a dismissive wrist in his direction as I resumed my seat.

"Thank you," said he with a ghost of a smile playing at the corner of his lips. "Bodies don't just disappear. Even if they are destroyed, there would be some kind of residue of body fat, or a finger. With Severus, it is almost as if he disappeared into thin air. I would like you to disprove these slanders and allay my wife's fear of meeting hushed whispers about her husband and son whenever she goes abroad."

"How do you propose I perform this feat?" I asked, curling my lips into a snarl that I quickly mastered.

"I have in my possession a casket. Not just any casket, but a lead casket I believe to contain some papers of import. It was given to me by my son, who had in turn received it from Severus when my unfortunate friend was briefly Headmaster at Hogwarts. Severus told Draco that he had entrusted a sealed box to the casket, and instructed Draco never to open it except in the time of the direst need for our family, or for the expressed use of finding out the truth about him."

I raised a brow waiting for my host to continue. "Just what is this *truth*?"

Lucius Malfoy delicately dabbed the corner of his mouth with a napkin. "I am not very sure, but I think it contains some of Severus's papers which may give us a hint as to what happened to him after his so-called death by the magically enhanced venom of a spectacled cobra."

"What makes you so sure he survived, other than the fact that his corpse is missing?"

"It may interest you to know that Severus was the Dark Lord's potions brewer. He had used Nagini's venom in many potions to strengthen the body of the Dark Lord, and as is customary for Severus, he always tests the potions on himself. In the course of slaving for the Dark Lord, Severus's habit of trying the effectiveness of the potions on himself led him down two paths. One he built up some kind of resistance to the venom. Two he concocted a serum that acted as an antidote to the venom. I know the second to be true because Severus had given a vial of the counter-serum to the members of my immediate family when he saw the dreadful conditions under which the Dark Lord had placed us during our house-arrest. He had, as he himself said at the time, feared for our lives. Given that the Dark Lord never liked dirtying his own hands unless it was absolutely necessary, Severus thought it likely that the cobra would be the instrument of our demise when our existence was deemed to be no longer expedient to our Master. Of course, he made us swear never to reveal the existence of the counter-serum to the Dark Lord. I am proud to say we kept our promise."

"I do not mean to impugn your character, Mr Malfoy, but I find it difficult to rely on your account of things," I interjected with an honest remark. Then when his brow darkened, I adopted a more diplomatic tone. "I have no doubt of the existence of a counter-serum to the venom of Voldemort's snake. I am acquainted with Professor Snape's skills in potions brewing. Thus, I can readily believe his foresight in concocting an antidote so to speak. From my limited observation of him, I know enough of his character to be aware that Professor Snape was the sort of man to make contingency plans. The existence of the antidote fits in with this shrewd aspect of his nature. However, I marvel at your confident suggestion that he may still be alive."

Lucius silenced me with a scathing look. "What if I told you Severus always carried a vial of the counter-serum on his person? What if I told you I found him in the Shrieking Shack when the rest of you were celebrating the downfall of the Dark Lord?"

"And how did you know he was in the shack?" I narrowed my eyes at him

"I asked my other compatriots and they revealed that the Dark Lord had sent for him while he was encamped there. As Severus was never seen returning from that place, I assumed he must have still been there. I exploited the general euphoria stemming from the Dark Lord's death, bade Narcissa take Draco home, and I set off to find Severus. I did find him in the Shrieking Shack, unconscious, lying in a pool of his own blood where he had been bitten by the snake. I took a gamble when I examined his body. His pulse was faint and nearly non-existent, so I took a chance. I sealed the site of the bleeding and poured the vial of the counter-serum, which he always kept in the left inner pocket of his robes, down his throat."

"And did he survive?"

"I think he did."

"You mean you did not secrete him somewhere?" I quizzed, struggling to keep my irritation in check.

"Call me a coward if you must, Miss Granger, though I would prefer it if it were out of my earshot," he smirked contemptuously at himself upon taking another sip from his glass. "As much as I wanted to take Severus with me, I sensed the presence of other wizarding magical energies within the immediate vicinity of the shack. Fearing that they were rounding up Death Eaters, I Disapparated home to rejoin my wife and son so as to bid them farewell should the authorities come for me. I can see by the look on your face that you are repulsed by my leaving Severus behind. But I did not think. I did what I could and left before anyone could find me."

My mind was reeling from these revelations and I had to steady myself by finally downing some of the wine. "Something must have happened in the interim when you Disapparated from the Shack and we arrived to reclaim Professor Snape's corpse."

"Sorry?" came the puzzled voice of my host.

I spat the wine into my napkin to contain my ironic laughter. Was my host pretending not to understand me or was he being facetious? In any case, I recomposed myself and addressed him. "You said you Disappeared when you sensed the presence of other wizards in the area. Those other wizards were Harry, Ron and me. We were at the gate of the Shack when we saw this white light glimmer briefly at the window. We thought nothing of it at the time, thinking it a trick of the light. When we finally arrived at the Shack, Professor Snape's body was no longer there, just a small pool of blood."

He cast me a knowing half-smile, stroking the top of his ring thoughtfully. "Which makes you wonder, doesn't it?"

"Where could he have gone if he is indeed still alive?"

"That's what I need you to find out." He promptly picked up the bell from the table and rang it sharply. The surly manservant ambled back into the dining parlour and scowled at his employer. "Ah, Ivan, would you please retrieve for me the lead casket and the two books on the mantelpiece in the drawing room?" As this Ivan fellow shuffled away, Lucius refilled my glass. "Your eyes tell me you are curious as to true identity of Draco's valet. I will tell you." He smirked lazily, looking much more like his old self. "That is Ivan Shuvalov, Igor Karkaroff's younger half-brother *and* a squib. When Igor departed this life, there was no one to look after Ivan. I made it a point to search for him and provide him with meaningful employment. He may look disagreeable but he is very loyal, a trait that is sorely wanting in the domestic staff nowadays with all this nonsense of unionising the house-elves." His eyes undertook a contemptuous gleam. "Unionising house-elves! Ha! What next? Organised strikes by house-elves? Dashedly absurd!"

I coughed loudly into my napkin and shot him a reproachful look.

"My apologies, Miss Granger," said he smoothly. "I had quite forgotten you are a champion of theirs. Times change, so should our ways, I suppose." Fortunately, Ivan Shuvalov returned at that moment with the casket. "Thank you, my good man."

The valet withdrew and the imperturbable Mr Malfoy turned to me with a smile. "Draco should be the one telling you all this, but he is still somewhat embarrassed that you had turned down his offer for tea. He very much wanted to be the one who sought for your help, seeing how Severus is his godfather. But because I too have a vested interest in the matter, it fell on me to do the honours." He paused to hold out the object to me. "This is it the thing which may prove Severus is alive."

Eyeing him suspiciously, I ran through the standard gamut of spells to ensure that the object was not an illicit Portkey, or bespelled with curses, or riddled with evil spells. On finding it strangely safe, and un-warded, my curiosity stirred. Silently taking the proffered lead box into my hands, I mentally considered that Lucius was only interested in the contents of this container because it would serve his family from its present ignominy. Then an unpleasant thought struck me, and being an incurably forward person whenever my mental processes were engaged, I gave voice to that which was foremost in my mind. "You have never opened the box?"

"No!" he protested with a hand on his chest in mock shock. "We were charged not to open it unless our family was in desperate danger or if the truth behind Severus needed to be known."

"Which in layman's English means you tried but failed."

"You are uncannily omniscient," he complimented with a smirk at me while twisting the ring on his finger.

The casket was fairly unremarkable. Like most wizarding caskets, it was decorated with carved Celtic knots and cold to the touch. However, this particular design did not seem to have a discernable latch or seal by which it could be opened. If I had not been told this was a box, I would not have thought of it as such. "Curious, very curious," I found myself muttering aloud.

"Indeed it is, Miss Granger," he agreed, pushing two medium sized tomes towards me. "Severus also left these with Draco along with the casket. Also, un-bespelled and completely safe."

"*De Lapide Philosophico* and *Synosius*," I read off the spine of the first book, then the other. "Alchemical texts that discuss..."

Interrupting me with the ringing of his wine glass, my epicurean host affected to appear innocent of his deliberate disruption of my thoughts. "They discuss this," he announced, removing the ring from his finger, and tossing it carelessly to me.

"The ouroboros or tail-eater." I took the ring and examined it closely. The craftsmanship was so exquisite that each scale on the snake's body was individually defined and its emerald eyes glittered seductively in the candlelight. No doubt it was goblin made, I mused. I was about to throw it back across the table to Lucius stopped me.

"Keep it. According to Draco, Severus told him the ring was in the inner box of the casket when it came into his possession, part of his mother's dowry plate or something like that," he explained, taking another sip of his wine. "I believe it is the key to opening the box. Alas, my efforts have not been successful. I was hoping you would have better luck."

Turning to him with an impassive expression, I curled my lips forcefully into an uneasy smile. "All this to spare your wife the shame of being whispered at? It is most diverting. You must realise, do you not, that even if, and this is a very big if, we uncover what really happened to Professor Snape that fateful day, even if he is indeed still alive somewhere, we may not be able to publicise it."

"I know. Those mad dogs calling themselves my former compatriots want my blood and Narcissa's for helping Potter. Those mad dogs on your side can't wait for me to slip up so that they can throw me in Azkaban. A no-win game in either case for me and my family." A pain expression then crossed his face. "But I need, no, want to prove to Narcissa that I did not do away with Severus Snape's body. She never says anything about it to me, but I can see the accusation in her eyes. She deserves to know the truth. I *need* to know the truth as to what happened to a man who remained a friend to me in spite of the falling of my fortunes with the Dark Lord. I have long wanted to locate Severus, now I am asking you to do it for me. Please, I beg of you."

I sighed inwardly out of compassion for the wizard before me. He had truly spent a great deal of time reflecting on his past while at St Mungo's. However, in light of his past, it struck me as odd that he should be my supplicant. "I never knew you were one to stoop to entreat a Muggle-born for a favour. How do you do it?" I sneered with a bite to my voice.

"Very easily, Miss Granger," he answered, turning to face me without a trace of his former arrogance. "I make it a point to now live by the motto of my mother's ancestor, Maud of Northumbria *in veritate victoria*, victory lies in the truth."

NOTES:

'*Veritas odium parit*' is Latin for 'truth breeds hatred', and is a quote from Terence.

'*In veritate victoria*' is Latin for 'victory lies in the truth' and is the motto of the Earls of Huntingdon.

To clarify Maud de St Liz was also known as Maud of Northumbria.

I was alerted to the probability that some readers might think a casket is a coffin. Coming from a tradition where casket = box used for the storage of jewellery, and coffin = box where you put a dead body, I was rather surprised to learn of this. So, to clarify matters, in this story, casket = box for the storage of jewellery.

