

Journey out of Darkness

by StormySkize

Book 7 -- The Way it Should Have Been. Harry, Ron, and Hermione don't return to Hogwarts for their seventh year. Instead, they join forces with the Order of the Phoenix to find Voldemort's Horcruxes and save the wizarding world. Members of the Order teach them how to fight. Along the way, Hermione realizes that her feelings for Ron have changed -- and so have her feelings for two other Order members.

Chapter 1

Chapter 1 of 16

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One

The last golden day was ending.

Bill and Fleur were married.

Bill had stood tall and proud as he watched his bride walk toward him. The bandages that had covered most of his face after the attack by Fenrir Greyback were finally gone; the scars would never fade.

Fleur, in Great-Auntie Muriel's beautiful goblin-made tiara, had taken his hand in hers and stood beside him as they pledged themselves to each other.

Molly and Arthur both cried as they watched.

Ron and Hermione held hands throughout the ceremony.

Remus Lupin and Nymphadora Tonks stood side-by-side, but there was a noticeable tension between them.

Harry and Ginny also stood side-by-side. Even though Harry had broken off his relationship with Ginny, for her own protection, there was no disguising the special feelings between them.

Charlie stood as witness for his older brother. Gabrielle, in spite of her young age, stood as witness for her sister.

Fred and George, subdued for once, stood behind their parents.

Percy, although Molly had insisted he be invited, had not bothered to show up.

When the simple ceremony was complete, the newlyweds turned to receive the well wishes of the rest of the guests.

Although everyone tried to put a good face on it, an underlying sadness permeated the very air.

There was a very good reason for the sadness. There was a war on and Albus Dumbledore was dead.

He had died at the hands of one of their own. At least they'd thought he'd been one of their own.

Severus Snape had looked upon his friend and mentor with horror and revulsion. He had listened as Dumbledore pleaded with him, and then he had raised his wand and cast the Killing Curse without a second's hesitation.

Harry had seen it happen. He had been held immobile by the last spell Dumbledore ever cast, and he'd been forced to watch as Snape murdered him.

The two weeks that had passed between Dumbledore's death and Bill and Fleur's wedding had done nothing to ease his sorrow.

The fact that he'd had to spend those weeks with the Dursleys had only added to his burden. He wouldn't have gone back to them at all if he hadn't promised Dumbledore. But, in less than six weeks, he'd be seventeen. He'd be legally an adult in the wizarding world and free to leave the Dursleys forever. He was counting down the hours.

Now, the day was ending. Bill and Fleur had left amid a flurry of confetti and rice. Charlie had kissed his mum and dad goodbye, jumped on his broom, and headed back to Romania. Fred and George had filled a sack with leftover food and had gone back to their shop. Gabrielle had Portkeyed back to France.

The rest of the guests left in twos and threes, not wanting to attract the wrong kind of attention to the ramshackle house in Ottery St. Catchpole.

Soon only Molly and Arthur, Remus and Tonks, Harry and Ginny, Hermione and Ron, and Minerva McGonagall were still sitting in the Burrow's crowded kitchen.

Molly poured tea for everyone and for a few minutes there was only the clinking of spoons and the murmured requests for milk, sugar, or lemon.

"It was a lovely ceremony, Molly, Arthur," Minerva said at last. "Albus would have been pleased."

"He always did love a good wedding, didn't he?" Arthur said with a small, sad smile.

"Especially the cake," Remus said.

"Did you choose lemon curd filling in his honour, Molly?" Minerva asked.

"I knew he would have liked it, and Fleur and Bill had no objections," Molly replied. "I would have decorated it with sherbet lemons, but that might have been a bit much."

There were chuckles at that comment.

Harry had heard enough.

"How can you joke about wedding cake?" he asked as he threw his napkin to the table and jumped to his feet. "He's dead, and you're making fun of him!"

"Sit down, Mr. Potter," Minerva said sharply.

"We're not making fun of him, Harry," Remus said in a soothing tone.

Hermione and Ginny, sitting on either side of Harry, were tugging on his arms, urging him back to his seat.

"That's what it sounds like to me," Harry insisted.

"We're reminiscing about an old friend," Remus said. "We all loved him. We all miss him. This is a way for us to keep our good memories of him alive."

Harry allowed himself to be pulled back down into his seat.

"Mr. Potter ... Harry," Minerva said turning to him, "no one knew Albus Dumbledore better than I did. He wouldn't want us to mourn him for too long. He would want us to remember the happy moments and move on."

"I miss him so much," Harry said after a moment. He was blinking rapidly, trying to hold back his tears.

"We all miss him," Arthur said, his own voice thick with unshed tears.

Beside Harry, Hermione sniffled softly, and Ron wiped surreptitiously at his cheeks with his fingers.

"I'm ... I'm sorry for my outburst, Professor," Harry said, turning toward Minerva.

"It's understandable," the older witch said.

The group resumed their tea drinking.

"Are you ready to head back to the Dursleys?" Remus asked as he got to his feet a few minutes later. "Nymphadora and I will see you there safely."

Tonks also stood up, knocking her chair over in the process.

Harry exchanged glances with Ron and Hermione. They had spent most of the late afternoon talking and making plans.

"I'm not going back," Harry said. He looked at Professor McGonagall as he spoke and raised his chin in a stubborn angle.

"You *must!*" Minerva said.

"I'll be seventeen in less than six weeks," Harry said. "I was going to leave then, anyway."

"Yes, but until then, you'll be safe," Minerva insisted.

"I should have left already. I should be out looking ... doing the job Dumbledore left me." He paused a moment and then added, "And hunting down Snape." He bit the name out, his mouth twisting as if the words themselves tasted bad.

"You must go back to the Dursleys until your birthday," Minerva said. "Whatever task Albus left you can wait until then."

"And what about Snape?" Harry asked. "He deserves to be punished for what he did."

"The Order will deal with Severus Snape," Minerva replied in a vague tone. She didn't quite meet Harry's eyes.

"No! I want to kill the bastard myself!" Harry shouted.

Minerva turned to Remus, as though seeking his support.

"Harry," Remus said, coming around the table to put a hand on his shoulder. "You must go back to the Dursleys. It is imperative that you do so."

"Why?" Harry demanded.

"I can't explain it right now, but you must accept what I'm telling you," Remus said. "There are ... circumstances you don't understand."

"Then tell me! Make me understand."

"We can't," Remus said. "You just have to trust us."

"I'm not going back unless you can give me a good reason."

"After your birthday, there will be more information made available to you," Minerva said. "We can't tell you anything else."

Remus turned to Hermione, "I know you can make him understand, Hermione. You've been the voice of reason since you were first-years."

Hermione had watched the exchange between Harry and the others. Ever since Harry had related the events that had taken place on the night Dumbledore died, Hermione had felt that there was more going on than any of them knew.

Hermione turned to Harry. "Maybe we should wait, Harry."

"This afternoon, you were all for going off!" Ron said, glaring at her.

"I just think we should listen to what they have to say before we run off half-cocked! We don't even know what we're looking for," Hermione said, glaring right back at him.

"I promise you that at one minute after midnight on July thirty-first, I'll be at the Dursleys to collect you," Remus said.

"Harry," Arthur said, "you know that you'll be welcomed here. You can move in with us, if you'd like after your birthday."

"Professor Dumbledore asked you to trust him," Minerva said. "He wanted you to remain at the Dursleys until your birthday. Would you go against his wishes now, with just a few weeks to go?"

"Please, Harry," Ginny said, speaking for the first time, "you need to stay safe."

Harry looked at Remus. He looked drawn and tired. The moon had been full the previous night, and for the first time in years, there had been no Wolfsbane to make the transformation easier for him. Harry hated the idea of adding to his worries.

Harry then looked to Professor McGonagall. There was an anxious, pinched look on her face. She had been appointed Headmistress even though it hadn't yet been determined whether or not Hogwarts would even open in September. Harry knew she had also taken over as leader of the Order of the Phoenix. She had enough worries without him making things more difficult for her.

"All right," he said a moment later, "I'll go back."

"Thank you, Mr. Potter," said Minerva with evident relief.

"But, if you're not there to get me, I'm leaving right away," Harry said to Remus. "I won't stay there a minute longer than I have to."

"I'll be there," Remus promised.

Remus and Tonks delivered Harry back to the Dursleys, and Remus reiterated his promise to be back to collect him on his birthday.

Once Harry was safely inside, they Apparated back to Grimmauld Place.

They stood in front of the old Black house, rather uncomfortable and awkward with each other.

"You should go home, Nymphadora," Remus said at last.

"I wanted to talk to you," she said.

"It's late and I'm tired. I always am on the day after the full moon," he added.

"That's subtle, that," Tonks said. "I know what you are, you know, you don't need to remind me."

"No, I don't suppose I do," he said with a sigh. "You'd best come in, then."

He opened the battered, black-painted door and stepped back to allow Tonks to enter in front of him. She stepped into the entrance hall, and immediately tripped over the umbrella stand. She held her breath, hoping she hadn't roused the portrait of Mrs. Black.

Remus reached a hand out and steadied her.

"We've finally found a way to silence the old harridan," Remus said.

"That's a relief," she replied.

"Let's go to the drawing room," Remus said.

Once they were inside, he used his wand to get a fire going in the small grate.

He turned back to find Tonks standing right in front of him. Before he could say anything, she stood on her tiptoes and kissed him, wrapping her arms around his neck, flattening her breasts against his chest, and rubbing her groin against his.

Remus turned his head, breaking the kiss before she could attempt to deepen it. He reached up and grasped her forearms, gently pulling them from around his neck.

"I thought you wanted to talk," he said.

"I'd rather do this," she said as she rubbed against him again.

"Please, I can't do this," he said in a hoarse whisper, as he stepped away from her.

"I don't understand. Don't you fancy girls? You're not gay, are you?"

Remus smiled. "No, I'm not gay."

"So, it's just *me* you don't fancy, then," she said.

Remus could hear the hurt in her voice.

"Let's sit down," Remus said.

"Going to let me down gently, aren't you?" she said, but she sat on the edge of the sofa.

Remus sat down beside her and took her hand in his.

"Nymphadora, I can't tell you how flattered I am that you would think of me in that way, but it's impossible."

"Why?"

"I could restate all the arguments I've presented over the last few weeks, but I suspect that you won't accept them any more easily tonight than you have previously," he said.

She nodded. "You're right. I know you ... you want me. I could *feel* you when I kissed you."

Remus flushed slightly. "That's a physical reaction. I'm just a man, after all at least most of the time. You're very attractive. If all I wanted or needed was a physical encounter, I wouldn't have a problem."

"I'll settle for that," Tonks said.

"That's just it," Remus replied gently. "I can't settle for a quick tumble. I've had enough of that. I've discovered that I need more; I need an emotional connection."

"And you don't feel that for me, do you?" she asked sadly.

"I'm sorry, Dora, but no, no I don't."

"Are you in love with someone else?" she asked.

Remus shook his head. "No, I'm not in love with anyone."

"Maybe, if we spent some time together, maybe you'd start to feel ..."

Remus reached up and touched a finger to her lips, stilling her words.

"Don't. If it were going to happen, it would have happened already. I don't want to give you any false hope. I don't want you to be hurt any more than you are already."

"How very noble of you."

Remus hated seeing the bitter twist to her mouth. He sighed. This was the very thing he had been hoping to avoid.

"You should leave now," he said. "I really am exhausted."

"I'm sorry, Remus. That was a very childish and petty remark."

She paused a moment. "Don't you get lonely?"

Remus sighed again. Sometimes he felt that 'lonely' was a word invented just to describe him.

"Yes, I do."

Tonks looked at him and finally realised that he would never be hers.

"Can we be friends, at least?" she asked.

"I would like to be your friend," Remus replied. "I've precious few of them."

"I'll see you at the next Order meeting, then," she said as she got to her feet.

"Of course," Remus said.

Tonks headed for the door, but just before she reached it, she turned back.

"Remus," she said.

He looked up at her. "Yes?"

"If you ever change your mind ... or your heart ..."

"Thank you, Nymphadora."

"Goodnight, Remus."

"Goodnight."

Remus heard the front door open and close. Then he heard the rattle of the dust bins as Tonks knocked into them as she made her way past the wards that protected the house. He smiled and wondered again how she had ever made it through Auror training.

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I chose prompt #5: Harry touches his scar; it hasn't pained him in 19 years. He

hears hooting, rolls over in bed to see Hedwig sweeping in the open window at Privet Drive, and realizes that his 17th birthday isn't far off. Go for it... a new seventh year for the lot.

I've basically begun my story where Half Blood Prince ends. This is the way seventh year and beyond might have gone; even, dare I say *it should* have gone!

Chapter 2

Chapter 2 of 16

Book 7 -- The Way it Should Have Been. Harry, Ron, and Hermione don't return to Hogwarts for their seventh year. Instead, they join forces with the Order of the Phoenix to find Voldemort's Horcruxes and save the wizarding world. Members of the Order teach them how to fight. Along the way, Hermione realizes that her feelings for Ron have changed -- and so have her feelings for two other Order members.

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Two

Remus was as good as his word. He was knocking at the front door of the house on Privet Drive before the mantel clock had finished its twelfth chime.

Harry threw the door open.

"Happy birthday, Harry," Remus said by way of greeting, as he stepped into the painfully neat living room. "Are you ready to go?"

"I've been ready since I got here," Harry grumbled.

"I know this has been hard on you," Remus said.

"Yeah ... well, it's never been easy here," Harry answered. "No reason this time should've been any different."

"Are you all packed?" Remus asked.

"I never unpacked. I just took out what I needed and left the rest in my trunk. Mr. Weasley came by yesterday to pick it up. All I've got is what I was wearing yesterday," he said as he held up a paper sack.

"Where are your aunt and uncle?" Remus asked.

"They've gone out. There was some big dinner for Uncle Vernon's company."

"And Dudley?"

"Out with his friends probably looking for someone to beat up."

"So you've already said your goodbyes, then."

"Huh. They never wanted me in the first place. There're all glad to see the back of me. Aunt Petunia will be counting the silverware tomorrow to be sure I haven't nicked anything," Harry said.

"You haven't, have you?" Remus asked with a smile.

"My mum and dad left me all I'll ever need. I wouldn't take anything from these people even if they offered, which they didn't."

"Where's Hedwig?" Remus asked.

"She's at the Burrow. I told her to stay there after she delivered my last letter to Ron. Mr. Weasley took her cage with him when he took my trunk. I'm travelling light," he added with a small smile.

"That's good," Remus said. "Take my arm, we're going to Apparate."

Harry took a firm hold of Remus's arm and in a moment, they were standing in front of number twelve Grimmauld Place.

"I thought we were going to the Burrow," Harry said.

"There's a bit of business I have to take care of here before we go," Remus replied.

"Is this place still Unplottable?" Harry wanted to know.

"Dumbledore arranged for a new Secret Keeper," Remus said. "It's as safe as it ever was. We've even managed to shut up that awful painting of Mrs. Black, though we've yet to find a way to get it off the wall."

Remus opened the door, and Harry followed him inside.

"Let's go down to the kitchen," Remus said. "I could do with a cuppa."

They went down the stairs and moved toward the large kitchen.

"You're not tired are you?" Remus asked as he opened the kitchen door.