Chapter 3 – In veritate Victoria

Chapter 3 of 5

Two years after the defeat of Voldemort, Hermione is enjoying a successful, if humdrum, career as Director of the Department for the Regulation and Control of Magical Creatures. One day, she receives a strange invitation. The mysterious sender of the invitation wants her to investigate the disappearance of Severus Snape. She accepts the challenge. This is the resultant tale.

A/N: A response to the Potter Place Post-Deathly-Hallows Prompt Challenge using prompts 3, 10 and 18. Some might consider the characters a little OOC. Some organisations and Ministry of Magic departments are made-up.

For the Benefit of the Unforgiven

Chapter 3 In veritate Victoria

Upon leaving my estimable host, I went back to my flat near Hyde Park and stayed up late, thinking and reflecting on that which I had undertaken. I saw now there could be no more serious talk about Death Eaters doing away with Severus Snape's body. If Lucius Malfoy had been convinced that his erstwhile friend had managed to leave the Shrieking Shack, I must give the matter serious thought. It was not so much that I wanted to restore the good Malfoy name; rather, I was more interested to know the truth as to what happened between the time Mr Malfoy claimed to have administered the antidote to Professor Snape and the time Harry, Ron and I arrived to claim his body. What was I? A bored bureaucrat. This mystery was the exact thing I needed to alleviate the tedium of my humdrum existence. A part of my brain reproached me for the presumption I had that I would uncover the truth. Yet another part of me feared that the truth would be too much for me to bear. Either way, it did not bode for me, yet I remained intrigued. Unable to quell the need to know anything that I stumbled into, I found myself madly flipping through the pages of *De Lapide Philosophico* and *Synosius* puzzling over the significance of the ouroboros and its connection to the lead casket.

"A serpent swallowing its own tail," I murmured, drumming my fingers on the desk as I was wont to do whenever I felt I had the illusory thread of something within my grasp and yet was unable to pull at it. So, what did I know? As a symbol of cyclicity, immortality, infinity, it played an important role in magic and alchemy. It has always been associated with self-reflexivity, as the ouroboros was deemed to be something that constantly recreated itself. I smiled wryly at that point, for it did remind me greatly of Professor Snape. He had recreated himself so to speak from Death Eater spy to member of the Order of the Phoenix, from bitter, self-centred wizard to sacrificial lamb. It was an apt symbol for him to select for himself, if it was indeed a clue as to what happened to him.

The more I thought on it, the more I became convinced that he was like the ouroboros ring sitting in the middle of my palm was a human embodiment of this symbolic cycle that began anew as soon as the last one ended. Was that what happened to him? Did he begin a new cycle for himself when the old one, namely his life as Severus Snape, former potions master and Headmaster at Hogwarts lapsed? If so, what sort of a new cycle was it? Did he begin life anew elsewhere under a new name? Or was Mr Malfoy too late in applying the antidote? No, I would not allow myself to think that. I must not, and should not speculate. Speculation leads to hope, and hope was often all too easily disappointed, as I learnt the hard way in my relationship with Ron. Every time I hoped he would accompany me to a museum or art gallery, he would brush me aside calling my interests too high-brow for him. Indeed, his lately arrived owl to me stated as much, and was in fact, his excuse for not accompanying Harry and me to Luna's book signing event on Sunday. He said he had already purchased season tickets to some dodgy team's Quidditch matches or the other, and could not see the tickets go to waste. Oh well, he can do as he likes. He and I have different tastes; that's all. He would laugh at me if he saw me now, pondering over the fate of a man who had been assumed dead and whose body was believed to have been destroyed. He would also rail at me for meeting up with Mr Malfoy and accepting this commission to find Professor Snape. Bah! What did Ron know about these things! Besides, the unsophisticated philistine did not have to know *everything* that went on my life.

"Yes," I said with a nod to myself, as I twisted the ring around to better examine it. "He does not have to know."

Then it struck me that the ring seemed to be half light and half dark. It seemed as though the top layer of it, that is the layer close to surface was darker than the bottom. Just exactly what I would have expected from my former potions master, I mused. He was Janus incarnate, half in the shadows and half in the light, quite like the ouroboros ring. While these aspects of the ring and I dare say his nature contrasted with each other, they were not in conflict. Indeed, I fondly recalled his lecture on the alchemical properties of the Draught of Peace. The Draught was supposed to be a liquid embodiment of opposites the self-interested desire to kill another so that one might continue to live versus the innate desire to live quietly away from others so as not to do them harm. A neat irony now that the ouroboros ring was in my hand, for I knew it represented the alchemist's magnum opus, uniting the conscious and unconscious mind. What was it that the modern alchemist Carl Jung said? I rolled my chair over to the relevant shelf in my book room and pulled down volume fourteen entitled *On Alchemical Materia*. Flipping through the pages hastily and sustaining numerous paper cuts in the process, I finally came across the passage I wanted:

In the age-old image of the ouroboros lies the thought of devouring oneself and turning oneself into a circulatory process, for it was clear to the more astute alchemists that the 'prima materia' of the art was man himself. The ouroboros is a dramatic symbol for the integration and assimilation of the opposite, viz., of the shadow. This 'feed-back' process is at the same time a symbol of immortality, since it is said of the ouroboros that he slays himself and brings himself to life, fertilises himself and gives birth to himself. He symbolises the One, who proceeds from the clash of opposites, and he therefore constitutes the secret of the 'prima materia' which unquestionably stems from man's unconscious.

"Very interesting," I said aloud to myself. I have a habit of talking to myself when I work, I have always found it much easier to think when engaged in conversation. It is an idiosyncrasy shared by Luna Lovegood, which of course did nothing to enhance our reputations. "Reminds me of something I read earlier in *Synosius*. The ouroboros is a representative of the cycle of birth and death from which the alchemist sought release and liberation. Interesting and vexing." I drummed my fingers on the desk once again. Given all that I knew about the ouroboros, I was now convinced that it had something to do with the casket and the mystery behind Professor Snape's disappearance. And somehow, knowing the ouroboros would help one to open the lead box.

There were always wheels within wheels and fires within fires where Professor Snape was concerned, and the whole puzzle surrounding the casket and its contents were no exception. How was I to open it? I could not just pry it open. That would be barbaric, and who knows what sort of spell had been placed over it. It would be more prudent if I uncovered as much as I could about the casket first. I had a nagging suspicion that it was made from Welsh lead. Professor Snape's mother, Elaine Prince was Welsh, and the Welsh wizarding families always preferred using items made from their native areas than any Saxon import. As I knew little about Welsh magical items, I spent the rest of the evening learning all I could about Welsh artefacts, so much so that in my late night study, I had become quite an authority on the subject of collecting Welsh lead caskets.

The next morning, I pasted on myself the guise of an antique curio collector and trundled off to Diagon Alley. While there, I launched on a tour of all the shops selling old curiosities. I asked in particular for Welsh caskets and showed them the one in my possession but none of the shops could identify it. Since none of the shops recognised it, I was left with only one alternative. I would have to make my way into Knockturn Alley and solicit the services of the proprietor of Borgin and Burkes.

It saddened me to have to resort to approaching the unsavoury characters running the shop, but that was my destiny now. I had to find out all I could about the casket. I kept to myself, wrapping my cloak tightly around me as I stepped into the area the wizarding population of Britain called 'the dodgy end'. The post-war infrastructural effort had improved much of Knockturn Alley. For one, its alleyways were now widened and no longer as noisome. Its buildings were also no longer in want of repair. However,

there was still something generally sinister hanging in the air of the place that I could not quite place. Humans and other creatures such as cats, dogs and rats seemed to scuttle about looking suspiciously over their shoulders. I shook my head as the third cat to look over its shoulder passed me. Despite the improvements made to the area, Knockturn Alley was the main haunt of the disreputable denizens of wizarding society. I, who am considered one of the new pillars of respectable wizarding society was out of place here. The stares thrown in my direction said as much, and I hastened my steps into 13B Knockturn Alley.

The shop bell above the door resounded in a maniacal cackle as I stepped into Borgin and Burkes, and a thin fellow popped up from behind the counter. This was the famous Mr Borgin. He looked a little worse for wear and was much more ill-made than I had remembered. His skin had now taken on the cadaverous yellow hue associated with rotting corpses, and his eyes were these great goggling things that took in everything within his range of vision as if he was being strangled by an invisible hand. "Good day, Miss Granger," he called out, rubbing his hands predatorily in a manner reminiscent of Charles Dickens's Uriah Heep. "What can I do for you today?"

"Mr Borgin," I said briskly, straightening the hood over my head as I stood before him across the counter. "What do you know of Welsh lead caskets of this make?" I brandished the box and held it aloft from his eager grasp when I noted his eyes glittering greedily.

"I would have to examine it first," he replied deferentially, his unctuous behaviour belying the sour look on his face.

"Only on the understanding that it is not for sale," I declared coldly, staring down at him.

He nodded his assent and held out his bony hands for the box. "This is excellent quality. The intricate workmanship places it in the sixteenth century. Used for storing jewellery in the old days," he rattled on, fully absorbed in turning the box this way and that in his appraisal of it. "How did you come upon this?"

"A dear friend's aunt whom I nursed died and left it to me," I lied without batting an eyelid.

"I will pay you for this, handsomely if the key is included."

A nerve twitched at the corner of my mouth in anxiety and annoyance. "It is not for sale."

He shrugged carelessly. "Excellent work this is. Burkes must see it if he can. Where is the key?" His beady eyes latched onto me curiously.

"What?" I blinked, stunned by the abrupt change in question. "You know how to open this?"

"So that's what you came for?" he laughed in an oily manner, his eyes narrowing. "Do not worry, I am the soul of discretion. We get all sorts here and I have the same code of ethics as Mediwitches and barristers."

"Which makes you very admirable, I am sure," I replied, struggling to keep my annoyance of his remarks under check.

"It is our business at Borgin and Burkes to know about all the curios prized by wizarding families," he continued smoothly, ignoring my sarcasm. "There is a kind of trigger for boxes of this make. You see the grooves where the knotted pattern meets?" He pointed at it with his last finger. "They form these circular designs, a masterful *trompe l'oeil*. To the untrained eye, they look like Celtic knots haphazardly strewn together as a design, but to those of us who know." His eyes gleamed in delight at knowing something that I, the most intelligent witch of my generation did not. He then touched the side of his nose knowingly, smirking a little at my attempt not to harrumph at him. "We can instantly recognise it for what it is. The Welsh borrowed from Etruscan symbolic mysticism and developed a unique kind of magic that resonates in all the things coming from their marshes. These lead caskets were favoured by the Tudors for storing their baubles because they were notoriously difficult to open. The discerning witch, as you are, Miss Granger, will find it a valuable addition to your collection. Look carefully at the design here." He pointed at the intricate knots with the last finger of his right hand. "This is an Etruscan symbol taken to mean 'many'. It was so adopted because the ladies in the days of old liked to imagine they would have more baubles to add to these confines."

"I do not see any Etruscan symbol," I spat testily on cocking my head to one side. It was then that it dawned upon me. "The infinity sign," I gasped, looking up at the knowing eyes of Mr Borgin.

He smiled, parting his livid lips and showing his yellow uneven teeth to the best advantage. "Place the key in the right loop of the representation of the one thousand, and the casket should open in a trice."

"Thank you," I commented when he pushed the box back towards me. "You have been a great help to me. How much do I owe you for the trouble?"

"Nothing," he said firmly, meeting my gaze of disbelief with an amused one.

Instinctively, my lips curled in their own accord as I kept the lead casket. "What do you want in return?"

"What kind of a wizard do you take me for?" he asked in a more ironic than affronted tone. "But if Miss Granger can find it in her heart to purchase one of our items, I would be very grateful." He bent down and removed something from the glass casing of the counter. "Might I interest you in this talisman?" he enquired, holding up an ank in perfect Prussian blue lapis lazuli. "It is guaranteed to bring strength and health to the wearer. From Kellia, don't you know? Known as the stone of truth, it offers protection and may lead you to find a most faithful friend. It usually goes for three galleons and five sickles, but for you, three galleons."

"Your oiliness is very refreshing." I flicked a wrist, signalling that I would take it. "That's daylight robbery," I grumbled, fishing for the right galleons in my coin purse.

"But robbery of an entirely legal nature," he said with an unctuous bow upon receiving the coins. An odd look then crossed his face. It expressed worry and a little embarrassment. "We all have to live, you know. Some of us do so by plodding along, others," he paused and jerked his head at the figures outside with their hands outstretched for alms. "They beg to be allowed to live. I choose the former," he continued, walking me to the door and holding it open for me. However, in so doing, he resumed what Shakespeare would call an 'antic disposition' and a thin smile. "Pleasure to have served you, Miss Granger. Please stop by again and favour Borgin and Burkes with your patronage soon."

I turned around and acknowledged his help with a nod before Disapparating home. Once there, I retreated to my favourite room. The day had been draining enough on me, and I needed a short repose. There was nothing I knew to be more conducive for raising one's spirit than staring at shelves-upon-shelves and rows-upon-rows of books. My study, or my sanctuary, as I called it was my true home within my home. Here, I was shielded from the glare of life's unpleasantness. It is only to be expected from the fair prospect of an airy book room facing south. Gliding to my desk, I rested my chin wearily on the bust of Plato and sighed. "It has been a trying day," I sighed again, divesting myself of the cloak, the casket and my purchase.

It was already late afternoon. No wonder I was tired. I had spent most of my day running around Diagon Alley and Knockturn Alley. But it had been a productive day, I smiled at myself, watching the sun shine through the window at a steep angle. For a moment, just a fraction of a second, the silver ouroboros ring on my desk caught the sunlight and reflected a small ray onto the casket emphasising the meeting of the two Celtic knots into a rough infinity sign.

"Everything was right in front of me and I didn't see it. The bloody irony," I commented wryly, walking across the rows of books and running my fingers across their spines until I came to one about pre-Roman magic. "Why is it that we never see that which is so obvious? Mummy is right then. The more educated we are, the more we fail to think simply," I remarked with a bitter edge to my voice as I returned to my desk with the volume.

As I was not one to lament my shortcomings, I strove to prove that my unappreciated genius and largeness of mind did not desert me. This self-imposed task was largely successful as I came across numerous references to Etruscan magic that matched all that Mr Borgin had told me. The Etruscan numeral for one thousand, written as CIO was used in alchemical writings and had the same significance to Etruscan wizards as the ouroboros in modern wizarding alchemy. It was most certainly not a coincidence that the symbol CIO resembled an infinity sign. It was also most certainly not a coincidence that the ouroboros and the infinity sign mirrored each other. "The infinity sign equates to a double ouroboros or a double eternity. Doubly clever," I murmured, placing the ring on the grooves of the right side of infinity sign on the casket and pushed it into place. "A perfect fit," I smiled in self-satisfaction.

Then, as if answering me, a soft click came from the box and it cracked open, revealing a tiny slit. What was there to do other than open it fully? I did so and found it half filled with documents, mostly in Albus Dumbledore's handwriting. The inner casket was smaller in size and had a discernable seal. Leaving aside Dumbledore's papers for the moment, I cracked the seal of the second casket. A rolled up piece of yellowed paper burst out and rolled onto my desk. My hand almost reached for it before retracting again. A sense of overwhelming fear washed over me. I had not felt such nervous apprehension since my days on the run from Voldemort. What if Professor Snape was well-and-truly dead? What if the parchment did not reveal anything that I did not already know? Pushing aside all the errant thoughts of Professor Snape running through my head, I exhaled slowly so as to better focus on the task at hand. Resolutely, I unrolled the parchment and saw that it was stained with copper coloured droplets and full of my former potions master's spidery handwriting:

20th February 1998

I, Severus Tobias Snape, current Headmaster of Hogwarts, am a Death Eater under the service of the Dark Lord Voldemort, as I am a Member and spy for the Order of the Phoenix in the service of Albus Dumbledore. I give this statement to Argus Filch and Irma Pince, to be opened in the event of great peril to the Malfoy family who are now turned against the madness of the Dark Lord Voldemort's regime, Members of the Order of the Phoenix, and also to the academic staff and students of Hogwarts, to use as they see fit. I write this because it is my supposition that I likely do not have long to live. Everyday the sense of foreboding grows stronger. Everyday the Dark Lord looks on me less favourably. Everyday the Dark Lord's plans for the complete subjugation of Wizarding Britain come closer to fruition.

The Dark Lord Voldemort's strong conviction in pure blood supremacy has resulted in extremely high-handed behaviour, which has only alienated even the staunchest of his supporters. Lucius Malfoy and his family are among the pure blooded supporters of the Dark Lord who have been used very cruelly by him. It has become very clear not just to me, but to Lucius and a few other Death Eaters, that the Dark Lord placed his own immortality and supremacy above the promises of power, glory and victory for his followers. From the punishments he meted out to Lucius on his supposed betrayal, and his fondness for ordering his cobra, Nagini, to kill those who proved incompetent in a mission, I begin to feel uneasy in my current state. It is apparent to all but his staunchest supporters that he would not hesitate to kill those who have outlived their purposes.

Dumbledore and I had already anticipated this before his death. He and I had frequently discussed the matter at length. I have already developed a counter-serum to Nagini's venom when brewing many of the venom-based poisons for the Dark Lord Voldemort's cause. Despite Dumbledore's attempts to persuade me to flee from the Dark Lord's service, I would not fly from my position. I had to remain in Hogwarts to protect the innocents. By staying behind, I was better placed to continue serving the Order in my turn. However, I allowed Dumbledore to make arrangements for a suitable plan of escape should I ever require it. He arranged for me refuge with some contacts he had made while on his grand tour. The wizarding monks of old Coptic Kellia would shelter me at the hermitage under an assumed name until I am able and/or willing to return to the fold of proper wizarding society. Should I decide to leave the protection of the monastic order, the monks would arrange for me a new identity.

I rubbed my brow with my free hand. It was not quite what I expected. Steeling myself against further surprising revelations, I read on:

The monks have agreed to this and have sent ahead a mute house-elf by the name of Tacitus to Hogwarts. Tacitus will act as a liaison between the monks and myself. He has an earring that is magically bound to the second button of my formal teaching robes. If I should be in desperate trouble and unable to extricate myself from danger, I am to touch the button and whisper 'veritas odit moras'; he will then come for me and take me the monastery via side-along Apparition. I do not believe I will resort to escape, but if it should come to that, I will bow to circumstances.

A sigh escaped me when I came to the end of the paper. Was that what happened to Professor Snape? Was he really in some obscure Coptic Wizarding Monastery? I knew that the Kellia Monastery in Egypt celebrated the old wizarding pantheistic religion and that the monastery appeared as a deserted ruin to Muggles. But what were the odds that a house-elf from the monastery had transported him to safety? The irony of a mute house-elf named Tacitus was not lost on me. Tacitus was the name of a famous wizarding historian and orator, and this house-elf, his namesake, was mute. Gently placing the parchment aside, I pondered on that which I had learned so far. The facts pointed to the possibility of Professor Snape still being alive. Nitria in Egypt should suit him. The wizarding monks spent most of their time in their own cells, praying and making handicrafts to trade for food, only coming together on Saturday and Sundays for communal meditation. Recalling all that was covered in the history lessons at Hogwarts' and knowing Professor Snape's character, I realised that the hermitage and the ascetic lifestyle it promoted was ideal for him. What should I do now? Should I go to Nitria then to interview the monks to enquire if he was still there? No, that would be too rash. I should have some form of confirmation that he was still alive and at large in the world. Perhaps the Dumbledore papers from the first casket would prove more illuminating? With that thought, I shuffled his letters and came across an interesting note the eccentric Headmaster wrote to Professor Snape:

I have looked over the place. Everything is in order. The living quarters are separated into communal and private areas. There are facilities where guests may be received, and the rooms are comfortable. My friend, Brother Cosmas, has assured me that your secret will be safe and will on no account go beyond him, your elder, and the house-elf. Additionally, Brother Benedict of Nursia has agreed to be your elder for the duration of your stay. In short, everything has been settled. The other things are being taken care of. If worse should become worst, Tacitus will bring you to either Brother Cosmas or Brother Benedict in a trice. Just remember that while you enjoy playing in the shadows, the light is just as important.

A. D.

"Why I am not surprised by this?" I sighed, skimming over the rest of Dumbledore's notes. First, he stage-manages nearly every aspect of Harry's life ensuring that he would be brought up as a suitable sacrificial lamb for the 'greater good'. Then, he controls nearly every aspect of Professor Snape's existence at Hogwarts by limiting what he could do for himself. Now, as evinced by his notes, he has extended his meddlesome reach into planning the Professor's alternative life after he is supposed to have expired.

Resting my head on back of my seat, I closed my eyes in an unsuccessful bid to ease the gears turning in my mind. I had learnt far too much, and was as yet unable to prove their veracity. I did not know whether I was suffering from 'information overload' as daddy would say, or whether I was warily weary of the twists and turns of all I had uncovered. Was I suffering from the fear of knowing too much? Or was I over-thinking things and worrying myself into a decline? Either way, I did not care. My one overarching flaw is this gnawing need within me to acquire knowledge and the truth behind it. One might even call it a curse, as Ron certainly did. Curse or not, it was a part of my character that I would not trade for all the Crown jewels.