"Not really," Harry replied.

"Good," Remus said with a smile, and then he gave Harry a gentle shove into the room.

"Surprise!"

"Happy Birthday, Harry!"

The calls overlapped each other as Ron and Hermione, Mr. and Mrs. Weasley, and Professor McGonagall all called out to him at the same time.

The next few minutes passed in a flurry of hugs and kisses as each of them wished him a happy birthday.

"There's cake," Molly said a few minutes later.

They sat around the large table and ate chocolate cake and drank tea. It was the first surprise party Harry had ever had, and he was grateful. The only way it could have been better was if Dumbledore had been there.

"He would have been proud of you," Minerva said as she noted the wistful expression on Harry's face.

"Thanks for saying that, Professor," Harry said.

"You're welcome," she replied, as she patted his arm comfortingly.

When the last bite of cake had been eaten, Minerva cleared her throat to attract the attention of the people around the table.

"Now that we've had our fun, it's time to get down to the business at hand," she said.

Everyone quieted down and waited for her to continue.

"Albus Dumbledore created the Order of the Phoenix during the first rise to power of the Dark Lord. Your mother and father, Mr. Potter, as well as your godfather, were members. So were Arthur, Molly, and Remus. After the events on Halloween in 1981, the Order became far less active than it had been. It was never disbanded completely, however.

"This turned out to be a fortunate thing because, contrary to what the majority of the wizarding world believed, the Dark Lord was *not* dead after that famous encounter with you, Mr. Potter. He was quiescent for more than ten years, gaining strength and waiting for the opportunity to return to power.

"Now, more than ever before, the wizarding world needs the Order of the Phoenix. As the Dark Lord has recruited new people to his side, the Order of the Phoenix recruits new members as well.

"After consulting with two of my top aides," Minerva gestured to Arthur and Remus, "it has been decided that we would like to offer membership to you, and to Mr. Weasley and Miss Granger, as well."

Harry started to speak, and Minerva held up a hand.

"It's important that you understand your responsibilities as a member of the Order before you accept."

Harry nodded and Minerva continued.

"After the despicable behaviour of Peter Pettigrew, it was reluctantly acknowledged that a wizard's word cannot always be taken at face value. Therefore, to become a member of the Order, you must make an Unbreakable Vow."

Minerva then went on to explain exactly what they would have to promise in order to become members of the Order of the Phoenix.

"Do you understand the promises you must make and the consequences should you break the Vow?" she asked, looking from Harry to Ron and then to Hermione.

"Yes, Professor, I understand," Harry answered.

"I do, too," Ron said.

"I understand," said Hermione.

"Are you prepared to make such a Vow?" Minerva asked.

"I am," Harry, Ron, and Hermione spoke together.

"Remus, would you act as Bonder for us?" Minerva asked.

"I'd be honoured, if it's all right with Harry," Remus replied.

"Is that acceptable to you, Mr. Potter?"

"Yes."

"On your knees, then," Minerva said. She slipped off her chair and fell to her own knees, casting a quick Cushioning Charm to protect her aged joints.

Harry dropped to his knees in front of her.

Remus stood over them, his wand in his hand.

Minerva reached out and took Harry's right hand in her own.

"Harry Potter, do you come of your own free will seeking to join the Order of the Phoenix?" Minerva asked.

"I do," Harry answered.

"Will you be loyal to the Order of the Phoenix and to each of its members?"

"I will."

A thin tongue of brilliant red flame left the tip of Remus's wand and wrapped itself around the pair's joined hands.

"Will you keep secret the identities of all other members of the Order of the Phoenix?"

"I will." A second tongue of flame attached itself to the first.

"Will you keep secret any locations designated by the Order of the Phoenix as Unplottable, or those protected by a Fidelius Charm?"

"I will." A third tongue of flame joined the first two.

"And finally, will you obey my orders, and the orders of anyone I choose to act as my delegate, as you work with the other members of the Order of the Phoenix toward the defeat of the Dark Lord?"

"I will." A last tendril of flame connected with the others. Their hands now appeared to be clasped within a glove of fire.

Remus touched his wand once more to their hands. The fiery glove faded.

"Welcome to the Order of the Phoenix, Harry," Minerva said. She pulled him toward her and placed a soft kiss on his cheek.

"Thank you, Professor," Harry replied.

"You go on and get up. I think I'll just stay down here to proceed with the other initiations.

"Mr. Weasley," Minerva said, gesturing to Ron, "would you like your father to be our Bonder?"

Ron looked to his father and nodded. He went to his knees in front of Minerva, and Arthur came to stand over them.

When the Vow was completed, Minerva also kissed Ron on the cheek.

"Welcome to the Order of the Phoenix, Ronald," she said in a warm tone.

"Thank you, Professor," Ron said as he got to his feet.

"Your turn, Miss Granger," Minerva said.

Before she knelt, Hermione turned to Mrs. Weasley.

"Would you act as our Bonder, please, Mrs. Weasley?"

"Thank you, dear," Mrs. Weasley replied. "I'd like that."

Another Vow, another kiss on the cheek, and Hermione Granger was a member of the Order of the Phoenix.

"Welcome to the Order of the Phoenix, Hermione," Minerva said formally.

"Thank you, Professor McGonagall," Hermione replied.

Hermione got to her feet and then bent down to help Minerva up.

Remus hurried to Minerva's other side to help.

"Oh, I'm getting too old for this," Minerva said as she rose stiffly, holding on to Remus's arm for support.

"Nonsense, Minerva," Remus replied.

"I believe a celebratory toast is in order," Arthur said. He set a tray down on the table. The tray held several small glasses filled with an amber fluid.

"This is a fine cordial contributed by another Order member," Arthur explained as he handed glasses out.

When everyone had a drink, one filled glass remained on the tray.

"Who is that for?" Harry asked.

"That would be *mine*," said a voice from the kitchen door.

And Severus Snape stepped into the room.

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Three

"You!" Harry shouted. He reached for his wand, but before he could draw it, Remus had a hand on his arm.

Arthur reached out to grasp Ron's arm as he too went for his wand.

Hermione, always the most level-headed of the three, scowled at her two best friends as the missing piece of the puzzle of Dumbledore's death was finally revealed.

"Honestly, you two are so thick. You won't need to wait for Voldemort to kill you. You can pull your wands and drop dead for breaking the Vow you took just five minutes ago!"

Snape smirked. "Where would they be without you, Miss Granger?" he asked.

"I don't understand," Harry said.

"What a surprise," Snape said in a mocking tone.

"That's enough, Severus," Minerva broke in. "The boy's in shock. Stop baiting him."

"As you wish, Minerva," Snape acquiesced. "He's no longer a boy, however; it's time he started acting like the man he professes to be."

Snape went to the table and picked up the remaining glass of cordial.

"Welcome to the Order of the Phoenix, Mr. Potter," he said as he held the glass aloft. "And welcome to you, as well, Mr. Weasley, Miss Granger."

"You're out of your mind if you think I'm drinking with you," Harry said. "You killed Dumbledore!"

"Yes, I did," Snape said, putting the glass back down and leaning toward Harry. "And if you think I took any joy from that act, then you're the one out of his mind."

"Mr. Potter!" Minerva spoke sharply, drawing Harry's attention back to her.

"Severus Snape is a member of the Order of the Phoenix. He has taken the same Unbreakable Vow you just took. Were his actions in any way contrary to that Vow, he would be dead."

"But, he killed Dumbledore!" Harry continued to protest.

"When I cast the Killing Curse upon him, Albus was already dead," Snape said.

"He wasn't! I saw him. He was pleading with you ... begging you not to ... not to ..." Harry's voice broke.

"Pleading with me to do it, Potter as he had ordered me to do. As had been planned for months ever since we discovered that the curse unleashed upon him when he destroyed the Horcrux in the ring was incurable."

"You should have found another way!" Harry cried.

"Don't you think we tried? Don't you think we *all* tried? There was no other way," Snape said.

"He was dying, Harry," Minerva said in a soft tone. "He was dying slowly and painfully. He found a way to use his death to help defeat the Dark Lord."

"He ... he was dying anyway," Harry said slowly.

"Ah ... a light breaks," Snape said, as he pulled out the chair next to Arthur and sat down.

"Severus!" Minerva chided again.

"Oh, please, Minerva," Snape chided back. "It is not Potter's dislike of me that galls. I've never given him reason to have anything *but* dislike for me. However, I most heartily resent the implied mistrust of Albus."

"I always trusted Dumbledore," Harry said.

"And how many times did Dumbledore tell you that he trusted *me*, you miserable brat?" Snape shouted.

Harry opened his mouth as though to speak and then closed it with a snap.

"He's right, Harry," Hermione said, coming to stand beside him. "We've known for years that Professor Snape was a member of the Order. And Dumbledore told us over and over again that he trusted him, that he trusted him with his life."

"Indeed, Hermione," Minerva said. "Severus was the only one he trusted to do what needed to be done."

"It must have been very difficult for you, Professor Snape," Hermione said, lifting her eyes to his.

Snape wondered if she was mocking him, but he detected no trace of sarcasm in her voice. He decided to take her words at face value and responded in what was, for him, a reasonable tone.

"I did what was necessary."

"That doesn't mean it wasn't difficult," Hermione persisted. "I'm sorry you had to do it, sir."

"So am I, Miss Granger," Snape replied. "So am I."

"Hermione," Ron hissed. "How can you be so nice to him?"

Snape glared but made no comment.

"When are you going to grow up, Ronald?" Hermione said. She had her hands on her hips, and her jaw was thrust forward. "Haven't you been listening?"

"I just don't believe ..."

"You don't believe what, Ron?" Hermione asked in a sharp tone. "You don't believe Professor Dumbledore? You don't believe Professor McGonagall? How about your mum and your dad? Do you believe *them*?"

If Snape was surprised by Hermione's vehement defence of him, he gave no sign. He watched her through narrowed eyes and wondered when she had grown up, and how he had missed it when she had. Of course, he had been rather busy this past year.

"Ronald Bilius Weasley, you sit down and behave yourself!" Molly Weasley spoke in a tone of voice she hadn't used since the incident with the enchanted Ford Anglia.

"But, Mum ..."

"Sit!"

Ron sat.

Harry and Hermione also sat back down. Neither wanted Mrs. Weasley to turn her attention to them.

Minerva rapped her wand sharply on the table. When she had everyone's attention, she spoke again.

"Harry," she said, "more than five weeks ago, Remus and I both told you that there would be new and important information revealed to you on your birthday.

"Although I might have chosen a less *dramatic* way to inform you of Severus's true allegiances," she paused to cast a baleful glance in Snape's direction, "that information is the most important you need to know and accept. Do you understand?"

"I ... I'll try," Harry mumbled.

Snape gave a soft snort, and Minerva sent him another withering look.

"You must do more than try," she insisted. "As the head of the Order, I could compel you and Severus to work together, but I believe it would be counterproductive if you do not trust each other completely."

"Why do we have to work together?"

"I told you it would be useless to attempt this, Minerva," Snape said as he got to his feet. "I'll be leaving now."

"Sit your arse down and don't move," Minerva said as she aimed her wand at him.

Hermione gasped. Remus chuckled and earned a glare from Snape. Harry looked to Snape as though expecting him to draw his own wand and engage Minerva in a duel.

Snape gave an exaggerated sigh, but resumed his seat.

Minerva turned back to Harry. "Did Albus Dumbledore mean so little to you that you will allow his sacrifice to have been in vain?"

"Don't you think that's a bit harsh, Minerva?" Molly asked.

Minerva turned her stare on Molly. "No, Molly, I don't. Now, please don't interrupt me again."

Molly flushed, but settled back in her seat.

"I asked you a question, Harry," Minerva said.

"I ... I loved Dumbledore," Harry mumbled.

Minerva turned to Snape. "Severus, what was your standing with the Dark Lord before Albus's death?"

Snape drew a deep breath and then began to speak. "I was barely tolerated. I wasn't included in any of the important meetings he held with his followers. It was believed by some, most notably Bellatrix Lestrange and Lucius Malfoy that my years at Hogwarts had made me less ... committed ... to the Dark Lord's cause. Peter Pettigrew was installed in my home, ostensibly to assist me. In actuality, he was placed there to keep an eye on me. My loyalty to the Dark Lord was often tested."

"What form did that testing take?" the older woman asked.

"This isn't necessary, Minerva," Snape said.

"As the head of the Order, I deem it necessary," she insisted. "What form did that testing take?"

"The Dark Lord repeatedly used Legilimency on me, after he prepared me with the Cruciatus, of course. He frequently encouraged my 'brothers' to beat me, physically."

"And?" Minerva continued.

"Please, Minerva ..." Snape said in a hoarse whisper. He'd gone even paler than usual.

"Tell them, Severus," she said.

Snape swallowed hard before he continued. "I was frequently assaulted ... sexually ... by them."

Hermione gasped again. Ron looked like he was about to be sick. Molly was clutching Arthur's hand, and tears were running down her cheeks. Remus kept his head down, not looking at anyone.

Harry looked like he'd been hit with a Bludger.

"When these assaults occurred, did they take your wand?" Minerva asked.

"No one takes my wand," Snape said with a fierce look at the older witch.

"You could have defended yourself?"

"I was usually outnumbered, but I could certainly have put up a fight."

"Why didn't you?" Minerva pressed.

"I would have been killed, thus ending my usefulness to the Order."

"What is your status with the Dark Lord now?" Minerva asked.

"I hold a place at the Dark Lord's side. He confides in me. He trusts me."

"He doesn't use Legilimency on you anymore?" Minerva asked.

"Oh, he does. Fortunately, I am still a much better Occlumens than he is a Legilimens," Snape replied with a snide little quirk of his thin lips.

"Does he still use the Cruciatus?"

"All of us suffer punishment occasionally. The frequency of my punishments has decreased dramatically, however," Snape replied.

"Do you still suffer beatings from your so-called brothers?"

"No."

"And the sexual assaults?" Minerva pressed on.

"You will make me say this?" Snape growled.

"There must be no doubts left, Severus. You know this," Minerva persisted.

"Very well then, if you insist that my humiliation be made public and complete. No, I do not suffer the sexual assaults of the others anymore. I have been deemed the exclusive property of the Dark Lord. Only he is allowed to fuck me these days!"

Snape stood and stomped through the door, slamming it violently behind him as he left.

Minerva turned to where Harry sat looking pale and ill.

"Do you still doubt Severus Snape's loyalty?" she asked.

"I ... I don't know what to say," he mumbled.

"You have a very important task ahead of you," Minerva said. "Believe me when I tell you that without the help of that man out there, you will fail.

"The fate of the entire wizarding world rests on your shoulders, Harry," she said in a much kinder tone. "We will all do what we can, but only Severus can provide the vital information you will need."

Harry nodded, and then he stood up.

"I ... I have to talk to him."

"He'll likely be in the drawing room," Minerva said. "He keeps a bottle of Firewhisky in the writing desk."

"Excuse me," he said as he turned toward the door.

Harry found Snape sprawled on the sofa in front of the fireplace. The bottle of Ogden's Old was in his hand, but the cap was still on, and it didn't look like he'd drunk any of it yet.

"Professor ..." Harry began.

"Come to feast on my humiliation, Potter?" Snape interrupted with a snarl.