Now that I knew what I did, I knew exactly what I should do. I should investigate the veracity of whatever I have unearthed, and if possible track Professor Snape down. But that can wait until Monday. For now, I need a nice, long, relaxing soak in the bathtub.

NOTES:

The Carl Jung excerpt is real and is taken from his *Collected Works*, volume 14, paragraph 513. I have taken some liberty with the title of Volume 14 as I decided to turn Herr Jung into a wizard.

'*In veritate victoria*' is Latin for 'victory lies in the truth'.

'*Veritas odit moras*' is Latin for 'Truth hates delay'.

Chapter 4 – Veritas temporis filia

Chapter 4 of 5

Two years after the defeat of Voldemort, Hermione is enjoying a successful, if humdrum, career as Director of the Department for the Regulation and Control of Magical Creatures. One day, she receives a strange invitation. The mysterious sender of the invitation wants her to investigate the disappearance of Severus Snape. She accepts the challenge. This is the resultant tale.

A/N: A response to the Potter Place Post-Deathly-Hallows Prompt Challenge using prompts 3, 10 and 18. Some might consider the characters a little OOC. Some organisations and Ministry of Magic departments are made-up.

For the Benefit of the Unforgiven

Chapter 4 Veritas temporis filia

Monday found me, as with any other work day, in my office at the Ministry of Magic. I had gone to work in a black mood for Harry and I had to bail Ron out for drunken Quidditch hooliganism the previous night. Whatever happened to going to pub for a pint after one's team lost? But no! Ron had to get horse-pissed drunk, incite some kind of fight at the pub near the stadium and be dragged away by the local Aurors. He claimed he was too drunk to remember what he did. A bloody likely story! He was evidently not too drunk to remember that Harry and I would be the best persons to bail him out of his predicament and sent us an owl from the Midlands' Auror Station in which district the Chudley Cannons versus Puddlemere United match had taken place. Come to think of it, this unfortunate incident would not have befallen Ron had he gone with us to Luna's book signing event. But that would be expecting far too much commonsense from Ronald Weasley. Just when I thought the beginning of my week could not possibly get any worse, my eyes lighted on that ghastly proposed bill my underlings had sent me last week.

If not the fact that the horribly written bill proposed by one of the more incompetent members of my staff at the Department for the Regulation and Control of Magical Creatures was still sitting on my desk mocking me with its existence, my office presented a comfortable prospect of three walls of books, one window, a fireplace and a more bookshelves above the mantelpiece. Unfortunately, the first thing that greeted my chaste eyes when I entered the office was the offensive orange file in which that ridiculous bill lived. As much I would like to incinerate it, I could not. That would only remove the offending eyesore from my desk. It would not remove that imbecile from my department. I was determined to circle all the flaws in the proposal in red ink and leave commentaries on all the various other subsections before ordering that it be sent back down to my subordinates. However that would take up time and a great deal of energy; and frankly, it was time and energy I would rather expend checking up on that which I had learned from the lead caskets.

After burying the file containing the odious would-be bill under a welter of papers and reports on diplomatic relations with centaurs and merpeople, I initiated my search for the records of Hogwarts' employed house-elves for the years 1997 to 1999. These records were, needless to say, somewhere on one of the shelves in my capacious office because the Department frequently had to follow up on the welfare of the house-elves in the employ of the school. I made it a point to know the names of the head elf in charge of each duty at Hogwarts' and delegated the members of the Office of House Elf Relations (OHER) to follow up on the unfortunate creatures by ensuring that they worked and lived in decent conditions. As I could not recall any house-elf by the name of Tacitus, which was understandable given that he was in the school's service briefly while I was on the run from Voldemort, I had to consult the books. That necessitated my climb up the ladders to the topmost shelves and plucking down the Hogwarts' House Elves Employment Records. While house-elves could generally come and go as they wished, having a record of them makes it easier for our department to act when the employers are accused of abusing their elves. I was stuck in this unenviable position when I found the book and was seated on the middle rung of the step-ladder when the floo chime sounded.

"Hmm?" I made a non-committal sound without looking up from the index of the book in my lap.

"Ahem," coughed the internal Ministry floo receptionist in the fireplace opposite me. "Madam Director, there has been a call for you."

"Hmm," I continued absently, fanning the volume to the right section. "Patch him, her, it, whatever, through."

"It's a floo call from without the Ministry." She hesitated in uncertainty. "He knew the code to ensure a secure call that would be overheard by no one else."

My head snapped up and my lips compressed into a thin, bloodless line to disguise my irritation. "Do you think disgruntled centaurs or house elves or ghouls or any sentient being seeking the services of the Department for the Regulation and Control of Magical Creatures would want eavesdroppers on their complaints when these eavesdroppers could very well be their tormentors and employers? This department promises security and protection to these creatures, of course they would have the code for a secure floo call. We're listed in the Ministry Directory as a secure floo line for crying out loud! Patch him through!"

"But it's a personal floo call for you!" insisted the floo operator in a high-pitched voice of anxiety. "Only those who have your name card can get you at this secure connection."

"Which is the entire point of me giving out my name card!" I spread my hands eloquently in a show of exasperation. "Just patch the fellow through!"

"If you say so, Madam Director." She stared defiantly back at me and shrugged. "Connecting to the secure floo line of the DRMC office 19S, clearance code G.R.730 E.R.J." Following a sharp clicking sound that locked my door, a gong resounded, signalling that security was enabled in the connection. "Floo line to DRMC 19S protected from other listeners and/or observers. Have a nice day."

A rich laugh reached my ears as soon as the floo operator's voice died away. "Why do they always go 'have a nice day' when they have just made a part of it miserable?" came the amused voice of Lucius Malfoy. I looked up and saw his face floating in the greenish flames with a tiny smirk on his lips. "If I had known calling you by the floo connection listed on your name card would be this troublesome, I would have sent you another Portkey dinner invitation. This certainly wasn't in place when I was with the Ministry. We could just call the relevant Director's office and instantly reach the person. Times have changed."

I lifted my head from the book and regarded him with a mild expression of reproach. "The bureaucracy of the place has been revamped to render the place more secure. Apparently, the ministry no longer enjoins the practice of entertaining external calls or visitors. The Central Fireplace Administrative Switchboard was established to monitor floo calls lest the floo caller attempt to blow us all up, or attempt to infiltrate the Ministry and upset the day-to-day running of wizarding Britain. The Central Outsiders' Liaison Office was created to prevent any young Hogwarts students and rogue Death Eaters from running amok in the Ministry and destroying certain sections of it. To minimise the chances of such an infiltration, visitors to the Ministry, including the employees' children, would have to check-in their wands, sign in their purpose of visit and the person whom they are visiting and so on in order to receive a smiling, winking sticker on their robes as 'authorised visitors'. Very, very bureaucratised. I can't say I agree with it. I taught my mother to use the floo. And poor mummy was treated like some kind of criminal when she tried to floo over for our lunch date two months ago. I had to inform the higher-ups that my mother was my guest and had been bestowed level 3.5 clearance to my office and level 1.7 clearance for the Ministry from the Auror Department. You're lucky Shuvalov has a 2.0 level clearance from Draco's dealings with Arthur Weasley's department, otherwise he would not have been able to send me your invitation to begin with."

"I apologise for the inconvenience it must have caused you," Lucius Malfoy chuckled, evidently enjoying himself at my expense.

"Bah!" I flicked a wrist dismissively at the memory. "I should be the one apologising to you, Mr Malfoy."

"You know how it is in politics, Miss Granger." He smiled, and for once, I saw the mirth reach his eyes. "Whenever there is a problem, committee A will form committee B to look into the matter, and committee B will form committee C to draft proposals; both committees B and C would then hand in their findings to committee A, which will then form committee D to float the policy balloon. Committee D will by then be honour-bound to form committee E to assess the success and failure of the floated policy."

To which sally, I raised a brow and cut straight to the point. "I do not believe this is a social call. I gave you my name card on the understanding that you would only contact me in cases of extreme emergency. So, what is the emergency?"

"No emergency, nothing at all really." He smiled again, this time making me uncomfortable with his gaze. "I just wanted to see how you were getting along in a quest to retrieve my good name?"

"I don't like people keeping tabs on me," I growled, returning my attention to the book, running my finger along the names until I came to one 'Tacitus, house-elf of Alexandria, trained for service at Hogwarts, December 1996-May 1998' whose employer was one Damian of Scetis, Abbot of Abba Amun. It would only be a small step from knowing that to finding the address of this Abbott and requesting for an interview with Tacitus.

"Deepest apologies, Miss Granger," he purred melliflously with an ironic ring. "I merely wish to enquire if you have made any progress."

"Tell me, Mr Malfoy," I riposted in the same tone he used with me. "Assuming Professor Snape is still alive and somewhere out there, how do I know you have no intention of finishing him off or revealing his location? For all I know, you may expose Professor Snape to the media and so reclaim your *good name*."

"You don't know for certain if you can trust me; just as I do not know if I can trust you." He raised his jaw slightly in an aggressive manner. "I've already told you that I will not press the matter as to his whereabouts. I just need to know he is alive, so that I can tell Narcissa. I cannot have her labour under this mistaken belief that I did away with a family friend who had striven to protect both her and our son. I don't give a fig what the wizarding world thinks about the Malfoys. The Daily Prophet is practically infamous for the things it chooses to publish and circulate. Society knows better than to take things it says too seriously. Eventually the finger pointing and whispering will stop. Narcissa can bear with such behaviour until society finds something else to talk about. But she deserves to know the truth. I do not want her to think I have become a monster. You may not believe me, but I care what Narcissa thinks of me. So long as she knows Severus is alive somewhere and I did not do him in, I will be content."

I raised a brow and stared at him coldly. "How do I know you are speaking the truth?"

"Damn it, Miss Granger," he hissed, his eyes glistening in anger. "The war has left me a broken man. It has robbed my son of his innocence. It has deprived me of my status as one of the leaders of our world. It has deprived my wife of her sisters. My son, my Draco, has been reduced to working as a historian in the British Wizarding Museum of Art instead of having a brilliant political career. He even has to liaise with the Weasley patriarch to investigate magical paintings that have been rendered motionless. My Draco will *never* have a glittering career before him now. My family's fortune is now reduced, and I am reduced to writing articles on wizarding flora and fauna for the *Quibbler* as it is the only establishment that will hire a person of my history. What do you think I have left, Miss Granger? My tattered dignity? My family is all I have left. I will not endure the fissures in it especially if it is between Narcissa and me. Narcissa and Draco are the only things that I can call mine. I will not have them leave me because they think *Daddy* is a maniac who killed a friend who had protected them."