"No."

"Then go away and leave me alone," Snape said as he unscrewed the cap on the bottle in his hand.

"I ... I didn't know ..."

"Of course you didn't know. You were a child; such knowledge would have been unseemly. Besides, did you think I wanted to have that information bandied about among the students? I can only be grateful I don't have to face them again. I shall never forgive Minerva for forcing me to make such a revelation, and to you, of all people."

"I'm glad I know," Harry said.

"Why? So you and your friends can snicker at me and take delight in the fact that I debase myself on a regular basis?"

"No. I'm glad because now I know why you hate me so much. If it weren't for me, you wouldn't have to ... to do that."

"As usual, you vastly overestimate your own importance, Potter. I sealed my own fate when I took the Dark Mark. And my promise to Albus to work toward the defeat of the Dark Lord was in place even before your first encounter with him on the night your parents died."

"Why did you go to Professor Dumbledore? Why did you turn against Voldemort?"

"Why do you care?" Snape growled.

"I guess I need to understand."

Snape seemed to consider Harry's words for a moment, and then he began to speak. "I went to Albus because I finally recognised the Dark Lord for the madman he is. Because I finally realised that his only motivation was a quest for power and for his own immortality. Because after Regulus Black tried to leave his service, and was summarily executed, I realised that until the Dark Lord was dead, I would never be free.

"My motives were purely selfish," Snape added.

"I don't believe that," Harry said.

"Why not? You've been willing to believe the worst of me since you've known me. Why would you disbelieve me now, just when I've confirmed your beliefs?"

"Because I think you'd rather die than submit to him that way."

"As miserable as my life is, it's better than being dead."

"You don't believe that any more than Dumbledore did," Harry insisted. "You allow yourself to be treated that way because it's the only way to get close enough to learn how to defeat him."

"How do you know I'm not just some pouf who enjoys it?"

"Because if you enjoyed it, he wouldn't do it, would he? It's all about control with him, isn't it?"

Snape looked at the young wizard in front of him. He looked so much like his father his proud, arrogant, hateful father. But, there was none of James Potter's smugness, none of his haughtiness, none of his vindictiveness residing in Harry Potter. James Potter had chosen the path he walked. Harry Potter had been forced to follow the path laid out by a madman. *James* Potter would have delighted in Snape's humiliation. It was patently obvious that *Harry* Potter did not. Mayhap it was time to stop seeing the father in the son.

"It is indeed about control. I wouldn't have expected you to be so perceptive," Snape said.

"Having to ... to do that must make you hate me even more," Harry said.

Snape glared at the younger wizard for a moment.

"I don't hate you, you wretched whelp," he said, but there was more resignation than rancour in his voice. He recapped the bottle of Firewhisky without drinking any. "I admit I hated your father. He was an arrogant bastard who enjoyed making my life a misery. But you are not your father, and it was wrong of me to mistreat you because he had mistreated me.

"And that's as close as you'll get to an apology from me, Potter. Take it or leave it."

"Professor McGonagall says that without your help, I'll never defeat the Dark Lord," Harry said, not commenting on Snape's 'apology'.

"And what do you think?"

"I think she's right," Harry replied.

"You seem to have done all right without me thus far," Snape said.

"You've been helping me since my first year, I was just too blind to see it and too stubborn to accept it."

"There may be hope for you yet."

"Will you help me, Professor, please?"

Snape got to his feet and tucked the bottle of Ogden's Old back into the drawer of the small desk, and then he turned back to Harry.

"I'm no longer your professor, Potter," Snape said. "Perhaps it's time you addressed me less formally."

"You want me to call you 'Severus'?" Harry asked, trying to hide his surprise.

"Don't be ridiculous. You may call me 'Mr. Snape'."

Harry stared at him and then started to laugh.

Snape scowled. Apparently Potter had thought he was *joking*.

"Can we talk later, Snape?" Harry asked when he had finally stopped laughing. He purposely left off the 'mister'.

Snape glared again and then shrugged. Although he'd used his surname, he hadn't said it disrespectfully or derisively. Potter was an adult now, and an Order member. It could finally be acknowledged that they were on the same side of the battle.

"We have a lot to talk about," Snape agreed. "Now that you and your compatriots are Order members, it's time we begin to train aggressively for the battles ahead. It's also imperative that we find and eliminate the remaining Horcruxes."

"I'm looking forward to it," Harry said.

"Don't get cocky. The Dark Lord isn't going to stand still and allow you to destroy his bid to live forever."

"I'll never underestimate him again," Harry said. "And I won't underestimate you, either."

"We'd best get back to the others," Snape said. "They probably think we've hexed each other unconscious by now."

"We never did drink our toast, did we?" Harry asked.

"I'm sure the others have finished their tipples by now, but it was a new bottle; they may have left a drop or two for us."

Snape turned back toward the door that led downstairs to the kitchen.

"Snape," Harry said, and Snape turned back.

"Yes, Potter?"

"Even without the Vow, I'd never have said anything to anyone, you know, not even to Ron and Hermione. I ... I wish my stubbornness hadn't made it necessary for Professor McGonagall to force you to ..."

"I'll deal with Minerva later," Snape said.

"Don't be angry with her; it was my fault."

"It's no one's fault, Potter, save the Dark Lord's."

"We'll make him pay," Harry said with vehemence.

Snape stared at Harry for a moment and then he nodded.

"Yes, we will. Now, let's go have that drink."

When Snape and Harry entered the kitchen a few moments later, all eyes turned to them.

"Have you two managed to find a way to get along?" Minerva asked.

"We have managed to agree to fight the common enemy rather than each other, haven't we, Potter?" Snape said.

"Yes, we have, Snape," Harry replied.

"In that case, I believe a toast is still in order," Arthur said.

Harry went back to his place between Ron and Hermione, and Snape once again took the place next to Arthur.

Snape picked up his untouched glass of cordial and held it up once again.

"Potter, Weasley, Miss Granger ... welcome to the Order of the Phoenix."

Harry raised his own glass and nodded. Then he brought the glass to his lips and drained it.

Hermione sent Snape a small, tentative smile and a softly murmured, "Thank you," before she, too, emptied her glass.

Ron looked from Harry to Snape and then from Snape to Hermione. Then he shrugged and swallowed his own drink.

Minerva looked relieved as she sipped from her glass. When everyone had finished their drinks, she once again tapped her wand on the table.

Seven pairs of eyes turned toward her expectantly.

"Now that the festivities have been concluded, it's time to get to work."

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hears hooting, rolls over in bed to see Hedwig sweeping in the open

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off. Go for it... a new seventh year for the lot.

Chapter 4

Chapter 4 of 16

Book 7 -- The Way it Should Have Been. Harry, Ron, and Hermione don't return to Hogwarts for their seventh year. Instead, they join forces with the Order of the Phoenix to find Voldemort's Horcruxes and save the wizarding world. Members of the Order teach them how to fight. Along the way, Hermione realizes that her feelings for Ron have changed -- and so have her feelings for two other Order members.

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Four

Minerva had not been exaggerating when she said it was time to work. A schedule was set up to give the three of them intensive Defence lessons. Remus and Snape handled most of their lessons. Tonks and Mad-eye Moody, when they could take time away from their Auror duties, also took turns teaching them how to cast a wide-ranging variety of spells and curses and how to defend against them. The end of each day usually found at least one of them with cuts and bruises to be healed. There was even an occasional broken bone to be mended. And they learned those spells, and a number of other healing spells, as well, since it was likely that there would be times when they would not be able to get to a Healer.

All of them became proficient at casting spells nonverbally.

The three of them worked with both Snape and Remus to learn Occlumency. Harry paid a lot more attention to the lessons this time around. While duelling with Snape in the moments after the events on the Astronomy tower, Harry had learned the importance of blocking his thoughts. When he allowed himself to think of it, he realised that even as he had been fleeing, Snape had been trying to teach him.

Legilimency was a much more difficult skill than Occlumency, but Snape maintained that it was important that they at least learn the basics.

They studied more and learned more over a four week period than they had learned in the six preceding years at school. Some days they spent as much as fourteen hours studying and practicing.

The Board of Governors met in special session the last week of August. It was decided that Hogwarts would open after all, but because they had delayed so long in reaching their decision, the first day of school would be the first of October rather than the first of September. Letters were sent to the parents of all returning students advising them of the new schedule.

Harry, Ron, and Hermione didn't return to Hogwarts when classes started. Instead, they remained at Grimmauld Place and continued their lessons there.

There was much speculation about their whereabouts when they failed to return for their final year.

When the Ministry questioned Minerva, she showed them a letter from Hermione's parents stating that they were withdrawing her from Hogwarts and that the entire family was moving to Australia.

The hiding of Hermione's parents her very vulnerable Muggle parents had been one of the first things the Order did after Hermione became a member. The Grangers weren't in Australia, however. Louis and Emily Granger had been relocated to America. They'd changed their names and were practicing dentistry in a small town near Salem, Massachusetts. When a Ministry official visited the Granger home, she found it locked and apparently abandoned, a 'For Sale' sign stuck on the overgrown lawn.

At the Ministry, Arthur Weasley told everyone that Harry Potter had talked his youngest son into leaving school and spending a year 'bumming' around the continent.

"He's broken poor Molly's heart," Arthur was heard to say to anyone who would stand still long enough to listen.

In actuality, Harry and Ron seldom left Grimmauld Place those first few weeks, but reports of their escapades were common. Almost overnight, 'Harry Spotting' became a favourite sport among wizarding folk.

Although Ron and Hermione had taken Apparition lessons, Harry hadn't been able to because he hadn't been of age before the previous school year ended. Now, he worked with Minerva and with Tonks to learn how to Apparate. Once all three of them had mastered the skill, Snape insisted that they learn how to do it without making the distinctive popping sound that usually accompanied Apparition. It took another three weeks of exhaustive concentration and practice, but soon Apparating silently was second nature to them.

One evening Snape began teaching them how to create Portkeys.

"Having an activated Portkey disguised as a button or a piece of jewellery could save your life one day," Snape said.

"Don't you need Ministry authorisation to create Portkeys?" Hermione asked.

"Ministry authorisation?" Snape sneered. "The Ministry is compromised. Seeking authorisation for a Portkey would be tantamount to taking out an advertisement in the *Prophet* announcing our plans.

"Grow up, you silly girl!"

Hermione flushed slightly, and Ron bristled.

"Don't talk to her like that!"

Much to Ron's surprise, Hermione took Snape's side.

"He's right, Ron. This is war. I've got to stop thinking like a student afraid of being caught out after curfew.

"Show me again, sir," Hermione said turning back to Snape.

Three hours later, all three of them could cast the Portus Charm, although only Hermione had managed to create a Portkey that would take them more than a few kilometres.

By the middle of October, Remus had returned to Fenrir Greyback's pack in the hope of gleaning information about planned attacks against the families of Muggle-born witches and wizards. He hated the time he had to spend with Greyback and his cronies, but he did what he had to do to fulfil his Vow as a member of the Order.

Because of her duties as Headmistress, it was nearly impossible for Minerva to get to Grimmauld Place more than once a week, and Tonks and Mad-eye were frequently called away on Ministry business. That meant that the greatest portion of their training now came from Snape.

As Voldemort's most trusted aide, Snape was summoned frequently. Most of these summonses came at night, but it was not uncommon for him to be called away during the day as well. He would clutch his arm and hiss softly through his teeth. He would usually instruct them to continue practicing whatever they were working on, or he would assign them reading from one of the many Dark Arts books that the Black library held.

Sometimes he returned within the hour, but most times he was gone several hours. Frequently, when called in the evening, he didn't return until the next morning. On those occasions, he would be even more surly and uncommunicative than usual. The others in the house soon learned that it was best to stay out of his way as he trudged wearily through the kitchen and made his way to the bathroom always his first priority on those mornings.

"I didn't think Snape ever took a wash," Ron commented one morning as he, Harry, and Hermione sat at the kitchen table having coffee and listening to the pipes in the old house clang as the shower in the second floor bathroom started. "But I guess he has to considering what he probably did last night."

Hermione stood so quickly, her chair toppled backward behind her.

"How can you say such a thing?" Hermione demanded.

"What'd I say?"

"He doesn't *do* anything! Voldemort *rapes* him!"

"He doesn't fight him off, though, does he? He probably *likes* it," Ron retorted.

"You're disgusting, Ron Weasley!" she shouted.

Ron turned to Harry as though seeking his support, but Harry just shook his head.

"Hermione's right, Ron. We've been wrong about him since the beginning. What he does what he lets Voldemort do he does *for* us. He does it for the Order and for every other witch and wizard who will suffer if Voldemort isn't brought down. He hates it, and I think if it weren't for us, he'd kill himself before he submitted to the slimy bastard that way."

"I was just joking," Ron mumbled.

"It's nothing to joke about," Hermione said. "Professor Snape doesn't deserve your insults."

"I wasn't insulting him," Ron protested.

"What were you doing, then?"

"Look, Hermione, I'm sorry, okay? At least I didn't say anything to his face."

"Good job you didn't," Harry said, trying to diffuse the anger between his two best friends.

"I'll say," Hermione agreed. She turned around and righted the fallen chair. "He'd have given you a first-hand example of how the Cruciatus feels."

Ron gave a mock shudder and both Harry and Hermione laughed, easing the tension between them.

When Snape entered the kitchen twenty minutes later, Harry and Ron were talking about Quidditch, and Hermione had her nose buried in a book.

"Potter!" Snape barked.

Harry and Ron both looked up. Hermione put her book down.

"What's the incantation for the Bone Knitting spell?"

"Uh ... *Adjungo* ... uh ..."

Snape had to stifle a smirk as he watched Granger practically sit on her hand in an effort to keep from raising it. She, of course, knew the answer. He was sure she was hoping she'd never have to rely on Potter to set a broken bone.

"Weasley, how many times can you use a Portkey before you need to renew the spell?"

"Six?" guessed Ron.

He heard Granger groan and saw her shake her head in an exasperated manner.

"Wrong, both of you," Snape snarled. "Yet here you sit, discussing Quidditch, as though such knowledge mightn't one day save your lives!"

"Go and find the correct answers. I'll expect them when Miss Granger and I return."

Harry turned and left the room, but Ron just stood, glaring at Snape.

"Return?" Ron said. "Where are you going?"

"I have a potion to brew; Miss Granger will assist me."

"Why can't Harry and I help, too?" Ron whined. "We're tired of just sitting around."

"How many drams of asphodel are required to achieve the colour-change necessary in the Wolfsbane, Weasley?"

Ron flushed.

"Just as I thought," Snape said in a smug tone. "How many, Miss Granger?"

Hermione bit her bottom lip nervously. She glanced over at Ron, and he scowled at her.

She lifted her chin defiantly and turned her head to address Snape.

"Three-point-two-seven drams will produce the colour-change assuming that one is brewing a single month's dose."

Snape made no attempt to stifle his smirk this time. "And that is why Miss Granger will be assisting me, and you will be studying," he said.

"Go fetch your cloak, Miss Granger. We'll be leaving in ten minutes."

"Yes, sir," Hermione replied and turned toward the stairs.

"Show off," Ron muttered under his breath.

Snape didn't think Granger heard the cutting remark as she continued walking toward the stairs. Once she was out of the room, Snape spun back toward the younger wizard sulking in front of him.

"Miss Granger has been helping you since you were an incompetent first-year. Without her, you would have washed out of Hogwarts long ago, and that's how you repay her?"

"What business is it of yours, Snape?" Ron replied.

"My business is preparing the three of you for the fight of your life."

"Maybe we don't need your help."

"You're an ungrateful little snot," Snape hissed at Ron.

"And you're a ..."

"Ron!"

Harry had returned to the kitchen when he realised that Ron hadn't followed him into the library.

"Get him out of my sight, Potter," Snape said through thinned lips.

"Let's go, Ron," Harry said as he grasped Ron's arm.

"I'm leaving," Ron said as he shook off Harry's hand. "I can't stand the sight of *him*, either."

Harry pushed Ron through the door, and then he turned back to Snape.

"We *do* need you," Harry said. "Ron's just upset because you showed him up in front of Hermione. I'll talk to him."

"See that you do," Snape replied.

Harry nodded, and then he turned and left the room.

Hermione blinked back tears as she hurried upstairs to get her cloak. She'd heard Ron's muttered remark, and it had hurt more than anything he'd ever said to her.

Contrary to what Ron and many others thought, learning didn't come effortlessly to her. She worked hard to accumulate knowledge. She'd sacrificed all through her years at Hogwarts, often skipping after class activities, and sometime even meals, to study. As a Muggle-born, she'd been at a disadvantage at Hogwarts. She'd had to *learn* things that other witches and wizards, including Ron, had grown up *knowing*. She thought it was very unfair of Ron to expect her to play dumb just to spare his feelings. He

should be proud of what she'd accomplished instead of trying to make her feel that she'd betrayed him simply because she'd answered a question he couldn't.

Her hurt turned to anger. If Ron wanted dumb, he could just start going out with Lavender Brown again! Not that she and Ron were 'going out'. Oh, they'd managed to get together a time or two, but the encounters had been hurried and furtive and unsatisfying at least for her. But their current circumstances, hidden away at Order headquarters and working twelve to fourteen hours a day, had made it impossible for them to develop any kind of normal relationship.

She'd always known that Ron was less mature than she was, but she'd been attracted to him anyway. Now his hurtful remark about her, as well as his thoughtless attitude toward Professor Snape, made her doubt he'd ever grow up.

She was going to have to do some serious thinking about her relationship with him.

Hermione gave herself a mental shake as she grabbed her cloak and hurried back down the stairs. She loved brewing and she was looking forward to working with Professor Snape. She wasn't going to let thoughts of Ron distract her.

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Chapter 5

Chapter 5 of 16

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Five

"I'll Apparate us to our destination," Snape said when Hermione returned to the kitchen. "Take a deep breath and let it out slowly as we travel," Snape warned. "It's quite a distance."

She nodded and took the arm that Snape offered her. She drew in a deep breath and closed her eyes.

Hermione was thankful for Snape's warning as the compressed feeling of Apparition seemed to go on and on. Just when she thought she'd never draw another full breath, the pressure began to ease. As it did, she opened her eyes and gratefully filled her lungs.

Hermione looked around. They were in the middle of a deep valley surrounded by steep, snow-capped mountains. Although the mountains sheltered them from most of the wind, it was still very cold. She shivered and pulled her cloak tighter around herself.

"It's a short distance from here," Snape said as he turned and began walking. Hermione followed him, nearly running to keep up with his long-legged strides.

Five minutes later, they were standing in front of a large pile of boulders. Snape pointed his wand at the boulders and muttered a series of incantations. The rocks shimmered for a moment and then faded away revealing a small opening in the side of the mountain.

"Only one person can go through at a time. Light your wand as soon as you step inside, and then turn right and follow the passageway. There are no openings off it, so you needn't worry about making a wrong turn. The tunnel opens out into a small cavern. Wait there for me; I'll enter the tunnel as soon as you leave it."

"Yes, sir," Hermione said, and then she stepped through the narrow opening. She could feel the tingle of the magical wards as she crossed the invisible barrier. She lit her wand and began moving along the tunnel.

Hermione decided that it was a good thing she didn't suffer from claustrophobia. The tunnel was so narrow that she could touch both sides at once if she stretched her hands out. The stone ceiling was only a few inches above her head, and she was sure that Snape would have to hunch over when he walked along to avoid banging his head. There was no light at all, other than the dim glow emanating from her wand tip.

The floor sloped gradually downward as it wound deeper into the mountain. She rounded a gentle curve and found herself in the small cavern Snape had told her she would find. She must have activated the wards because as soon as she entered the cavern, the wall sconces flared to life, illuminating the small space.

A few minutes later, Snape stepped into the cavern.

He aimed his wand at the blank wall in front of them and spoke an incantation. As had happened with the pile of boulders guarding the outside entrance, the rock face shimmered and then faded away. The magical façade had hidden a heavy wooden door with a large brass knocker in the shape of a sleeping dragon.

"You will be asked for a password," Snape said as he turned to Hermione. "Repeat the password I give the guardian, but don't say it until I tell you. Do you understand?"

"Yes," Hermione said.

Snape reached over and lifted the knocker, releasing it so gently it barely made a sound.

The sleeping dragon roared to life.

"Who dares disturb my slumber?" it bellowed.

"Severus Snape," Snape replied.

"Password?" the dragon asked.

"Phalanges mucilaginous," Snape replied, and Hermione put her hand over her mouth to stifle her giggle.

"You have a guest," said the dragon as its head swung around and his gaze swept over Hermione.

"Yes, I do."

"Name?" the dragon asked. Wisps of smoke had begun to trickle from the dragon's nostrils.

"Hereward!" Snape spoke sharply, and the dragon's head turned back to look at him.

"My guest's name is Hermione Granger. She is under my protection," Snape said.

"I understand," Hereward said.

He gaze returned to Hermione. The trickle of smoke from his nostrils had stopped.

"Password?"

Hermione looked over at Snape who nodded.

"Phalanges mucilaginous," Hermione said.

"You are welcome here, Hermione Granger," Hereward said.

"Erm ... thank you, Hereward."

The dragon looked to Snape again.

"Can you spare a tickle, Severus?" Hereward asked in an almost plaintive voice. He raised his head, exposing his long, scaly neck.

Snape scowled, but he reached out and gave the dragon a few perfunctory scratches under his chin.

Hereward turned back to Hermione. "Tickle?"

Hermione smiled and reached out, stroking the dragon's neck gently.

"Nice," Hereward murmured, and his eyes began to close.

"We've a lot to do today, Hereward," Snape growled. "Open the bloody door before you fall asleep."

"Always in a rush," Hereward grumbled, but the door swung open.

"He seemed rather fierce at first," Hermione said as the door closed behind them, "but he's just a big softy once you give him the password, isn't he?"

They were standing in what appeared to be a small foyer.

"Knowing the password isn't enough," Snape said. He took off his cloak and hung it on a hook just inside the door. "You were allowed entry only because I stated that you were under my protection. It's a safeguard put in place by Albus. It's imperative that the safety of this stronghold never be breached. If I were put under the Imperius, or given Veritaserum, I might be *persuaded* to surrender the password. However, should anyone other than me, and now you, attempt to gain entry, even with the password, that person would be incinerated on the spot."

"Where are we, anyway?" Hermione asked as she removed her cloak and hung it on the hook next to Snape's.

"The Himalayas," Snape replied.

"Isn't that where the Abominable Snowman supposedly lives?" Hermione asked.

"When Albus was creating this place, he exploited the legend of the Yeti to keep the Muggles away."

Hermione smiled. "That sounds like Professor Dumbledore."

"Indeed. Now, we'd best get to work. We really do have a lot to do today. Follow me."

Snape moved down a short corridor and Hermione followed.

The corridor opened out into a large parlour that looked like it had been lifted from a country cottage and dropped into place here. It was simply furnished, but comfortable looking. There was even a fireplace.

"This is incredible!" Hermione exclaimed. "Is all this real? I mean, it's not just transfigured ice and rocks, is it?"

"No. Albus used a considerable amount of magic to enlarge the existing cave and configure the walls, ceilings, and floors, but the furnishings are real. He used Shrinking Charms on everything and transported the whole lot in a valise. He was quite proud of that and had no one but me to brag about it to. Needless to say, I had to listen to the story endlessly."

"He made this place for you?" Hermione asked.

"No, he made it for himself originally. He refurbished it for me."

Snape didn't elaborate, and Hermione didn't press him. She was surprised that he'd been as forthcoming as he had been.

"The lab is through here," Snape said as he pushed open one of the doors leading off the parlour.

"Later, I'll teach you the correct revealing charms to open the passageway. You'll be able to come on your own when I'm ..." Snape said.

"Don't even think that way," Hermione interrupted.

"I was going to say when I was otherwise engaged, but since only you and I know about this place, it will become yours by default upon my death. There's no point in letting

the place just sit. It is quite a pleasant retreat as well as a fully functional lab."

"I'm sure you'll be using it for many years to come," Hermione said.

"I'm not nearly as sanguine as you," Snape said without a trace of self pity. "Now, let's get to work."

The lab was as impressive as the parlour had been. There were various sized cauldrons stacked in the corner, stirring rods and beakers on the shelves against the wall, and sets of measuring spoons and scales at each of the three work stations. Another wall held a long bookshelf, and it was there Snape headed.

"We will each brew a batch of the Wolfsbane," Snape said as he pulled down a slim, battered-looking volume.

"You will work there," he said, pointing to one of the work stations. "I will work here."

He opened the book and placed it on the table between the two work areas.

"Read through the formula and instructions before you begin, and then collect the ingredients you need from the storeroom back there." He pointed to a door off the lab.

"What if I mess it up?" Hermione asked.

"I fully expect you will 'mess it up'," Snape replied. "It took me several attempts before I could brew it successfully. It's an incredibly difficult potion."

"Maybe I should just read the book and watch you make it the first time," she said.

"Since you knew the answer to my questions earlier, I'm sure you've already read the formula several times."

"Well, yes, but ..."

"As valuable as book learning and observation are, Miss Granger, you will only learn to brew by brewing."

"Now, begin."

"Yes, sir," Hermione said.

She leaned over the book and began reading, her brow furrowed in concentration, her bottom lip caught between her teeth.

Snape went to the pile of cauldrons in the corner and picked out two of them. He placed one at his work station and the other at Hermione's.

Hermione glanced up when he placed the cauldron over the holder.

"That's the wrong cauldron," she said.

"I've been brewing Wolfsbane for nearly ten years, Miss Granger," Snape said in a haughty tone. "I know which cauldron to use."

"I'm sure you do," Hermione replied, just as haughtily. "I can only assume, then, that you deliberately chose the wrong cauldron ... perhaps to test whether I would notice the error?"

Snape actually smiled, albeit fleetingly.

"I should have saved my back," Snape grumbled as he picked up the offending cauldron and returned it to the pile in the corner.

"Yes, you should have," Hermione agreed.

Once they began the actual brewing, they worked in near-silence. Because of his years of experience, Snape worked a little faster than Hermione did. This enabled him to keep a critical eye on her progress.

He knew the moment her potion went bad, three hours into the brewing, but he said nothing, waiting to see how long it would take her to recognise that the potion, which at this point was supposed to be barely thick enough to coat the back of a spoon, was now the consistency of honey and just as useless to a werewolf.

He was surprised when he realised that she had got much further along in the process than he himself had in his first attempt to brew it. He was also a bit impressed, though he'd certainly never admit *that* at least not to her.

Less than a minute after he'd determined that her potion was ruined, he saw her pick up the next carefully measured ingredient to add to her cauldron. For a brief moment, he thought about stopping her. Re'em blood was difficult to come by and very expensive.

Before he could act, however, she slammed the beaker down on the work counter.

"Bloody hell!"

"Problem, Miss Granger?" he asked as innocently as he could.

"I've cocked it up," she replied with a scowl.

"I noticed that."

She turned and glared at him. "Why didn't you say anything?"

"We learn from our mistakes. Now, tell me *how* you cocked it up."

Hermione ran her finger down the lines printed in the book, and then she leaned over the cauldron, her nose nearly touching the bubbling surface.

She pulled her head back out of the cauldron and turned to Snape. "I should have turned the flame down before I added the shredded eucalyptus leaf. It acted as a thickening agent," she concluded.

"Correct. I'm sure you'll remember next time. Dispose of that mess and clean out your cauldron before you begin again." He turned away.

Hermione cleared her throat, and when he turned back, she raised her hand.

"Another problem?"

"I need the loo."

"We're not in school any longer, Miss Granger. You don't need to ask my permission to use the toilet."

"I wouldn't have asked if I knew where it was," she said.

"It's through the bedroom," he said.

Hermione didn't move; she just stared at him.

Snape glared at her, but she didn't back down.

Snape sighed. "Come along, then. I'll show you where it is."

"Thank you."

She followed him back into the drawing room. He led her through another door. She tried not to be too obvious as she peered around the room, but he caught her out anyway.

"It's just a bedroom, Miss Granger. No branches for 'the great bat of the dungeons' to hang upside down from, and not a shred of green silk in sight."

Hermione flushed slightly. "I never believed any of those stupid rumours."

Snape looked at her and sighed again. "No, I don't suppose you did."

"Are you hungry?" he asked, changing the subject.

"Yes, I am, actually," she replied

"I'll go to the kitchen and find us something to eat. It's the only other door off the drawing room."

"I'll only be a few minutes."

Snape nodded, and then he turned and left the room.

After Snape left, Hermione did take a moment to examine the room a bit more. It was, as he'd said, just a bedroom. The bed was large and had an oak headboard. The bedside table, armoire, and dresser were a matching oak. The bed was made with a dark blue quilt and a carpet of a similar shade covered the floor.

She stepped into the bathroom. This room was very much in keeping with the simple homeliness of the bedroom and parlour one or two steps above utilitarian, but several steps below opulent.

When she walked into the kitchen several minutes later, Snape was standing in front of the stove stirring a pot.

"I found a tin of soup in the cupboard. There's cheese and crackers as well. I'm not much of a cook, but there are no house-elves here."

"Soup's fine," Hermione said. "I'm not much of a cook either."

"Sit. The soup is ready."

Hermione sat as Snape filled two bowls, carried them to the table, and set them down next to the two glasses of water already on the table.

When Snape sat down, he grimaced and shifted slightly on the chair. He was even paler than usual.

"Are you all right?" Hermione asked.

"I'm fine," he replied. "Eat your soup."

"I'm waiting for it to cool off, and you look like you're in pain."

"It's none of your business, Miss Granger," he snarled.

"Don't you have a pain-relieving potion here? What kind of potions master are you, anyway?"

"I'm a potions master who has a genetic resistance to pain relieving potion. And I reiterate it's none of your business!"

"No wonder you're so cranky all the time," Hermione said as she stood up. "I'll be right back."

When Hermione returned to the kitchen, she held out a small bottle.

"Here."

"What's that?" Snape asked. He made no effort to take the bottle.

"Ibuprofen."

"And what, pray tell, is ibuprofen?"

"It's an anti-inflammatory and a pain reliever. I take it when I have cramps. I don't like the potion Madam Pomfrey supplies."

"I assure you, I don't have cramps."

"Maybe you missed the 'pain-reliever' part?" Hermione asked.