I pursed my lips tightly together in a thin, uncomfortable smile. "You are either very honest or a supremely gifted actor."

He seemed to treat the remark as rhetorical and did not answer me. He only shot me a well-placed glare. For a moment, I contemplated challenging him to take Veritaserum. Then I realised I could employ another tactic without resorting to magic. He too seemed to understand the futility of arguing with me in this vein when we both were attempting to size each other up and exploit the other for what it was worth. He knew he would have to accept my authority as he had engaged my services as a private investigator of sorts, and he knew full well that I would not hesitate to use the weight of the Ministry of Magic against him if I so chose it. His features resumed their normal appearance, and he nodded at me in a display of reluctant apology.

As I was brought up to be gracious towards those who were courteous towards me, I returned the gesture. It was then that it struck me. If Professor Snape was indeed still alive, as I was increasingly convinced, there was a way for Lucius and Narcissa Malfoy to be satisfied with Professor Snape's present status without giving away the former potions master's current refuge.

"Let me be honest now," I said consideringly, hopping down the step-ladder that had hitherto been my perch. "Even I do not know for certain whether Professor Snape is amongst the living. I have managed to open the caskets and have discovered that there were plans for him to remove himself somewhere should his life become threatened."

"Will you let me see those papers?" Mr Malfoy asked.

I shook my head. "I am sorry, I cannot allow that. I am keeping them as an insurance policy against you. I hope you understand my reluctance to commit Professor Snape's status and whereabouts to your hands, if indeed those papers are truthful."

He curled his lips into a smirk and inclined his head forward. "I would have done the same in your position, though for less honourable reasons."

"I am so glad we understand one another," I said in a colourless monotone. "However, *might* arrange something after I get in touch with one of my contacts. I just need confirmation of a few facts. I will let you know, of course, either by owl or by floo."

He eyed me suspiciously and reluctantly nodded. "I am grateful for your help."

"No, I must thank you for entrusting this to me."

"By the bye," he ventured casually. "Have you seen Shuvalov anywhere? I heard from Draco he took the day off, but I can't seem to find him."

"I haven't seen him," I answered testily. What has his manservant taking the day off got to do with me?

"If you see him could I trouble you to ask him to buy some kippers and halloumi for me? He always knows where to buy the best halloumi."

"Can't you do so yourself?"

"Me? Purchase my own kippers? What a novel idea!" laughed Lucius Malfoy.

"It would allow the other members of our society to see how well-adjusted you have become," I added with a bite to my voice.

He curled his lips. "Now that you mention it, it does sound like a marvellous idea. Keep me abreast of any new developments."

"That I can do. Good day, Mr Malfoy," I blustered with a bit of a sigh before disconnecting the floo call.

Once the greenish flames died away, I put aside all nonsensical thought and permitted myself the luxury of returning to my chair and swivelling it around to face the window so that I could stare out at the park across the Ministry. Everything pointed to Egypt, from the reference to Coptic wizarding monks, to this house-elf named Tacitus of Alexandria, to the Wizarding Abbot of the Coptic order of Abba Amun, to the Coptic elder whom Dumbledore wrote would take Severus as a 'disciple' within the order for appearance's sake.

Nitiria was forty miles from Alexandria and believed by Muggles to be buried underneath centuries of sand. Damian of Scetis, the Abbot of Abba Amun, hailed from Scetis which is modern day Wadi Natrun, rather near Cairo. Abba Amun was one of the founding fathers of Egyptian magical practices and the first proponent of the pantheistic religio-magical rites in potions brewing. Moreover, if this Damian of Scetis was the Abbot of Abba Amun, he was not only the descendant of this Abba Amun, he was also

the head of the ancient wizarding order of Kellia at Nitria. I realised of course that a hermitage in Kellia Nitria was ideal for Professor Snape. From my research, the Kellia monastery was a large rectangular enclosure, complete with practically designed living quarters to keep out the northern and northeastern desert winds and storms. According to the wizarding historian, Palladius, the living quarters of the hermitage were located in the northwest of the enclosure, and came with a large courtyard in the southeast, and a well and latrines. Each newcomer to the order was appointed as a disciple to an elder and practically lived with him as a student. The elder's living space would have had walls with niches, a meditation room, a workspace for potions brewing or charms practice or whatever it was the elder specialised in magically, as well as a small room for sleeping. The elder's disciple would sleep in a separate room next to his. In their communal living space, both elder and disciple had a niche for books, and a recess used for storage, books and tools. These rooms were covered by a vault, with small high windows to allow a little light and fresh air. To further encourage both better ventilation and communication between elder and disciple, small, cylindrical openings were carved between rooms and lined with ceramics. The whole interior structure of the hermitage was protected by a warded vestibule inside the walls of the monastery.

"Oh yes, it would suit him very well," I muttered to myself a little ruefully. "He would be left alone and in relative peace." Most of the pieces in the jigsaw were coming together. I just had to gather the remaining few pieces and I would be privy to the complete picture. All that remained for me to do was to get in touch with the Abbot Damian of Scetia. To that end, I endeavoured to place a secure long-distance floo connection to Egypt.

Firmly striding to the grate, I opened the canister of floo powder, threw a handful of powder into the grate and commanded to the network to connect her to the Egyptian Ministry of Wizarding Affairs in Cairo. A few minutes was all it took to patch me through the Director of wizarding practices in Cairo

"Do you have any idea what time is it in here, Mademoiselle Granger?" asked the Egyptian witch.

"Yes, I know, Miss Saadawi." I felt the warmth creep into my cheeks as I coloured. "I need a favour."

"In return for your help in apprehending and expediting the brazen fellow who broke into the Cairo branch of Gringotts?" my Egyptian friend smiled tiredly. "I knew you would call in the favour sooner or later. I never knew it would be so soon."

"Ah, but that was four months ago, Nurhaslinda," I laughed, cupping my chin in my hands.

"Even so." She nodded. "What do you need from me?"

"Connect me to the Coptic wizarding monastery of Nitria," I said, not bothering to mince my words. "I have some urgent business with the Abbot Damian of Scetis."

"At this hour?" She raised a brow in disbelief. "The Abbott is still awake, but to disturb him now..."

I inclined my head forward. "It is very urgent."

"If you insist."

"I do. You would be doing me a great favour." I forced myself to smile. "I will send you a pretty headscarf for your birthday as thanks, how about that?"

"Resorting to bribery now, Hermione?" she laughed, the greenish flames bobbing up and down with her head. "Stay connected to the network, I'm trying to get hold of the Abbot."

Nurhaslinda El Saadawi's head then disappeared from the flickering flames and after several minutes, there was a sudden blaze and the round face of a clean-shaven man with a permanent expression of woe sitting on his fleshy features came into view.

"*Ne?*" he asked, looking curiously at me. "*Ti d'ou me'llô?*"

Blast! My brain swore at me for not realising that the Coptic wizarding order still used Attic Greek. There was no other way about it, I thought, containing my frustration by pasting on an artificial smile. "*Sungignô'ske moi...*" I began, screwing up my brow as I mentally translated that which I wanted to say from English into Greek.

"*Ô sunte'leia!*" he exclaimed, running a hand distractedly over his bald pate. "You are English, *ne?*"

"Thank goodness, you know English!" I cried out in relief. "I am terribly sorry to bother you at this ungodly hour."

"No, no," he protested with a smile. "You took the trouble to look me up." He gestured for me to continue.

"Well, Father Superior Damian, I am Hermione Granger, Director of the Department for the Regulation and Control of Magical Creatures with the Ministry of Magic in Britain. I was formerly a student of Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry up to two years ago," I paused to lick my lips nervously. "I understand you have a house-elf named Tacitus in your service who was briefly at Hogwarts. May I borrow him?"

He was instantly on his guard and his eyes looked at me guardedly. "Who are you really?"

"I already told you the truth Father Damian, or would you prefer I call you Brother Cosmas?" I went on.

"Who are you?" he repeated in a monotone, his eyes carefully veiled. He must have been quite a formidable wizard for I felt his magical energy surge. It was with great effort that I remained sitting upright.

"I am Hermione Granger, a former student of Severus Tobias Snape and Albus Dumbledore," I said simply without squirming under his gaze.

"I see. It would appear we have much to discuss," he replied. "Please come over the floo to the hermitage and have coffee with me."

Quickly checking my pocket for my wand and quickly grabbing the canvas shopping bag holding the casket and their papers, I stepped through the grate and into the circular chamber of Father Superior's office. As soon as I cast a cleaning charm over myself to remove the soot from my person, I gave my surroundings a good look.

The Father Superior or Abbot as he was vernacularly called was a bald, stocky man, sitting on a high-backed chair. He stared at me in such an intense manner that I was discomfited and had to look away. I allowed myself to be distracted by the rest of his chamber. There was a lapis lazuli ankh hanging on the wall behind him, resembling a larger version of the one I had been compelled to purchase from Mr Burgin's establishment.

"The lapis lazuli is revered in our order," he said plainly as he followed my eyes. "It is a reminder to everyone within to speak the truth and to be faithful to themselves and their friends. Truth is the key to life after all, Mistress Granger."

I nodded politely and turned my attention to the manuscripts and books lining the walls. I own myself impressed. He must be an extraordinary scholar, as I would have expected of a friend of Dumbledore. There were books on philosophy, magic, potions and nearly every cultural subject in Hebrew, Latin, Greek, and other languages. I noted with admiration that everything was neatly placed along the shelves.

"Mistress Granger," he coughed, on realising that my eyes were drawn to the books on his shelves. I blushed and suppressed my drooling bibliophile self. "You mentioned Albus Dumbledore and Severus Snape. I think an explanation is in order."

He gestured for me to sit and I did so across him at the little desk where vellum and quills were laid out.

"Within," I said uncertain as to how I should begin as I removed the two lead caskets from the bag, "are documents pertaining to Severus Snape's flight from Hogwarts. Kindly apprise me of their authenticity." He frowned, reached forward and drew out the papers from both caskets. While he read them, I continued, "I am conducting a

discreet inquiry into the disappearance of Professor Snape's body from the grounds of Hogwarts on behalf of Lucius Malfoy. There is a minor scandal where he is accused of disposing of Professor Snape's body. I wish to borrow Tacitus so that Mr and Mrs Malfoy will know that the Professor's body is safe, thereby enabling them to hold up their heads knowing they had assisted a good and kind man."

"We will discuss that by and by. How did you know I was previously Brother Cosmas?" he questioned, still examining the papers in his hand.

A soft pop sound in the corner caught my attention and I saw a house-elf with a long hooked nose and thin lips amble forward with a clay jug of freshly brewed coffee, two cups, and some biscuits. As he poured out the coffee, his large eyes looked questioningly at me.