"Don't get cheeky with me, Miss Granger."

"Or what? You'll assign me detention? I'm trying to help you, you miserable prat!"

"How dare you!" Snape roared as he jumped to his feet.

And in the next moment, he was clutching the edge of the table to keep from falling over as pain stabbed through him.

Hermione reached out a hand to steady him.

"Sit down before you fall down," she said as she held on to his arm.

Snape glared at her, but he eased himself back down into his chair.

"Won't you at least try the ibuprofen?" she asked. "It might help, and if it doesn't, you won't be any worse off, will you?"

Snape sighed. It was difficult to refute such logic. Besides, he was in enough pain to be willing to try just about anything. The bloody bastard had been particularly *playful* the previous night.

"Give me the bloody pills, then, so I can eat my lunch and get back to work."

Hermione opened the bottle and shook out four small, orange-coloured caplets.

"The usual dosage is just two," she said as she dropped them into Snape's palm. "I always start with three, though, and I'm not nearly as heavy as you are. You can safely take four to start and then take two every four to six hours thereafter."

"Thank you, Healer Granger," Snape said dryly as he tossed the pills back and picked up his glass of water.

"Now who's being cheeky?" Hermione asked as she slipped the bottle into the pocket of her jeans.

Snape made no reply, but Hermione thought she saw his lips twitch.

They talked about Hermione's failure with the Wolfsbane as they ate. When they were done eating, Hermione carried their empty bowls to the sink and ran water in them.

"Where's the detergent?" she asked as she bent down, looking under the sink.

"There are cleaning charms to do the washing up, you know," Snape said.

"I prefer soap and water."

Snape opened the cupboard over the sink. He reached inside and pulled out a small bottle of detergent.

"So do I," he said as he handed the bottle to her.

"Why do you keep it up there?" Hermione asked. "Most people store it under the sink."

"My mother used to keep it under the sink. Then one day the dog got into it because she hadn't closed the door properly. My father was displeased, to say the least. My mother moved everything overhead the next day. I got into the habit of keeping things overhead after that, as well."

"You had a dog?" Hermione asked with a surprised look.

"My father had a dog," Snape corrected her. He had picked up a towel and was drying the dishes as Hermione washed them.

"What's the difference? It was a family pet, wasn't it?"

"King was mean and aggressive, but he was slavishly devoted to my father. He wouldn't tolerate anyone else coming near him. And my father felt the same way about King."

Hermione flushed as she realised the implication of Snape's words.

She quickly changed the subject.

"I'm ready to try the Wolfsbane again."

"We should have enough time for two more attempts today," Snape said as he glanced at his watch.

"Maybe I won't need two more attempts," Hermione said in a teasing tone. She pulled the stopper from the sink to let the water drain.

"I wouldn't be surprised if you didn't," Snape replied as he finished wiping the last bowl and draped the towel over the edge of the counter to dry.

"Has your pain lessened?" Hermione asked as they made their way out of the kitchen.

It was Snape's turn to flush. It was humiliating to know that Granger was aware of his discomfort and its cause.

He scowled at her, ready to lash out if he saw the slightest hint that her question was prompted by a prurient interest in his sexual activities. He relented when he realised that her face showed only concern.

"The ibuprofen has helped," he conceded grudgingly.

"You can have that bottle then," she said.

"I wouldn't want you to be without your medication when you need it," he said as he held open the door to the lab to allow her to precede him in.

"I've just finished needing it," she said over her shoulder. "I have another bottle, and I can go to the chemist and get more if I have to."

"You shouldn't be leaving Grimmauld Place to go traipsing about."

"I don't go 'traipsing about'," she said as she turned to face him. "I go out only when it's necessary, and when I do go out, I use a glamour. I'm probably safer among Muggles than I am among wizards, anyway. I don't remember the last time I ran into a Death Eater at the chemist."

"You may be right. The Dark Lord has curtailed much of his anti-Muggle activity. He is concentrating his energy on overthrowing the Ministry and finding Potter."

Hermione took the bottle of ibuprofen tablets from her pocket and held it out. "That settles it then. Keep the bottle," she said. "Besides, you need them more than I do. It's only a few cramps, after all."

Still Snape hesitated. He hated the thought of being indebted to anyone.

As if she had read his mind, she spoke again.

"Please take them, Severus. It's just a few pills. I won't consider that you owe me a life-debt," she said.

And then she smiled at him, and any further protest died before he could voice it. Because he couldn't remember the last time anyone had smiled at him with such understanding and acceptance.

He couldn't even berate her for using his given name. Somehow, it seemed right and natural that she had and that he reciprocate.

"Thank you, Hermione," he said as he took the bottle of pills from her hand.

"You're welcome."

Her eyes held his as she spoke and Snape knew that in that moment, things had forever changed between them.

Hermione successfully completed the Wolfsbane on her second try after lunch. As she watched the potion change from muddy green to silvery grey, her smile grew wider and wider.

She turned and saw that Snape, while not exactly smiling, was at least looking a little less dour than usual.

"It's right, isn't it?" she asked.

"Why do you ask a question you already know the answer to?" Snape asked in a slightly chiding tone.

"Because you're the expert on Wolfsbane, and I want to be sure I've done it correctly."

"If you hadn't done it correctly, it wouldn't have changed colour, as you very well know. Now, decant it before it spoils, and all your hard work goes for naught. Lupin will have need of it in just a few days."

"You're going to give him the batch /made?"

"Yes, along with the two batches I brewed today. I've been making extra as time allows so that he can stockpile it."

"I thought Wolfsbane had a very short shelf life," Hermione said as she lined up the seven glass vials she needed to decant her batch of Wolfsbane.

"When Lupin was teaching at Hogwarts, he and I worked together to create a Stasis Charm that preserves the potion for up to a year. At that time, the Dark Lord had not returned, though we believed he soon would. We knew that once he did return, it might become difficult for me to continue to brew the Wolfsbane. Since there are very few brewers who are capable of producing such a difficult potion, we've been 'rotating the stock', so to speak, until you could master the brewing."

"Even back then you planned for me to learn how to do it?"

"Let's just say you were on our short list," Snape replied. "We had to wait until you joined the Order so that I could reveal my true allegiances and oversee your attempts. Now that you've been successful, I'll be able to turn my attention to other matters."

"I must also admit that I'm ... relieved ... that there's someone else with access to this place."

"You mean no one else knows about it?" Hermione asked as she fitted a funnel into the neck of the first vial and began ladling the potion in.

"Oh, Minerva is aware that it exists, but she doesn't know where it is or how to get past Hereward. You're the only person, other than me, who can actually get into the place. Should something happen to me, you'll need to bring someone else in."

"I hate it when you talk like that," Hermione snapped as she slammed the ladle down on the counter.

"This is war. People die in wars. I'm simply being a realist."

"Pessimist is more like it."

"I leave the optimism to all you starry-eyed Gryffindors," he retorted.

"It's a good thing I've enough for both of us, then," she said.

Snape merely snorted.

"What else are you working on?" Hermione asked as she continued filling the vials.

"A number of things, including a potion to allow a person to more easily resist the Imperius Curse."

"What's in it?"

"I trust I don't have to remind you not to say anything to anyone about this place or what goes on here?"

"Of course you don't. I can't imagine Voldemort would be very happy to discover that you're working to counteract one of his favourite curses."

"No, he wouldn't," Snape agreed.

They spent the next several minutes discussing the mind-strengthening properties of several of the ingredients that Snape had incorporated into his test potion.

Snape found it satisfying to have someone intelligent to discuss his work with.

Hermione finished filling the vials and began sealing them.

"Finished," Hermione said as she sealed the last one.

"I'm gratified that I no longer have to be concerned that Lupin's supply of Wolfsbane will be interrupted should something happen to me."

Hermione looked at him through narrowed eyes.

"You mean if Voldemort kills you."

Snape shrugged. "Voldemort, Lucius, Bellatrix, or any one of my fellow Death Eaters. And let's not forget that the Ministry has a price on my head, as well. The list of those who would see me dead is quite extensive."

"You needn't sound so pleased about it!" Hermione retorted.

"I'm not *pleased*; I am merely resigned. I'm a double agent; my status is always in jeopardy."

Before Hermione could think of a response, she saw him clutch his arm.

"I have to go," Snape said.

"He's summoning you?"

"Yes. I'd hoped for a brief respite, but as they say, 'there's no rest for the wicked'."

"You're not wicked," Hermione protested.

"We can argue the state of my soul at another time. I can't keep him waiting too long. Now that you know where you are, can you get yourself back to Grimmauld Place?"

"Yes."

"Don't try to Apparate until you're outside the wards," he warned.

He moved toward the door and took his cloak from its hook.

"Do I need to reset them as I leave?"

"No. As soon as Hereward sees that we've both gone, he'll take care of it."

"All right."

"When you get back, tell Molly or Arthur I've been summoned. They'll get a message to Minerva. I was supposed to meet with her tonight, but I doubt I'll be back before morning."

Hermione nodded.

"You can come back tomorrow and brew another batch. Lupin has a couple of friends he helps out when we're enough ahead."

"I'll wait for you," she said. "We can each brew a batch."

"Don't wait too long," he said. "Every time I'm summoned there's always a very real possibility that I won't return."

"I'll wait for you," she repeated stubbornly.

Snape rubbed his arm as the Mark burned again.

"I'll see you in the morning," she said as she looked into his eyes intently.

"I sincerely hope so," he replied.

He broke eye contact, opened the door, and hurried through.

Author's note: This story was written in response to the Post DH Challenge on The Petulant Poetess.

I chose prompt #5: Harry touches his scar; it hasn't pained him in 19 years. He hears hooting, rolls over in bed to see Hedwig sweeping in the open window at Privet Drive, and realizes that his 17th birthday isn't far off. Go for it... a new seventh year for the lot.

Additional Author's note: Hereward is an English name that means 'guardian'.

Chapter 6

Chapter 6 of 16

Book 7 -- The Way it Should Have Been. Harry, Ron, and Hermione don't return to Hogwarts for their seventh year. Instead, they join forces with the Order of the Phoenix to find Voldemort's Horcruxes and save the wizarding world. Members of the Order teach them how to fight. Along the way, Hermione realizes that her feelings for Ron have changed -- and so have her feelings for two other Order members.

Disclaimer: All characters and settings of Potterverse are the property of J.K. Rowling and other sundry entities. Only the plot belongs to me. I am making no money. I play in this universe for the sheer joy of it. My only payment is the kind reviews and comments of those who read and enjoy my tale. This story is canon-compliant through HBP. DH has, for the most part, been happily disregarded, especially that sappy epilogue!

Special thanks go to my beta reader, JuJuJenn. She makes sure I stay focused.

Six

It was well after midnight when Snape entered the kitchen at Grimmauld Place. He was exhausted; he hadn't slept at all the previous night and had now been awake for nearly forty hours. He was also in quite a lot of pain. The medication that Hermione had given him at his hideaway had worn off hours ago, and there'd been no opportunity to take more. There hadn't even been the opportunity to use the loo, and after swallowing four of the ibuprofen tablets with a small sip of water, he headed to the second floor and the bathroom there.

Voldemort had kept all of his followers standing for hours while he made an example of one of his lowlier minions who had been overheard complaining about having to stand overnight guard duty outside Borgin and Burkes. And while watching someone else being punished was infinitely preferable to being punished himself, he had never enjoyed the spectacles of pain and degradation as so many of his 'brothers' did.

By the time the quivering lump of flesh on the floor in front of them had finally died, he'd been hard-pressed to keep his stomach from rejecting what little food he'd managed to get into it that day.

Snape stripped out of his blood-spattered clothes and looked longingly at the shower. If he turned it on now, the clanging and banging of the old pipes would wake up the entire household, and he was too damned tired to talk to anyone. He sighed and settled for casting a quick cleansing charm on his hair and body. He donned the dressing gown that Molly kept hanging on the back of the door for him and padded down the hallway carrying his boots and dirty clothes.

He sat on the edge of his bed glanced at the bedside table. Most nights he could resist the siren call of the liquor. Oh, he had a glass of wine with dinner on occasion, or a small glass of cordial afterwards, but he stayed away from the hard stuff. He'd seen what the booze had done to his father, and he'd determined early on in his life that he would never become what Tobias Snape had. Yes, most nights he could resist but not tonight. He opened the drawer, pulled out the bottle of Firewhisky he kept there, and

unscrewed the cap. He didn't bother with a glass, but merely tipped the bottle up and swallowed. The liquor burned a fiery trail from his mouth to his stomach, and he felt its warmth begin to radiate outward. He recapped the bottle and returned it to the drawer. He never drank more than a mouthful.

He stood and removed his dressing gown. He slipped naked between the sheets and punched his pillow into a more comfortable configuration. He closed his eyes and thought about what he had learned that evening. There had never been a guard posted at Borgin and Burkes until very recently. He added this information to a remark Riddle had made to him the previous evening and knew that one of the bastard's Horcruxes probably Helga Hufflepuff's cup was now being kept at the Dark arts emporium. He would have to meet with Potter in the morning to formulate a plan to get in and find it.

He tried to think, but ibuprofen, Firewhisky, and utter exhaustion combined to drag him into sleep before he could come up with anything.

Hermione was sitting on the couch in the drawing room, one leg tucked up under her, and her head bent over the large book open on her lap. Harry and Ron were sprawled on the carpet in front of the fireplace. They also had books open, and Harry was actually reading his. Ron, however, was reading his dog-eared copy of *Quidditch Through the Ages*. Every few minutes he'd call Harry's name and read a passage from the book out loud.

"Listen to this," Ron said, interrupting Harry for the third time in twenty minutes.

Before he could continue, Harry spoke.

"Ron, you know I love Quidditch, but I really think we should be studying like Snape told us to." He returned his attention to his book.

Ron snorted softly. "Bloody waste of time," he muttered. But he closed his copy of *Quidditch Through the Ages* and stuck it into his back pocket.

Hermione shook her head and wondered if Ron would ever grow up.

They studied in silence for several minutes, and then the old pipes overhead began clanging.

Hermione closed her book and stood up.

"I'm going to make coffee," she said.

"Could you bring me some pumpkin juice?" Ron asked.

"I suppose," Hermione replied.

"And maybe some toast?" he added hopefully. "I'm starving."

Hermione rolled her eyes. Ron was *a/ways* starving!

"Come into the kitchen, then," she said. "I'll make the toast but I won't wait on you."

Ron closed his book and got to his feet. Harry stood as well and the three of them walked out of the drawing room.

When Snape entered the kitchen ten minutes later, he found Potter, Weasley, and Granger sitting around the battered old table sipping coffee and munching toast.

"The coffee's fresh, Professor Snape," Hermione said.

Snape nodded and moved to the counter to fill a mug.

"Toast?" Hermione held up a plate that held a single piece of buttered toast.

"Hey!" Ron said. "I was going to eat that."

"You've had four pieces already," Hermione said.

"It's all right, Miss Granger. I'm not hungry," Snape said.

Ron snatched the piece of toast from the plate Hermione still held and stuffed it into his mouth. He shot Snape a triumphant look.

In truth, Snape was hungry, but he wasn't about to get into a pissing match with Weasley over a piece of toast. He ignored the younger wizard's dark look.

Hermione glared at Ron, but he was oblivious.

Snape leaned against the counter and took a sip of his coffee.

"When you've all finished your breakfast, we have something to discuss," he said.

"What is it?" Harry asked, pushing his empty plate aside.

"I have reason to believe that one of the Horcruxes has been moved to Borgin and Burkes."

"Why would he put it there?" Ron asked.

"It doesn't matter *why* it's there, Ron," Harry said. "All that matters is finding it and destroying it."

"Today's Thursday," Ron said. "All the shops on Knockturn Alley close early on Friday. We can go in there, snatch the Horcrux, and be back ..."

"... in plenty of time to attend my funeral on Saturday morning," Snape said.

"What?"

"Honestly, Ron," Hermione said. "You're supposed to be the strategist. We can't just go barging in and grab it."

"Why not?" Ron asked.

"Do you think he might notice that it's missing?" Snape asked with exaggerated patience.

"Well, yeah."

"And just who do you think he would suspect of taking it?"

"Us, I guess."

"Since only he and I know about the Horcrux, and he's not here drinking coffee and eating toast, how long do you think it will take him to figure out ~~that~~ the one who passed on the information?"

Ron swallowed hard.

"I ... I didn't think of that."

"Obviously."

"So what do we do, then?" Ron asked.

"That's what we need to discuss," Snape said. "Although the Horcrux is being guarded, it is being guarded from outside Borgin and Burkes. And while I believe that the Horcrux we're looking for is in Helga Hufflepuff's cup, I don't know how we'll find it inside the store. I don't even know what the cup looks like."

"I know what it looks like," Harry said.

Snape arched a brow at him.

"It was in the memories that Dumbledore shared with me. Voldemort stole the cup from Hepzibah Smith while he was working at Borgin and Burkes."

"We could make a duplicate cup and switch it for the real one," Hermione said.

"That's what Regulus Black did with the locket," Harry added.

"I hope you were paying attention in Minerva's classes," Snape said as he put his empty coffee mug down on the table in front of Harry.

"Me, too," Harry said as he drew his wand.

Harry made several attempts to transfigure the mug into a duplicate of the gold, two-handled cup he'd seen in Hokey's memories, but none of them seemed quite right to him.

"And if it doesn't look right to me," Harry said in a resigned tone, "it certainly won't fool Voldemort."

"Is it your memory of the cup that's hazy?" Snape asked.

"My memory is fine; it's my Transfiguration that's pants," Harry replied. "I can't seem to get all the fussy little details right."

"Miss Granger's Transfiguration skills are somewhat more refined than yours. Perhaps you should let her try to recreate the cup."

"I don't know what it looks like," Hermione protested.

"Look into his mind and find out," Snape said. "This is an excellent opportunity to practice your Legilimency skills, as well."

"I'll try not to block you," Harry said with a smile.

Hermione smiled back and drew her wand.

"Potter, open your mind and bring the image of the cup to the forefront of your conscious thought," Snape instructed. "And you, Miss Granger, should concentrate on finding that image, while at the same time being careful not to push too forcefully. Since he won't be trying to keep you out, you could easily overwhelm him."

Harry and Hermione both nodded.

Hermione pointed her wand at Harry. "*Legilimens*," she said.

Because Harry wasn't trying to block her intrusion into his mind, she found the memory quickly. She studied the cup as it rested in its velvet-lined box, and she watched as Harry relived the memory of Tom Riddle turning the cup over and over in his hands before he reluctantly gave it back to Hepzibah Smith.

She withdrew from Harry's mind, turned, and aimed her wand at Snape's erstwhile coffee mug.

"Do you have it?" Ron asked. "Can you do it?"

"Quiet, fool!" Snape hissed as he saw the look of intense concentration on Hermione's face.

Ron glared at Snape, but rather than comment, he jumped to his feet and moved to the counter to pour himself another cup of pumpkin juice. He peered into the toaster and scowled when he discovered it was empty. He opened a cupboard and began rummaging around.

Hermione meanwhile, was muttering under her breath, her brows drawn together intently. A moment later, the transfigured coffee mug was once again shifting shape, but subtly this time a ridge added here, a curlicue subtracted there.

When she lowered her wand, she turned to Harry.

"Well?"

"That's it, Hermione!" Harry exclaimed. "You did it!"

Snape picked up the transfigured cup and examined it.

"I've never seen Helga Hufflepuff's cup, but this certainly appears to be something that could easily be of that era," he said.

"We don't need to duplicate the box, do we?" Hermione asked.

Harry shook his head.

"Now all we have to do is get into Borgin and Burkes, find the original cup, and make the switch," Hermione said.

"And then figure out how to destroy the Horcrux inside," Harry added.

Getting into the Dark arts emporium turned out to be easier than any of them expected.

As Ron had stated, the shops on Knockturn Alley closed early on Friday night. The only activity on the street had been at the Underbelly, a tavern located at the end of Knockturn Alley closest to Gringotts. The Underbelly was a favourite Death Eater gathering place, and Snape had made sure at least three people had seen him there within the last hour or at least they'd say they'd seen him there. And should he ever be questioned, the man guarding the back door to Borgin and Burkes would state just

as emphatically that he *hadn't* seen Snape anywhere near the place. The Imperius was such a useful tool, especially when combined with a Confundus Charm and a Memory Charm.

It was a little before midnight when Snape Apparated into a shadowed alcove behind Borgin and Burkes.

One minute after he arrived, he heard the distinctive sound of an owl's hoot.

"Who ... whoo." There was a short pause, then, "Whoo."

The Golden Trio had arrived, hidden under Potter's invisibility cloak.

Snape lifted his hands in a casual gesture and adjusted his cloak slightly. This was the pre-arranged signal to let them know he was aware of their presence.

He stepped out of the alcove's concealing shadows and approached the man guarding the door.

"Snape," the man said. "What the hell are you doing here?"

"I just came to see how you're doing, Farrell," Snape replied.

Farrell shifted nervously from foot to foot.

"He doesn't want to see me, does he?"

If Voldemort wanted to see him, that could only be bad news. The image of his predecessor's twitching body and the sound of his screams rose in the man's mind.

"No, he doesn't want to see you."

The man breathed a sigh of relief.

"Is the door secure?" Snape asked.

"Of course," Farrell replied. He turned to rattle the doorknob and didn't see Snape raise his wand.

"*Imperio*," Snape whispered.

Five minutes later, Farrell was conveniently looking the other way as Harry, Ron, and Hermione walked past him and through the now-open back door of Borgin and Burkes.

"We have approximately four hours before Farrell's replacement is scheduled to arrive. I want to be out of here in three," Snape said a few minutes later as he watched the three of them slip out from under the invisibility cloak.

"How will we find it?" Hermione whispered as she looked around the crowded shop.

"He'll have put it someplace pretty easy to get to, but not out in the open where a customer might see it and think it was for sale," Harry said.

"Look behind other things on the shelves closest to the floor," Ron offered. "No one gets down on their hands and knees to look for stuff there."

"Check the storage areas under the display cases, as well," Snape said.

Two hours later, they had checked every dusty shelf and every drawer under the glass display counters, but they had not found Helga Hufflepuff's cup.

"I don't know where else to look," Harry said as he rubbed his dirty hands on his jeans.

"It's here; I know it is," Snape said in an irritated tone. "We're simply not looking in the right place."

"We've looked everywhere," Ron said.

"What about in there?" Snape asked as he pointed to an ornately carved dresser. The top of the dresser was crowded with silver candlesticks, porcelain spittoons, and ugly china figurines.

"There's nothing in those drawers but some mouldy old table linens and an ancient silverware box," Ron said.

"Did you look in the box, Ron?" Harry asked. "The cup was stored in a velvet-lined box."

"No one said anything about a box," Ron said.

"We most certainly did!" Hermione snapped. "You were too busy drinking pumpkin juice and looking for food to pay attention to what we were saying."

"I would've remembered if you talked about a box."

"Honestly, Ron ..."

"Enough!" Snape hissed as he strode over to the dresser.

"Weasley, which drawer?"

"The bottom one," Ron replied. "On the left."

Snape pulled the drawer open and peered down into its depths, lighting the tip of his wand to better examine the contents. He pushed aside a pile of yellowed linen napkins to expose a battered-looking mahogany box.

"I think that's it!" Harry said as he and the others moved to stand next to Snape. "See that round dent near the edge? And the little nicks on each side of it? When I saw them in the Pensieve memory, I remember thinking that they looked like a Snitch in flight."

Snape gave a soft snort. Trust Potter to see everything in Quidditch terms.

"I saw that in your memory as well," Hermione added. "I don't think it looks like a Snitch, though."

"I don't care if it looks like Merlin's athletic supporter," Snape hissed. "Is this it or not?"

"Yes," Harry replied.

Snape waved his wand over the box, murmuring softly under his breath.

"There doesn't appear to be a warning charm on the box," he said.

Harry closed his eyes for a moment.

"He doesn't know we're anywhere near it," Harry said. "Besides, he doesn't believe anyone can get close to it at least not anyone who knows what it is."

"Regulus Black managed to switch the locket without alerting him," Hermione commented.

"True," Snape conceded. "Very well, let's get it done."

He reached into the drawer, lifted the box out, and set it on the floor near the dresser.

He slowly opened the lid of the box.

A moment later the four of them were staring down at Helga Hufflepuff's cup.

Snape used his wand again to check the cup itself for any warning charms or protective spells.

He detected nothing.

Harry reached down and grasped one of the cup's finely wrought handles.

"Ready, Hermione?" Harry asked.

Hermione had the duplicate cup in her hand.

"Ready."

Harry lifted the Hufflepuff cup from its velvet nest, and Hermione fitted the duplicate into place. It was done in less than three seconds.

Snape closed the lid of the wooden case and put it back into the drawer. He moved the linen napkins so that they were once again covering the box, and then he pushed the drawer shut and stood up.

"You three get back under the invisibility cloak. As soon as we step outside, Apparate back to Grimmauld Place. I'll make sure that Farrell remembers what an uneventful watch he had."

"Be careful, sir," Hermione said.

"What are you, his mother?" Ron muttered.

Hermione turned on Ron. "If you were the one going out every day and putting your life on the line, I'd even tell *you* to be careful!"

Snape held up a hand and spoke before Ron could reply.

"As much as I appreciate your concern, Miss Granger, I'm quite capable of taking care of myself. If I don't make it back to Headquarters tonight, I'll be there by eleven. We have much more work to do at my lab."

"I'll be ready," Hermione replied.

"I've no doubt of that," Snape said. "Now, get under the cloak and prepare to leave."

Harry shook out the cloak and the three of them huddled under it. They were adults now, and the cloak didn't cover them as completely as it had when they were first-years, but they shuffled out the door that Snape was holding open.

"Snape," Farrell said. "What the hell are you doing here?"

Harry, Ron, and Hermione were gone before they heard Snape's response.

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Chapter 7

Chapter 7 of 16

Book 7 -- The Way it Should Have Been. Harry, Ron, and Hermione don't return to Hogwarts for their seventh year. Instead, they join forces with the Order of the Phoenix to find Voldemort's Horcruxes and save the wizarding world. Members of the Order teach them how to fight. Along the way, Hermione realizes that her feelings for Ron have changed -- and so have her feelings for two other Order members.

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Seven

Harry, Ron, Hermione and Snape stood in a circle peering down at Helga Hufflepuff's cup, which rested at the bottom of a battered old cauldron.

They were in the back garden of Grimmauld Place. A cool breeze was blowing through the hedges that surrounded the property.

"Oh, I wish there were another way to do this," Hermione said.

"We have no choice," Harry said. "The only way to get rid of the Horcrux is to destroy the cup. Just like I had to destroy the diary, and Professor Dumbledore had to destroy the ring."

"I know, but that doesn't mean I have to like it."

"It's just an old cup," Ron said.

Snape snorted. "Even the Dark Lord appreciated the significance of the vessels he chose to house his soul-parts."

"I don't get it."

"It's a piece of Hogwarts' history, Ron! Helga Hufflepuff was one of the Founders. The locket belonged to Salazar Slytherin, another one of the Founders. Hogwarts was important to You-Know-Who."

"Indeed," Snape said. "It wouldn't surprise me to learn that other Horcruxes are in items that belonged to Rowena Ravenclaw or Godric Gryffindor."

"Maybe it's time to do some research and see if anything that once belonged to either of them has gone missing," Harry said.

Snape arched an expressive brow. "That's actually an excellent suggestion, Potter."

"Don't look so surprised," Harry muttered, and Snape actually smiled.

A moment later, Harry and Hermione were smiling as well.

Ron just scowled. He was the only one who failed to find any humour in the exchange.

"We should get on with it," Snape said a moment later. "Are you ready, Potter?"

"Yes."

"Weasley? Miss Granger?"

"Ready," they said together.

"I'll cast the containment spell. It will allow your spells to pass through, but will prevent the protective curse surrounding the Horcrux from escaping. You'll need to act quickly. I'm sure the protective curse is very strong. I don't know how long I'll be able to hold the containment spell."

Harry, Ron and Hermione raised their wands and pointed them at the cup.

Snape raised his own wand.

"*Impervio externus*," Snape said.

A line of shimmering pale-orange light left his wand and stretched over the top of the cauldron like a piece of cellophane wrap.

"Now!" Snape shouted.

"*Annihilio!*" Harry, Ron and Hermione spoke together. Shafts of brilliant purple light shot from each of their wands. They passed through the protective barrier over the top of the cauldron and met at the very centre of the gold cup.

At first, it seemed that the cup had absorbed the energy of the three spells and remained unaffected. Then the cup began to glow. It seemed to swell and throb from within. They could hear a low-pitched humming which quickly escalated to a high pitched whine.

Suddenly the cup exploded fragments melted against the sides of the cauldron and flew up against the barrier. The shaft of purple light faded and the connection between the cup and the three wands was broken.

A black cloud rose from the bottom of the cauldron. It pressed against the protective barrier while inhuman screams issued from its smoky depths.

Hermione watched anxiously as the protective barrier pulsed and bulged. It stretched like an over-inflated balloon, and it seemed impossible that it would not burst, releasing the deadly curse upon all of them.

She could see sweat trickling down the side of Snape's face as his brow furrowed in even deeper concentration, and his grip on his wand tightened.

As though sensing that the barrier holding it was weakening, the black cloud seemed to swell and pulse even more. The screams increased in volume and pitch.

"We have to help him," Hermione said. She raised her wand and pointed it at the bulging barrier.

"*Impervio externus!*" she cried out, and another layer of pale-orange light dropped across the barrier, thickening and reinforcing it.

"*Impervio externus*," Harry said as he turned his wand against the swollen orange membrane.

The screams from within were muffled as the barrier thickened again.

Ron lifted his wand, but before he could cast the spell, the black cloud within the barrier began to dissipate. It seemed to lighten and melt as the screams faded.

A few moments later, the bulging membrane had shrunk back down, and there were no sounds at all coming from within the cauldron.

"Is it ... dead?" Hermione asked.

"With the barrier in place, there was no place for the Horcrux to go when the cup was destroyed. It simply ceased to exist. And with the Horcrux gone, there was nothing for the curse to protect. I believe it is neutralised, as well," Snape said.

"We will, however, take precautions before we remove the barrier completely.