A soft 'ahem' from the Abbot reminded me of his presence, and I mentally berated myself for being distracted. I laced my fingers tightly and said, "The historical Cosmas and Damian were twins and skilled healers in their day. The Muggles made them saints, but we who know them as Coptic wizards, know that they founded a kind of healing used in Asia Minor and this part of the world." Professor Dumbledore spoke of a Brother Cosmas in his letters to Professor Snape. Your order, I know, advocates the selection of something similar to a papal name linked to one's original name upon one's ascendance to the Abbotship. Your birth name is Cosmas, and you are a healer within the Coptic wizarding order of Nitria. It is fitting that you chose the name Damian for yourself when you became Father Superior. Even though you had already come into your abbotship when Professor Dumbledore made the arrangements for Professor Snape, he still called you Cosmas because he could not change his habitual way of addressing you. Professor Dumbledore sent Professor Snape to you because he thought you would be able to heal him if he was worse for wear."

I paused to accept the coffee cup offered by the house-elf whom I assumed was the famous Tacitus. "It is the same reason why Professor Dumbledore requested for Benedict of Nursia as Professor Snape's elder. To the Muggles, Benedict of Nursia is the patron saint against poisons. The wizarding community however has long looked at the Italian house of Nursia as one of the chief alchemical and potions brewing families in the world. Two members of the Nursia clan of every generation are obliged to join the Coptic order; and the ones who join the order are usually gifted with concocting antidotes to poisons."

"Very well reasoned," he chuckled, his rotund body vibrating as he set aside the papers. "You appear to have plucked out the heart of the mystery. Why then are you here?"

"I need to know, nay, I *want* to know if Professor Snape is still alive. You have my word I will not speak of his existence here to anyone. I will make an Unbreakable Vow if you so desire it," I offered, noting the eyes of the house-elf did not leave my face for even a second.

The venerable Father Superior removed his reading glasses and pinched his large, fleshy nose gently. "I would never have expected Brother Macarius's caskets and documents to see the light of day. Nor did I expect anyone from his past life to come here within his lifetime."

"Brother Macarius?" I spat the coffee back into the cup, uncertain whether this was a reference to the person of our conversation.

Infuriatingly, he smiled and I thought I saw a twinkle in the corner of his green eyes not unlike Dumbledore's. "Brother Macarius Benedicte Stylites is the name he took on joining the hermitage. I flatter myself that Albus would have approved of the name. The original Macarius for whom he is named was a son of Egypt who fled to the Nitrian desert, and was a hermit. For a period of time, he was banished from the mainland to an island on the Nile, just as our unfortunate friend is in voluntarily exile from his homeland. Brother Macarius picked Benedicte for himself as *un homage* to his elder, Brother Benedict, and the surname Stylites after Saint Simeon Stylites famous for his private austerities and spending his time meditating on top of a pillar. Brother Macarius is worthy of praise and he unites both the practices of asceticism and isolation of our order as recommended by our wizarding Saint Simeon of plant charms. Like his elder, he does not advocate meditating upon one's own spiritual well-being over all else. Rather, he emphasises peaceful living in proximity with others within our small order and educating the wizarding children of the area."

My interest was piqued and leaned forward. I contained my excitement by biting my lower lip. "Do you mean to tell me Professor Snape ~~is~~ Brother Macarius?"

"Have I said that?" He smiled again, mirroring my actions by steeping his fingers.

"May I see him?" I asked suddenly without knowing why I did so.

"For the Malfoys?"

"No, Tacitus' account of Professor Snape's survival in the post-spectacled cobra bite will suffice for them," I explained, my eyes meeting the nearby house-elf's. "I want to see him for myself, just to see if he is all right and doing well."

He eloquently pinched his nose again. "You would have to first speak to his elder, Brother Benedict on Saturday or Sunday."

"Does it take that long for him to determine if he would be amenable to the scheme?"

"Brother Benedict and his disciple value their quiet time, which they spend in alchemical research, educating the young, and meditating. Each elder is generally an advocate of this way of life. Only on Saturday and Sunday do we all meet for communal meals and discussion," Father Damian elucidated. "Beyond that, I sup with the elders once a week."

"Very well," I announced, coming to yet another spur of the moment decision. "I will return on Saturday evening. Would that suit you and Brother Benedict?"

"I will tell him tomorrow." Dumbledore's old friend smiled again with the selfsame annoying twinkle in his eyes. Undoubtedly they were from the same 'meddlesome secretive wizards with cheeky twinkle in eyes' club. "Now, I will take you at your word that the Malfoys will know nothing of this." I nodded my assent. "Good. Tacitus, I am sure will be willing to help." He turned to address the house-elf. "You have been privy to a lot since you last saw my friend, Albus, do you remember? Would you like to help this young lady now that you have heard everything she has to say?"

For a moment, I wondered how this mute house-elf would be able to explain the minimal facts needed to convince Lucius and Narcissa Malfoy that Professor Snape was still alive. However I need not have worried, for I heard the house-elf's squeaky voice in my mind, mildly echoing, "Yes, I will please help young missy."

Darting my eyes at the Abbot, I met with an amused smile. "Do talk to him, he understands well enough."

"Should you like to travel with me to Britain for a day and meet two friends of mine and Professor Snape's?"

"Yes, missy," was the eager reply.

"I want you to tell me about Professor Snape and how you found him and brought him here."

Tacitus' voice bounced in my skull as he narrated briefly. "Mr Severus, very white he was in wooden hut. Blood everywhere. Funny sounds everywhere. He hold on tightly to button. I see people coming. I take him and come here. I did right?"

"And very well too," I commended. "When you meet my two friends, who are Mr Severus's friends also, can you tell them you found him and then brought him to a safe place? If you can tell them what you like so long as they know you rescued him. I promise I will not tell them your name, and if they ask too many questions, we will go. Will you do this for me?"

"Yes, missy." This time he nodded, and I for the first time in a long time, I felt relieved without knowing why.

NOTES:

'*Veritas temporis filia* is Latin for 'truth is the daughter of time'. I take it to mean that given time, the truth will be known/revealed.

Ne is Greek for 'yes'.

'*Ti d' ou me'llô?*' is ancient Greek for 'How may I be of assistance?'

'*Sungignô'ske moi*' is ancient Greek for 'Excuse me...'

'*Ô sunte'leia!*' is ancient Greek for 'Oh, ye Gods!'

The term 'Mistress' is used in the old-fashioned sense of the word. In this context, it refers 'an old form of address for a woman'. Before Anne Boleyn was granted the title of Marchioness in her own right and married to Henry VIII, she was known as 'Mistress Boleyn'. The title did not distinguish between married and unmarried women.

Lapis lazuli is known as the stone of truth in some cultures. The Ankh has many meanings. The most common meaning is 'life', or given its shape 'key to/of life', depending how you want to translate its Latin name, *crux ansata*.

Readers curious as to why Borgin sold Hermione an ankh that was from the Coptic wizarding order in this story please bear this fact in mind:

In ch 3, it was stated somewhere that members of the Coptic wizarding order of Nitria/Kellia survived by "...making handicrafts to trade for food..." among other things. It is implied that the lapis lazuli ankh was made by the order, traded/sold for food or money. It is entirely likely that the item was sold to Borgin and Burke. Think what you will on that.

Halloumi is a type of goat's cheese from Cyprus. What has our missing manservant got to do with Halloumi? I leave you to think on that.

Chapter 5 – Veritas vos liberabit

Chapter 5 of 5

Two years after the defeat of Voldemort, Hermione is enjoying a successful, if humdrum, career as Director of the Department for the Regulation and Control of Magical Creatures. One day, she receives a strange invitation. The mysterious sender of the invitation wants her to investigate the disappearance of Severus Snape. She accepts the challenge. This is the resultant tale.

A/N: A response to the Potter Place Post-Deathly-Hallows Prompt Challenge using prompts 3, 10 and 18. Some might consider the characters a little OOC. Some organisations and Ministry of Magic departments are made-up.

For the Benefit of the Unforgiven

Chapter 5 Veritas vos liberabit

The next few days were uneventful. I willed myself to rewrite the horrible proposed bill, and allowed Ron to find me in my office, gently scratching my mark on parchment, apparently oblivious to any words he could say about my preferences for work over him. By Thursday, the bill was more or less in a presentable form and submitted to the policy dunderheads for evaluation, and I was at liberty to carry out my obligations to the Malfoys by allowing them to meet with Tacitus the house-elf. Friday evening was set aside for our rendezvous, and I dare say all parties involved were in nervous trepidation. Despite knowing what I did, namely that Professor Snape was alive and well even if the Father Superior of the Order would not directly confess to it, I doubted that I would make any headway in my self-imposed mission of meeting him. I wondered how things were progressing at the wizarding monastery of Kellia at Nitria. Had the Abbot interceded successfully on my behalf to Brother Benedict of Nursia? Would the elder permit this extraordinary request from a stranger he did not know he could trust? I would have to wait until Saturday before I found out. In the meantime, Tacitus and I were expected at Malfoy Manor.

That evening Tacitus and I arrived at Malfoy Manor to find the lord and lady of the manor in an unusually sober mood. Draco was conspicuously absent. Both were clad in black, and strangely enough, so were Tacitus and I. Mr Malfoy was in his usual robes. Mrs Malfoy on the other hand, left her golden hair unbound, and wore a black chiffon gown. Both favoured my companion and me with a polite nod. The two of them presented a fair prospect. Yet there was a certain awkwardness between them. I knew better than to judge by faces, and with Lucius Malfoy that evening, I did not try. His mouth had taken on a vain and silly smile at my arrival, but his eyes were hardened and anxious. He looked at me keenly and penetratingly, but I sensed more melancholy than suspicion in his gaze, as though he understood that trust and affection were folly, but still regretted that that was so. His wife, though of regal bearing, was easier to assess. She had red lips and pink cheeks, and an expression of sweetness which I knew instinctively was feigned, as such expressions always are.

"Miss Granger," the wizard who-would-clear-his-name-to-his-wife took my hand warmly and bowed low over it. "Dare I hope that you have good news to report?"

"It might be good news of a sort," I answered plainly. "Mrs Malfoy, your husband hired me to investigate into the matter of Professor Snape's disappearance. I am pleased to report that he did not murder Professor Snape or destroy his body. He had in fact done his utmost to save Professor Snape after he had been left for dead by..." I paused for diplomatic phrase. I was loath to pronounce Voldemort's name before the Malfoys for fear of agitating them. In the end, I decided to bluster on with the truth. "It was assumed that Nagini's bite had killed him and he was left for dead."

"And?" she looked at me beseechingly.

"Mr Malfoy had sealed the wound where he had bitten and administered the antidote to Professor Snape before he fled on hearing foreign footsteps and sensing foreign magical energies. I am sure, he would commit that memory to a pensieve for the sake of confirmation," I continued.