"Potter, you'll need to lift your spell first," Snape said. "But be prepared to cast it again should that become necessary."

"Yes, sir," Harry replied.

Harry dropped his wand and broke the connection, but he immediately raised it again and aimed it at the barrier.

There was no reaction from within the cauldron.

"Now you, Hermione," Snape said.

Ron's head jerked up when he heard Snape use Hermione's first name. No one else seemed to realise what had happened.

Hermione dropped her wand, but as Harry had done, she immediately raised it again, ready to re-cast the spell if need be.

Again, there was no reaction from within the cauldron.

Snape dropped his wand, breaking the final connection.

The orange barrier disappeared. Harry and Ron immediately pushed forward, but Snape held up a hand to halt them.

"Your impetuosity may kill you yet, Potter, but it won't be on my watch. Stand back."

Harry threw a Snape-worthy glare at the older wizard, but he stepped back. He took Ron's arm and pulled him back as well.

Snape leaned over the cauldron, his nose nearly touching the rim. He pointed his wand into the cauldron's centre.

"*Revelato*," he said.

Whatever he saw in the cauldron reassured him. He straightened up and lowered his wand.

"Now you may see what you have wrought," he said as he stepped away from the cauldron.

Harry, Hermione and Ron stepped up to the cauldron and leaned in.

Small lumps of melted gold were stuck to the sides and bottom of the cauldron and were covered in what appeared to be a thin layer of black dust.

"Is that the curse?" Ron asked as he reached into the cauldron.

"No!" Hermione and Harry both shouted at once. Hermione grabbed Ron's arm, pulling him away from the cauldron.

"Were you born a fool or do you have to work at it?" Snape hissed.

"You said it was neutralised," Ron said.

Snape just shook his head. He whirled back toward the cauldron, aimed his wand at it, and muttered an incantation.

The cauldron disappeared.

"That doesn't mean it was safe to touch it, Ron," Hermione said. "There might have been some lingering, unpleasant effects in the dust."

"How was I supposed to know that?" he asked in a sulky tone.

"Have you ever actually *read* any of the books I've assigned you?" Snape asked.

Ron flushed. "Well, yeah, sure I have," he said, but he wouldn't meet Snape's eyes.

Snape curled his lip in disgust.

"You still seem to regard this as some sort of adventure a lark. This isn't a game; this is *war*, you stupid fool. You need to know how to defend and protect yourself and those around you. As things stand, you're more of a liability than an asset."

"I can take care of myself," Ron retorted.

"Against well-trained and powerful Death Eaters?" Snape scoffed. "I doubt you'd last two minutes defending yourself, never mind the others."

"I know I wouldn't want to have to depend upon your skills to save my life," he added.

"Not sure I'd want to save it anyway," Ron muttered.

Hermione gasped, and even Harry looked shocked by Ron's remark.

Snape's grip on his wand tightened, but he didn't raise it.

"You are fortunate that my desire to see the Dark Lord fall and my Vow to the Order are more important to me than proving to you just how inadequate your skills really are," he said.

"Anytime," Ron said in a belligerent tone.

"I don't have time to listen to your foolish braggadocio," Snape said.

"You're just afraid I might beat you," Ron said.

"Oh, yes," Snape said derisively, "I'm shaking in my boots."

Ron flushed again.

Snape waved his free hand in a dismissive gesture and then turned away from Ron and addressed Hermione.

"I have an important meeting this afternoon. Go to the lab and take care of the potion we started yesterday. It's rested long enough."

"Yes, sir," Hermione replied.

"Potter, take your friend inside and try to teach him something useful."

Snape stepped back and prepared to Apparate away.

Ron moved as though to follow him, and Harry grabbed his arm.

"Let him go, Ron," Harry said.

"Someday I'm going to give that greasy git exactly what he deserves," Ron said.

"Why don't we concentrate on getting rid of Voldemort first?" Harry said reasonably.

Harry and Hermione began walking toward the back door of Grimmauld Place.

Ron looked over and watched as Snape silently Apparated away.

"Someday," he muttered. Then he turned and followed Harry and Hermione into the house.

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Chapter 8

Chapter 8 of 16

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Eight

The next few weeks passed swiftly.

There were strategy meetings nearly every day, usually in the morning. Snape would discuss any new information he had gleaned with Harry, Ron, Hermione, and whoever else was able to attend. At least three days a week, after the meetings, Hermione and Snape would leave Grimmauld Place and Apparate to his hidden laboratory. Before he left, Snape would give Harry and Ron a reading assignment or a list of spells and charms to practice.

Without Hermione's help, it took them a lot longer to get through their work, and Ron still needed to be nagged on a fairly regular basis. Although he wasn't as good at nagging as Hermione was, Harry managed to keep Ron more or less on track.

Then something happened that made Ron realise the importance of what Snape was trying to teach them. Afterwards, he reluctantly relegated his copy of *Quidditch Through the Ages* to his dresser drawer and began to concentrate instead on *Dark*, *Darker*, *Darkest* and *Calamitous Curses*.

On a Tuesday morning, about ten days before Christmas, Harry, Ron and Hermione were sitting at the kitchen table drinking coffee and talking about how different the upcoming holiday would be compared to past Christmases spent at Hogwarts.

A loud thumping at the back door had them reaching for their wands as they jumped to their feet.

Before they could reach the door, it swung open.

A figure stood in the doorway, backlit by the bright morning sun behind him.

"Snape," the figure croaked. "Get Snape."

And then he collapsed in a heap at their feet.

Hermione was the first to realise who their unexpected visitor was and to react.

"It's Remus!" she cried as she knelt by his head. She brushed his grey-streaked hair back off his forehead, revealing his bloodied face.

"He's badly hurt. Harry, go get Professor Snape. Ron, get the Dittany and some bandages from the first aid kit over the sink. I'll see if I can clear off some of this blood and find out where it's coming from."

She touched her wand to his face. "*Tergeo*."

By the time Harry and Snape entered the kitchen a couple of minutes later, Hermione had cleaned the numerous slashes and gouges on Remus's face and neck. She had banished his torn and bloody robes and shirt, and was working her way down his torso with her wand, cleaning him up as she went. Ron was sprinkling the many wounds with the Dittany.

"I'm trying to determine the extent of his injuries," she said to Snape as he knelt beside her on the floor.

"You're doing exactly the right thing, but we should move him to his bedroom," Snape said. "This floor is very cold, and he appears to be in shock."

"Potter, go light the fire in his room. Weasley, find some extra blankets and bring the first aid kit upstairs with you."

Harry and Ron hurried off to follow Snape's orders.

Hermione cast a Warming Charm over Remus, and Snape cast a Mobilicorpus. Together they guided the unconscious wizard through the kitchen door and up the stairs.

They settled him on his bed. Hermione reached for the pile of blankets that Ron had brought in, but Snape stopped her.

"Finish your assessment and treatment first," he said. "The Warming Charm will be sufficient for a few minutes."

Hermione nodded and closed a particularly nasty gash along his right rib cage. She hesitated as she approached the waistband of his trousers.

"No time for false modesty, Miss Granger," Snape said. "I'm sure you're no simpering maiden."

Hermione flushed slightly, but she spoke the incantation that banished Remus's trousers along with his boots and socks.

"There's where most of his blood loss originates," Snape said as he pointed to the inside of Remus's left thigh. "See that slice? It looks like it nicked his femoral artery. Another couple of centimetres and he'd have bled to death before he ever made it back here."

"Do you want to cast a cauterising spell?" Hermione asked. "I've never done one."

"Well, now you will have," Snape replied. "I'll step in if you run into trouble."

Hermione swallowed hard and furrowed her brow in concentration as she cast the spell.

She breathed a sigh of relief when the seeping blood slowed to a trickle and then stopped.

"Dittany," she said as she held her hand out. Snape dropped the canister into her palm, and she sprinkled it over the gaping wound.

She raised her wand to cast a healing spell, but Snape stopped her.

"We'll wrap it well, but leave it open for a few days so we can continue to treat it with the Dittany. It's deep and it's got dirty. It'll need to be cleaned twice a day to prevent infection."

"Is he going to be all right?" Harry asked.

"The moon was full on Sunday night," Snape said. "Even with the Wolfsbane, the transformation weakens him and lowers his resistance to infection. All we can do is keep the wounds clean and treat any complications that arise."

"What happened to him, anyway?" Ron added.

"What happened to him? I would say that his true allegiances were discovered. He was either tortured to elicit information, or as punishment for his duplicity." Snape paused for a moment before he continued speaking.

"We'll need to examine his genitals. Greyback has a special fondness for castration."

"There's not much blood on his underpants," Hermione said. "And most of that looks like spatter from his other wounds."

"If Greyback castrated him, he would have healed the wound. He doesn't usually use it to kill."

Harry nodded grimly. Hermione blinked back tears. Ron looked sick.

"Why does he do it, then?" Ron asked.

"Intimidation," Harry said before Snape could answer.

"Just so," Snape replied. "There aren't many men who would risk defying Greyback's authority knowing what will happen to them should they fail in their attempt to overthrow him."

"Since Lupin's mission was to infiltrate Greyback's pack, he wouldn't have defied him. He was either betrayed or he got careless."

"Remus wouldn't have got careless," Hermione said emphatically.

Snape sighed. "No, I don't believe he would have. But it doesn't really matter either way. He's now a marked man. If he survives, he'll have to remain hidden until this whole thing is settled one way or another."

"He'll survive; we won't let him die," Hermione said.

"If he's been castrated, he may well wish he *had* died," Snape replied.

"We ... we should ... check," Hermione stammered out.

Snape reached down and pulled the sheet up over Remus.

"I'll do it," he said in, what was for him, an almost kindly tone. "Go to the storage cupboard and get antibiotic potions. There are at least three different formulae; get a few of each. We'll use a shotgun approach. Get the Fever Reducing Potion and a few vials of Blood Replenishing Potion, as well. He's going to need all of them."

"I'll be right back," Hermione said and left the room to get the potions.

When he heard her feet on the stairs, Snape reached for the sheet.

"Isn't there something you want us to do?" Ron asked before Snape could cast the charm that would remove Remus's underpants.

"Squeamish, Weasley?" Snape asked.

Ron tried to brazen it out. "I just don't think Remus would appreciate all of us staring at his balls."

"You'll see a lot worse before this war is over," Snape said with certainty.

"Yeah, well, I can wait," Ron mumbled.

Snape gave a soft snort before he spoke.

"Go send messages to Minerva and to Moody. Lupin will have missed his check-in, and they'll be concerned. Don't trust sensitive information to owls or to the Floo; arrange for face-to-face meetings with them to let them know he's here."

"We wouldn't have used owls; we're not stupid, you know," Ron snarled.

"No, just lazy and careless," Snape snarled back.

Ron moved toward Snape, but Harry stepped between the two of them.

"Would you two stop it?" he said in an exasperated tone. "This isn't helping Remus."

Knowing that Harry was right, Ron let the argument drop. He turned and moved toward the door.

"We'll be back to check on him as soon as we talk to the others," Harry said to Snape.

Snape nodded, and Harry followed Ron out of the room.

When Hermione returned upstairs, Snape was standing outside the bedroom, a thoughtful expression on his face. She put the vials down on the bedside table and then joined him.

"Is he ... all right?" Hermione asked in a near-whisper. "I mean, I know he's seriously injured but he wasn't ... wasn't ..."

"No," Snape replied. "He apparently escaped before Greyback could do further damage."

"Did you find his wand?"

"No."

"He was surprised, then, and disarmed. Probably outnumbered, as well."

"Most of his wounds aren't from curses or hexes," Hermione said. "They're too ragged and too dirty. He was beaten, wasn't he?"

"Yes, and kicked as well, from the looks of it. The gash on his leg, however, was the result of a Slicing Hex and was probably intended for his scrotum. When he touched his Portkey, he was jerked away and the curse sliced his leg open instead."

"He should have used his Portkey sooner," he added.

"He probably thought he could talk his way out of trouble, so he waited," Hermione said.

"He nearly waited too long."

"He wouldn't have wanted to compromise his mission. He knew that as soon as he escaped, he'd be exposed as a spy. He wanted to do his duty to the Order."

"Getting himself killed or castrated wouldn't have done a bloody thing for the Order," Snape said.

"Perhaps not, but he wouldn't have been able to live with himself if he'd simply run away. He had to try."

"He may yet not be able to live with himself," Snape said as he looked past her toward the bed.

"What?"

"He's going into convulsions," Snape said as he rushed to the bed. "His temperature is dangerously high."

Hermione pointed her wand at the room's only window. The glass disappeared, and a blast of icy air rushed in. Next she soaked a blanket in the bucket of water she conjured and draped the sodden cloth over Remus. Lastly, she extinguished the fire in the grate. The room was immediately much cooler.

"We need to get these potions into him quickly," Snape said.

"How?" Hermione asked. "He's unconscious; he can't swallow."

"We'll have to resort to drastic measures," Snape said.

He waved his wand over Remus and muttered an incantation.

Remus's body immediately relaxed completely.

"We have to work fast," Snape said. "This spell suppresses all bodily functions including the autonomic ones."

"He's not breathing?"

"No, and neither is his heart beating. We've less than four minutes to get the potions into him and lift the spell before he suffers irreversible brain damage."

"What do you need me to do?" Hermione asked.

"Pull his head back and open his mouth," Snape instructed as he rummaged through one of the dresser drawers.

Hermione climbed onto the bed and pulled Remus's head onto her lap. She tilted his head back and levered his mouth open.

Snape transfigured the leather belt he'd pulled out of the drawer into a length of flexible rubber tubing, larger at one end than the other.

He leaned over Remus and threaded the tubing down the unconscious wizard's throat.

Holding the tube in place with one hand, he used his other to uncork one of the vials on the bedside table. He poured the contents of the vial down the tube. He followed the first vial with four others.

As soon as the last vial was empty, Snape carefully pulled the tube out of Remus's throat.

"*Finite Incantatem*," Snape murmured as soon as the tube was clear.

Nothing happened.

"He's still not breathing," Hermione said. She put her hand over his heart. "And his heart's not beating."

"He was too weak, his injuries too severe," Snape said.

"We can't just let him die!" Hermione cried.

"He's already dead," Snape said.

"No!"

Hermione pushed Remus's head off her lap and then turned to kneel beside him. She leaned over him, closing her mouth over his, and breathed into him deeply. She did this twice and then placed her hands on his chest and began pushing.

As soon as Snape realised what Hermione was doing, he reacted.

He pushed Hermione's hands aside. "I'll do the compressions; you do the breathing."

They worked in tandem for what seemed like an hour, but was probably only two or three minutes.

Then Remus gave a strangled gasp and began thrashing around.

"He's breathing on his own," Hermione said.

"Yes, and his heart's beating."

"Will he be all right now?" she asked as she climbed off the bed. She used her wand to dry her sodden clothes.

"We won't know if he suffered any brain damage until he regains consciousness if he does," Snape replied. "But one of the potions is already working. Look, he's sweating; the fever is breaking."

"We'd better dry him off and cover him up," Hermione said.

"And repair that open window," Snape added. "It's freezing in here."

They worked together and in just a few minutes the window was repaired, the fire was once again blazing in the hearth, and Remus was dressed in dry pyjamas and lay on dry sheets with a light blanket covering him.