She waved a languid hand before seizing mine. "He had done so last night on your recommendation." She paused and her eyes bore into mine. "What about Severus? Is he alive?"

"I do not know. I have not seen him," I replied honestly. "However, this house-elf saved him after Mr Malfoy administered the counter-serum."

Narcissa Malfoy looked down at Tacitus and her nose wrinkled briefly in distaste. But to her credit, she carried herself well. Except for the slight flaring of her nostrils, no one would have supposed she thought of house-elves as lesser creatures. "Is he alive?" she asked him in what would have passed for a kind voice.

As was his way, Tacitus spoke through our minds. "No, missy. He expire after I saved him."

"What happened that day?"

Again, Tacitus recounted the conditions in which he found Professor Snape and how he rescued him on the orders of his master and brought him away.

"Who is your master?" Lucius Malfoy asked, visibly intrigued.

I glared at my host and was about to make a curt remark when Tacitus told a bold-faced lie. "Please, sirrah. He order me not to say."

"But you are certain that Severus was alive when you took him away," repeated my hostess.

"Yes, missy," came the ready, unblinking answer. "Too late, it was to save him. My master, nothing he could do. My master buried him in family plot. He be safe now."

"Tell me how your master came to be acquainted with Severus and how he knew he needed rescuing." The face of the lady of the manor lit up like that of a Siren who had caught sight of a sailor in the distance whom she could lure to his demise.

My fears for Tacitus proved to be unfounded, for he seemed to hold his own very well. He managed to deflect all of Narcissa Malfoy's questions much to my amusement and her husband's, as our exchanged glances seemed to say. Tacitus was not an easy being to deal with that much I could see. As Lucius Malfoy enjoined us to dine, I mentally assessed the likelihood of success if I were to ask Tacitus anything about Professor Snape. Tacitus was a house-elf who spoke freely about distant places, history, and imagined persons. But of anything to do with Professor Snape, he spoke as little as if the truculent professor were hiding within earshot behind one of the velvet curtains with his wand, ready to spring out and avenge the mentioning of his name. I watched him with a tinge of awe as he skirted the probing questions as to the whereabouts of Professor Snape's body and the identity of his master.

This sensation continued to gnaw at me as we left for the wizarding monastery on Saturday, and it was with a great self-determination that I resisted the impulse to question Tacitus as to my former potions master's present condition. I knew I could ask all the questions I wanted and still not draw any definitive answer from him. No wonder Professor Dumbledore and Father Damian had used Tacitus for the delicate task of overseeing Professor Snape's overall flight. Now, if only I were granted the opportunity of seeing the good professor for myself. These thoughts ran rampant in my mind as Tacitus brought me to the courtyard of the wizarding monastery.

Despite the fact that I knew the truth as to what happened to Professor Snape, I was still frustrated. Though I was relieved to learn he was alive (contrary to the tale Tacitus spun the Malfoys), I was still dissatisfied. I wanted to see him for myself. How vain I was to assume I would be allowed to see him! I had just spent the previous evening trying to reconcile Lucius and Narcissa Malfoy and pre-empt their attempts at any questions pertaining to the present circumstances of their friend. To all intents and purposes, they laboured under the impression that Severus Snape was dead. Mr Malfoy had come into his good name once again, and Mrs Malfoy was once more able to look at her husband with trust in her eyes. Even if they knew Severus Snape was alive, they could not have done aught. They would have nothing to gain by advertising Professor Snape's status as a current member of the living world, for there were rogue Death Eaters still running amok, resentful of their former comrade's role as double agent-spy, and resentful of the Malfoys' escape from incarceration at Azkaban. Their very status as 'rehabilitated' members of society would be at risk if they so much as breathed Professor Snape was alive. There was every indication that the rogue Death Eaters would cause them grievous harm if it came to be known they had assisted Professor Snape, a double agent who had betrayed their Dark Lord. I cannot imagine any rogue Death Eater looking kindly on Lucius Malfoy for administering the counter-serum to a wizard who had betrayed their Dark Lord to Albus Dumbledore's Order. I also could not imagine any rogue Death Eater looking kindly on Narcissa Malfoy for assisting Harry in the Forbidden Forest by colluding to hide his survival from the same Dark Lord. The Malfoys' lips were sealed, and that relieved me, if only a little.

However, while standing dumbly at the courtyard of the wizarding monastery, I was apprehensive once more. Would I be allowed to see my former Professor? What if the elder, Brother Benedict would not see me? What if the Father Superior had lied about the Professor and he was already dead and buried in some corner of Nitria? What if Tacitus had spoken the truth and not a bold-faced lie as I thought? I sought to brace myself for this possibility as Tacitus led me to a stone seat by the fountain before popping off to get the Abbot.

Members of the brethren of the small wizarding community went about their daily activities, either avoiding my curious eyes or nodding a greeting to me, each according to their characters. The high walls around the community and the magical energy resonating from them, was similar to the wards over Hogwarts. After a few minutes in my seat, I began to pace. The movement was purely automatic, for I felt the compulsion to steady my nerves from the uncertainty. Eventually, even my knees succumbed to the trepidation at the things I would uncover that day and I sat down once again, turning matters over in my mind.

"Sorry to have kept you waiting," said the portly Father Superior, Abbot, call him what you will. "We have just dined, as you may have surmised. Might I interest you in some wine or fruit?"

"I dined before coming, thank you." I rose so as to better greet him.

"Then I shall make free and send you a fruit basket," Father Damian continued in an avuncular manner similar to Dumbledore's. I could not help but smirk. No wonder Dumbledore and he got along. "Brother Benedict, one of the few who knows me as Cosmas will be happy to meet with you. He is still in the dining hall."

Upon leading me through some narrow vestibules in the inner court of the structure, I soon found myself in a sparsely decorated room of mudbrick bespelled against crumbling from the elemental forces. In this airy room with simple wooden tables and benches, I came face to face with an old, thin, swarthy man of moderate height, who was then in the process of using his wand to heal a sacred ibis. When the sparks from his wand died away and the ibis hopped down the table, flapping its wings in thanks, I noticed that Brother Benedict had an air of abstemious self-control. His gentle and good-humoured face registered my presence with a smile and a frank gaze.

"I will leave it your discretion then," said Father Damian more to Brother Benedict than to me before retreating into the vestibule with the ibis.

When we were finally alone, Brother Benedict fingered the lapis lazuli ankh around his neck, smiled at me and gestured for me to sit. "Cosmas and Brother Alexander informed me you would come here to see Macarius.

"Brother Alexander?"

"A former member of our Order, a squib, whom we protected and sheltered, and who decided he wanted to make a life for himself beyond the shadows. I used to be his elder," Brother Benedict paused and eyed me cautiously. "You may know him as Ivan Shuvalov. He floos us for Halloumi from time to time at a shop in your part of the world selling some of our Order's products."

Suddenly, it all became clear to me. All the dots in the puzzle were finally connected. Then a thought dawned on me. "What if he tells the Malfoys?" I gasped, making a mental note to Obliviate the manservant.

"He would not. I am sure he would not. One does not tell an outsider what goes on in these hallowed walls. Once a member of this Order, one takes a blood-bound unbreakable oath not to tell discuss the Order or its members with strangers. Should the person be so foolish as to attempt such an action, death would befall them. The only exception to this rule is when an Order member has a guest within these walls. These walls, if you must know, are bespelled to keep out those who would do us harm be they wizards, Muggles or squibs." He levelled his gaze at me. "I already know you have no ill intention towards the wizarding Order at Kellia. Now, tell me your true purpose."

I swallowed hard, suddenly bereft of my prepared explanation. Something from the intense way in his eyes seemed to pierce mine told me that he was a skilled legilimens.

He looked at me kindly, and as he did so, a light pressure swept through my mind. "Please do not be frightened. I apologise for intruding into your private sphere, but one cannot be too sure. We cannot allow our sanctuary to become involved in worldly affairs, you understand."

I nodded in agreement at his unstated opinion as to the shortcomings of most human beings. "Still, I would have preferred prior warning. I would have let you delve into my mind if you had asked."

"You must forgive me, my child. Experience has taught me that an unexpected legilimency attack is the most effective at uncovering the heart of a person." He stared at me, as though deciding whether I was completely trustworthy.

"What did you see?" I asked out of curiosity.

"A warm, affectionate heart more concerned with truth and justice than the other superficial trappings of the world. Have you ever considered joining our sister order? My blood sister, Scholastica, is the Mother Superior of the Coptic wizarding Order of Apollonia at Scete." He chuckled and stroked his chin. "No? What a pity. I can see you have no ill will towards me or Macarius. You have kept your word, and have not revealed a thing. Now, child, tell me your intentions. Why are you here?"

"Is *he* still among the living?" I asked, releasing the breath that I had unconsciously been holding.

"He is."

"May I see him?"

"Why are you asking me?"

"Because you're his elder; because you are the proper person to ask."

"Let us be honest now, my child."

"Very well, you are more likely to tell me how he will receive me."

Brother Benedict stared at the wall behind me for a while without speaking. Then he broke the silence, looking at me straight in the eyes. "You show initiative. You may see him, but on no account must you ask him to leave. He will leave when he is ready. At present, he is not ready to face the world, not just yet."

"Thank you." My voice was thin and quiet; my heartbeat uneven. "Where..."

"Turn left when you leave the dining hall, follow the vestibule until you reach the end. The rooms at the end, on the right are for the Nursia, and have been in my family for generations. He is within; his chamber is to the right when you enter. The doors are unlocked as are all the doors within the complex." He smiled sadly at me. "He may not want to see you; it is only fair I warn you."

"So long as I can see him, I am content," I said by way of thanks and followed his directions until I came to the chamber Brother Benedict had indicated. I did not know what to expect, or whether I would still recognise him. Fate however, decreed that I was worrying over nothing. As soon as I came upon the disciple's research cell within Brother Benedict's apartment, I saw a pallid, thin wizard in black robes hunched over a desk poring some papers. His shoulder length hair fell forward, nearly touching the papers, and his hooked nose was playing host to a pair of prince-nez. He was thinner than I remembered, and I noted with a pang of emotion I could not place that he looked older and more worn.

"Brother Macarius Stylites?" I ventured uncertainly as I stepped into his cell.

His head snapped up from the desk in annoyance as I entered. For a brief moment, I thought he paled at seeing me, but I could not be sure. He only stared coldly at me as he removed the prince-nez from his face. "You!" he managed to throw out as a strangled greeting.

"Yes, me. Hermione insufferable know-it-all Granger, surely you remember *Professor Snape*," I replied, and without waiting to be asked, sat down. A frown crossed his brow. But before he could admonish me for intruding into his peace, I cut in with a bored voice, "I would remind you that I am here because of the papers you left in the caskets of Welsh lead, and because, your elder, Brother Benedict, and the Abbot, the former Brother Cosmas granted me leave to be here. I have the privilege to be engaged by Mr Malfoy to look into the matter of your disappearance from the Shrieking Shack on his discharge from the rehabilitation wing at St Mungo's last week. Do not, therefore, lecture me on the lack of protocol for barging into your refuge, sanctuary, call it what you will."

Instead of looking abashed at the harsh tone I adopted, he had the audacity to curl his lips in faint amusement. "What could possibly warrant Lucius opening the caskets?"

"There was talk that he had done away with your body. Mrs Malfoy was beside herself with anguish at her husband's betrayal of a friend, and this strained their marital relations," I explained.

"Lucius always had an uxorious streak in him," he sneered in a patronising purr he reserved only for dunderheads whose cauldrons invariably exploded in class. "He roped you in to investigate matters. What happened next? Is he going to come through those doors next?"

I met his unflinching gaze levelly with a severe flash of my own as I mentally deliberated whether I should tell him of Ivan Shuvalov and the latter's silence on his survival in the order. "Mr Malfoy could not open the first casket, I managed to undo it and find the enclosed smaller container and the papers therein. I traced Tacitus to the wizarding monastery at Nitria, and arranged a meeting with Father Damian and Brother Benedict."

He stared at me for some moments, his eyes boring into mine, marking my second encounter with legilimency in the day. "That is all very well and good, but Lucius and Narcissa will not be so easily satisfied. They will demand to see me," he said quietly in a warning tone. "You will be my undoing, Miss Granger... or is it Mrs Weasley now?"

I shifted my weight slightly in my chair. "I am unmarried, *sir*. And I will have you know I do not have the habit of carrying out tasks half-arsedly! I have thought long and hard about preserving your anonymity, your privacy and whatnot. No one else from Britain or the European continent is going to descend on you here in Egypt."

"Is that bravado, I wonder, or is that foolish over-confidence?" he went on in the same quietly dangerous tone. "What makes you think *Miss Granger*, that you can protect me when Albus Dumbledore could not?"

So, he harboured a little bitterness towards Dumbledore and sought to lash out at me. Very well, I could meet his mordancy with barbed wit. "I was under the impression that Professor Dumbledore, chief meddler that he was, farmed out the duty of protecting you to Brother Benedict, who is an expert on antidotes against poisons, and the former Brother Cosmas, now Father Superior Damian, to protect you. I also seem to recall them arranging for Tacitus to bail you out if you were beyond your depth. That constitutes as some form of protection as well, wouldn't you say? You should have more faith in them, even if you distrust me."

"What are you trying to say?" He sprang to his feet, his face white, and an edge of testiness creeping into his voice.

"Tacitus lied for you to the Malfoys." I smiled sharply, now resolved to say nothing of Ivan Shuvalov and his links to the order. "He made no mention of the Coptic wizarding order; he made no mention of Nitria; he made no mention of any of the inhabitants in the monastery. He told the Malfoys you expired not long after he found you and brought you to safety. He told them you were buried in his master's family plot. He told them his master and you met when you were gathering rare plant specimens in Addis Abba for potions for Voldemort." He flinched when I used the name, but I ignored the brief scowl that lighted on his face and went on. "He lied that his master was an apothecary whom you befriended, and who saved you, ordered him to look out for you. The story of calling for Tacitus via the button on your robes was related, and that was that. Mrs Malfoy now believes her husband did not destroy your body; Mr Malfoy now thinks he did his part in trying to save you by administering the counter-serum; even their manservant said nothing, and you and I know he knows more than he lets on." Professor Snape's eyes flickered up at me when he realised that I had slipped in a mention of Shuvalov. "To all intents and purposes, the Malfoys now believe Severus Snape to be dead and buried."

"Severus Snape *is* dead and buried," he reminded me softly, slumping back into his seat with hunched shoulders. There was relief written on his features. "You see before you Brother Macarius Benedicte Stylites."

"I concede to that," I said firmly. "Will you tell me how you like it here? How did you survive when you first arrived?"

"How did I survive? By feeding off the chameleon's dish and drinking water." He looked at me curiously, as though wondering whether it was worth his while to tell me his

story.

"You were almost mortally wounded I recall," I sighed, hoping that this was not going to be a circuitous conversation.

"Lucius had administered the counter-serum," he began calmly, still watching me intently. "However I was still too weak to Apparate. I called for Tacitus by the means you mentioned and I was brought here. Brother Benedict has already prepared some blood-replenishing potion for such an event, and I had sent ahead additional counter-serum should I require it. Slowly, through a combination of skilled healing from Father Damian, blood replenishing potion, and small doses of the antidote, the poison was purged from my body, and I recovered. I stayed here ever since. Were you expecting a more exciting story? Do I disappoint you by still being alive?"

I chose not to answer him. "Do you like it here?"

"No sacrilegious act occurs here. Learning of all arts wizzarding and Muggle are encouraged. Learning is valued here, scholarship is strongly encouraged. It is quiet, and we are often left to our own devices. The world should take a leaf from the retired lifestyle prescribed here. There is always time ample enough to reflect, to learn, to breathe, away from the material acquisition of the world, away from the politics of human interaction in the marketplace as the world has become," he traced his lips in a contemplatively gesture.

I smiled knowingly. "You like it here then." I rose and allowed my voice to drop as if I was talking to myself. "I am so glad." I glanced out the window that overlooked the courtyard. "If you should ever decide to return to the world of the living, rest assured that I will maintain your secret to my grave. "Should you ever wish to contact me, these are the addresses and floo connections at which you may find me. I suggest you floo me at my residence rather than the Ministry." I pushed two name cards towards him on the desk.

"I appreciate the gesture," he said at last when I was at his doorway. "But I doubt I shall ever return to the world you inhabit. I have lived in darkness, and I have lived in the light. Now, I chose to remain where I am. *Sic sic iuvat sub umbra*."

"You do realise," I coughed in a stilted voice. "You are quoting from the *Aeneid*. Is this retreat to the shadows a curse on those who had forced you to become what you were as Severus Snape, or your resignation at what you are now?"

"You were my aptest pupil." He curled his lips and folded his arms defensively before. "I leave it to you to decide." Deeming the comment to be a rhetorical one, I did not deign to answer and would have stepped out of the chambers he shared with his elder, had he not detained me by calling out to me. "Miss Granger..." He paused. I halted my steps but did not give the satisfaction of seeing me turn around. "Thank you for coming all this way to see me."

His simple thanks drew a lump to my throat. I did not turn back to look at him lest he should see me tear. I merely pressed on ahead, repeatedly reminding myself that I had finally uncovered the truth as to what happened to Severus Snape.

So what became of me after this adventure? I went back to work as usual, dealing with subordinates and their harebrained proposals. Once a month, the tedium would be broken by an owled letter from Professor Snape. His letters always came when I found myself particularly frustrated with Ron's behaviour as a boyfriend. I told him all about Ron, of course, and Harry too. He replies as he always does, abusing them in scathing tones. He always makes me laugh with his sharp, incisive analysis of the boys' characters. His letters usually warm me and I would wonder what I was doing with Ronald Weasley. There are times when I compare Professor Snape to Ron, and I think I am almost tempted by my former potions' master good sense and character. Though Ron and I have parted company for this reason and though I am tempted to tell Professor Snape of my comparisons, I have never done so, nor do I ever intend to. Why, you ask? Because I know he will never leave the shadows of Nitria for the glaring darkness of modern acquisitive Wizzarding and Muggle societies.

NOTES:

'*Veritas vos liberabit* is Latin for 'the truth shall make you free'.

Tacitus's English is deliberately sub-par.

The sacred ibis was venerated and mummified by ancient Egyptians as a symbol of Thoth (an Egyptian deity said to be representative of Plato's *sogos* or reason). According to Herodotus and Pliny the Elder, the sacred ibis killed the flies that brought pestilence to corpses. Hence, I had Brother Benedict heal the bird when Hermione walks in.

'Feeding off the chameleon's dish' line is adapted from Shakespeare's *Hamlet*. In Shakespeare's time, it was believed that chameleons feed on air hence the line.

'*Sic sic iuvat ire sub umbrā* is Latin for 'thus, thus I chose to go into the shadows'. It comes from Virgil's *Aeneid* at the climax of the Dido and Aeneas story. Dido begs Aeneas to stay and share her throne but he secretly makes plans to sail away. She discovers his perfidy, and unable to dissuade him, she stabs herself and has her body placed on a funeral pyre. Her final words express her own resignation but also her curse upon her inconstant lover. As she twice plunges the knife into her breast she exclaims, "Thus, thus I choose to go into the shadows [of death]. Let the cruel Trojan's eyes drink in these flames from over the ocean and let him take with him the ill omen of my death." This explains why HG says the things she says immediately after SS throws the quote at her.

By now, readers should have realised that the 'Unforgiven' in the title refers to several characters. The most obvious ones are Severus and Lucius. As for the rest, I leave it to you to devise.

~ *Finis* ~

My thanks are extended to my beta for her sharp proof-reading and suggestions. I am also indebted to the powers that be on the Petulant Poetess for kindly uploading the instalments of this story as and when the need arose. And to my readers a hearty thanks for reading this very short, hastily dashed off fic written in between bus rides to and from work. I hope you have enjoyed it as much as I did in writing it.

Points of Information:

Readers who objected to the Father Superior (formerly Brother Cosmas) revealing all about Severus/Brother Macarius in Ch 4, should note that careful reading of Ch 3 will reveal this:

The structure within the Coptic wizzarding order depicted herein is a hierarchical one because it is mentioned explicitly that disciples work and live *with* their Elder. In Ch 4, the hierarchy of the order is further expounded where the Father Superior explicitly states that he meets the Elders once a week where he gives them their instructions for the week. So you see a top-down approach in this order. Therefore, any decision regarding disciples (of which Severus/Macarius is one) lies not with the disciple himself but with his Elder. His Elder in turn has to bow to the decision of the head of the order, in this case the Father Superior. The only decision that lies with the disciple is whether he wants to leave the order. That too is stated in Ch 4. The Chekov's guns are already provided throughout the plot, it is a matter of whether they are noticed.

It should also be noted that SS's renaming is not the same as 'reinventing' himself. His renaming came with entering/joining the Coptic wizzarding order. One had to give up all one's former worldly ties including one's own name when joining the order; and a new one chosen for one by the order. The same goes for those entering the Buddhist monkhood/nunnery, and the Catholic priesthood &ca. Because the new disciple of the order has cut off his worldly ties, and because the order is the one to make all decisions pertaining to the disciple, everything to do with the disciple falls within the jurisdiction of the order. I based this latter fact on my research on Buddhism and Socio-political movements.