Hermione leaned over Remus and touched his forehead. It was cool and dry.

"How did you know about CPR?" Hermione asked as she straightened.

"How did you?" he countered.

"I saw it on the telly," she replied.

"So did I."

"You had a telly?"

"My father was a Muggle. I grew up in a Muggle home until I left for Hogwarts, and I returned to that Muggle home during holidays. Of course we had a telly."

"You've always seemed so completely immersed in the wizarding world it's easy to forget that you're part Muggle," Hermione said as she sat down in the room's only chair, which she had pulled close to the head of the bed.

"I've never forgotten."

"No, I don't suppose it's something you could forget."

Snape rubbed his forearm as he felt the burn of his Dark Mark.

"I have to leave. I should be back before he needs another dose of the potions."

"When will he need them?" Hermione asked. She kept patting Remus's hand and adjusting the sheet that covered him.

"In about four hours. He's too weak to go through another episode like this, however. If we stop his heart once more, I'm doubtful we'd be able to get it going again, even with CPR."

"What will we do if he hasn't regained consciousness by then?" Hermione asked.

"We'll try a *Renervate*," Snape replied. "If that doesn't work ..."

He let his voice trail off.

"We've done all we can do for him at this point. It's up to him now," he concluded.

Hermione nodded. Tears hovered on her lower lashes, but she blinked them back.

"He's strong. He'll fight to live, I know he will."

"I have to leave," Snape repeated. "The Dark Lord won't be pleased with me if I'm late."

Hermione jumped to her feet and rushed to stand in front of him.

"Will you be punished?" she asked. She reached up and clutched the front of his robes.

Snape put his hands over hers and gently pried her fingers away.

He didn't release her hands, however, and Hermione's fingers curled around his.

"He will have heard about Lupin by now and will have assumed that he came here. He will expect that I've had to tend to him. He'll want to know his status."

"What will you tell him?"

"That Lupin died from his injuries. I'm sure the Order will even have a small memorial service for their fallen comrade."

"Being dead is the best protection he can have at the moment, isn't it?"

"Yes," Snape replied. "No one will be looking for a dead man."

"Let's hope he only has to pretend he's dead," Hermione said.

"Indeed. Now, I really must leave."

It was only as he turned to go that he realised he was still holding Hermione's hands. He tried to pull his hands free, but Hermione held on.

"Be careful, Severus," she said as she looked into his eyes.

"I'm always careful. If I weren't, I'd have been killed long ago."

He tugged on his hands again, and again she held on.

"Be extra careful, then," she said. "I couldn't bear it if something happened to you."

She lifted his hands to her lips and kissed his knuckles, but her eyes never left his.

Snape felt like he was drowning. It was as if all of the air in room had suddenly been sucked out, and he couldn't draw breath. Without even realising he was doing it, his hands cupped her face, his thumb stroking the softness of her cheek.

He saw her lips part in silent invitation and for one brief second, he leaned toward her.

The burn of the Dark Mark on his arm brought him painfully back to reality.

His breath hitched, and he dropped his hands from her face as though her skin were burning him more cruelly than the Dark Mark ever had. He pushed her away and stepped back.

"Severus?"

"This can't happen," he whispered harshly.

He clutched his arm as his Dark Mark burned again.

"Go before he has an excuse to punish you," Hermione said. "We'll discuss this later."

"There's nothing to discuss! Didn't you hear me?" He was shouting now. "*This will not* happen!"

He turned and walked away, his boot heels clattering uncharacteristically loudly as he descended the stairs.

Hermione wanted to follow him, but knew that his summons from the Dark Lord had to take precedence. Besides, by the time she made it down the stairs he would be gone.

He might think there was nothing to discuss, but Hermione knew better. He said nothing would happen between them, but Hermione knew it already had.

She sighed and turned back into the bedroom to tend to Remus.

Chapter 9

Chapter 9 of 16

Book 7 -- The Way it Should Have Been. Harry, Ron, and Hermione don't return to Hogwarts for their seventh year. Instead, they join forces with the Order of the Phoenix to find Voldemort's Horcruxes and save the wizarding world. Members of the Order teach them how to fight. Along the way, Hermione realizes that her feelings for Ron have changed -- and so have her feelings for two other Order members.

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Special thanks go to my beta reader, JuJuJenn. She makes sure I stay focused.

Nine

Although Snape knew that his master was waiting, he took a moment outside Grimmauld Place to compose his thoughts before he Apparated away.

In spite of his dour looks and acerbic attitude, Snape had been the object of his share of student crushes over the years. It was something every teacher had to learn to deal with. It usually only took a few humiliating comments about the girl's (or, occasionally, boy's) lack of intellect, maturity, and desirability to turn even the most ardent student's infatuation into smouldering hatred, which was much easier to deal with. Yes, he understood that students sometimes fancied themselves in love, or at least in lust.

What he could not understand was his own reaction. Never, in all the years he had taught, had he ever felt the slightest bit of sexual interest in any of his students.

Technically, Granger was no longer his student. She was not currently enrolled in Hogwarts, and even if she were, he was no longer on staff there. This rationalisation did nothing to lessen the scorching shame of knowing he had nearly kissed her *would* have kissed her if the burn of his Mark hadn't interrupted them.

He would just have to deal with her as he'd dealt with the others. Yes, he decided. He would convince her that she was a stupid, ugly child not worthy of his notice.

Satisfied with the decision he'd reached, Snape pushed all thoughts of Hermione Granger back into a deep, well-protected corner of his mind along with everything else he didn't want the Dark Lord to see.

He touched his wand to his left forearm, which had begun to burn again, and disappeared.

"*Crucio!*"

Snape felt the curse hit him almost before he fully arrived at his destination. He fell to the floor and writhed in agony, struggling to draw a deep breath.

When the curse was lifted, he was sweating and shaking.

"When you were teaching, I knew there were times when you could not immediately answer my summonses," Voldemort said. His tone was quiet and controlled with no hint of anger. "Now that you no longer bear that burden, I expect you to come immediately when I call you."

"Yes, my lord." Snape spoke in a ragged whisper.

"And now I expect a proper greeting," Voldemort said as he seated himself on the throne-like chair that sat on a raised dais.

Snape got to his feet as quickly as he could manage and made his way to the foot of the Voldemort's chair. He dropped to one knee and kissed the hem of his master's robe.

"Now, what news do you have for me, Severus," Voldemort hissed as Snape completed his obeisance.

"The filthy werewolf showed up at Order headquarters this morning," Snape said. "He was badly injured."

When he felt Riddle probing his thoughts, he brought the picture of Lupin not breathing, heart not beating to the forefront of his mind.

"He's dead, my lord. He collapsed when he arrived and never regained consciousness. Potter and his friends tried to help him, but it was too late."

"*Crucio!*" Voldemort shouted, and Snape fell to the floor again, twisting in agony.

"What did he tell them?"

"N ... nothing ... my lord," Snape gasped out when the pain eased enough for him to speak.

Voldemort stood and raised his wand again, and Snape braced himself for the next onslaught.

When the spell was lifted this time, Snape immediately felt Riddle enter his mind again. He'd been expecting it, of course, after the additional bout of the Cruciatus. His master believed that no one could resist his intrusions after such a relentless assault. He was usually right, but Snape's mind was powerful and prepared. He directed Riddle's thoughts exactly where he wanted them to go. All Riddle saw were the remnants of Snape's pain, and the shocked look on Potter's face when he realised that another of his mentors was dead.

"Oh, the poor, dear boy," Voldemort said in a mocking tone. "Such suffering!" He resumed his seat. He said nothing about Snape's suffering.

"When you've recovered sufficiently, Severus, we must talk about the implications of last night's events," he said as he smoothed his robes.

Snape pulled himself to his knees and drew several deep breaths. He half-crawled, half-dragged himself to the foot of the chair where his master sat. Voldemort was holding his wand in one hand and tapping it lightly against the open palm of his other hand, as though counting out the seconds it took for Snape to make his way to his side.

"Feeling better?" Voldemort asked solicitously, as though he had no idea why Snape was unwell.

"Yes, thank you, my lord," Snape replied as he licked his dry lips. He forced himself to stand on shaky legs.

"We lost two valuable tools today," Voldemort said. "As you know, we often used your old friend to feed false information to our enemies."

"He was no friend of mine," Snape replied, "but he was occasionally useful."

"Oh, yes. He thought he was so clever skulking around Greyback's tent and passing on the trivial and useless bits of 'intelligence' we needed to get to the other side. It's a wonder that no one ever noticed how utterly worthless he was."

"Dumbledore had a strange fondness for the beast," Snape said. "McGonagall had a similar affection for him. And, of course, Potter very nearly idolised him. He wouldn't hear a harsh word against him." Snape was careful to use the past tense as he spoke.

"Potter's foolish sentimentality works to our advantage," Voldemort stated.

"Of course, my lord; it colours his judgement. He hesitates to do what is necessary because he wants to do what *isight*." Snape said scornfully.

"A common failing of those who are weak. I am not weak."

"No, my lord."

"Still, it is unfortunate that he overheard something he wasn't supposed to hear."

Snape said nothing, waiting for his master to continue.

"Greyback made a terrible error. He didn't merely *speak* of something he was told to keep silent about, he actually boasted of it to a known member of the Order of the Phoenix. He intended to kill Lupin, of course, and had he done so, I might not have learned of his mistake. Once the werewolf escaped, however, he had no choice but to come to me, explaining what had happened and promising that it would never happen again.

"I assured him that I knew it would never happen again."

Snape didn't need to ask what form that assurance had taken. There was no way Greyback could have made such a huge blunder and lived to tell about it.

"It is only by the greatest good fortune that Lupin died before he could reveal what he had learned to my enemies. Still, I can take no chances. I will have to act.

"I will be calling you later this evening to assist me in a small endeavour. I trust I don't have to remind you to respond with alacrity?"

"No, my lord."

"I thought not." He paused a moment before he spoke again.

"So, Severus, now that we have all the unpleasantness taken care of perhaps we can indulge in some more ... satisfying ... activity."

His reddish eyes gleamed even brighter, and he rubbed his hand across the front of his robes suggestively.

Snape couldn't prevent the slight shudder of revulsion that moved through his body.

Voldemort merely smiled his terrible smile and pointed to the floor in front of him.

"Your servant, my lord," Snape said and dropped to his knees.

When Snape returned to Grimmauld Place, he was in a foul mood. He entered through the kitchen door and inwardly groaned when he saw Molly bustling about.

"Oh, Severus, isn't it terrible?" Molly cried out as she clutched his arm.

"Not now," he growled as he shook her hand off. "I need the loo."

"I think Harry just went up there."

Snape moved through the kitchen and up the stairs. He stood outside the closed door of the second floor bathroom and pounded on it, none too gently.

"Out, Potter!" he shouted.

"I'll be out in a minute." Harry's voice was muffled by the thick wooden door.

"If you don't open this door in three seconds, I'll hex it right off its hinges!"

"One!"

"Two!"

The door flew open and Harry stood there, still fastening the buttons on his jeans.

"Bloody hell, Snape!"

"Fuck," Snape groaned. He made a lurch toward the basin, but didn't reach it in time. Instead, he vomited over the floor, the hem of his travelling cloak, and even Harry's trainers.

It took Harry a moment to react, but then he moved quickly. He reached over and closed the lid on the commode, and then he put his hand under Snape's arms and half-lifted, half-dragged him into a sitting position on the toilet. He filled the bathroom glass with water and handed it to Snape, and then he used his wand to clean up the mess.

Snape rinsed his mouth with the clean, cold water and then spit into the basin.

"Are you all right? I can get Mrs. Weasley or Hermione."

"I'm here." Hermione spoke from the doorway.

"Go away, Granger," Snape said through gritted teeth.

"He's sick," Harry said. "He just tossed everywhere."

"I'll get you something to ease the nausea," Hermione said.

"I don't need anything," Snape snapped.

It might have been more convincing if he wasn't shaking and clutching his stomach as he spoke.

"I'll be right back."

She was gone before Snape could protest again.

Less than five minutes later, she was holding out a small vial filled with a thick, pink liquid.

"Drink this," she said.

Snape wanted to refuse, but he could still feel his stomach roiling.

He took the vial from her hand and swallowed the contents. He could feel the effects of the potion immediately as the cramping and nausea eased.

"Better?" she asked as she took the empty vial from his hand.

Snape ignored her question and turned toward Harry.

"Lupin? Is he ..."

"He's been awake a few times," Harry said.

"Not really aware," Hermione interjected. "He's been mumbling and thrashing around a bit. He's been able to take a few sips of water, though."

"I have the other potions ready for him."

"Were you able to talk to Minerva and the others?" Snape asked Harry as he slowly got to his feet, still ignoring Hermione.

Harry nodded. "Professor McGonagall, Kingsley, and Mr. Weasley managed to get here to see him for a minute. Hermione told them what you said about it being safer for him if people thought he was dead. They agreed. As soon as they left, they started spreading the word."

"I informed the Dark Lord of Lupin's death, as well."

"Did he believe you?" Harry asked.

"Once he verified the information, he believed me," Snape replied.

Hermione bit her lip and swallowed hard. She knew how Voldemort verified things.

"Are you all right?" Harry asked.

"Better than Lupin," Snape replied. "We'd best tend to him, though, before his rumoured demise becomes reality.

"Potter, go ask Molly to come upstairs and help me give Lupin his potions."

"I'll do it," Hermione said. "Molly's in the middle of making lunch."

At the mention of lunch, Snape felt his stomach give another lurch. He clamped his mouth closed and swallowed, willing the sickness away.

"Do you need another dose of the anti-nausea potion?" Hermione asked with a worried frown.

Snape just shook his head. He brushed past Hermione and Harry and moved out into the hallway, heading toward Remus's room.

"What did you do to piss him off?" Harry asked Hermione. "You're the one he usually treats the nicest nice for him, anyway."

Hermione hoped he couldn't see her slight flush in the dim light of the hallway.

"Maybe he was just embarrassed to be sick in front of us."

"He was fine with me for a change. It's *you* he was being a git towards."

Hermione just shook her head. "You know how he is especially when he comes back from one of his meetings with ..."

"Yeah, I know."

"I'd better get in there before he gets even more pissed off," she said.

"Granger, get in here if you're going to help!" Snape's bellow resounded down the hallway.

"Too late," Harry said.

Hermione hurried down the hallway to Remus's room, and Harry turned the other way and went down the stairs.

Working together, Snape and Hermione eased Remus into a sitting position. He wasn't unconscious, but neither was he completely awake. He did open his mouth when they told him to, and he managed to swallow the potions they poured into him with only minimal spillage. Although his eyes were open, he didn't seem to recognise them or his surroundings.

After he'd taken the potions, Hermione cleaned the wound on his leg and put a fresh dressing on it.

Remus moaned softly as she worked. He also mumbled under his breath, but they couldn't understand what he was trying to say.

"Oh, Remus, I'm sorry," Hermione whispered as she worked. "I know this hurts."

"It's all right, Hermione." He spoke with sudden clarity and when she looked up, she saw that he seemed to be awake and lucid.

"Remus! Oh, Remus, you're back!"

"Where did I go?" he asked.

Hermione bit her bottom lip, uncertain if she should tell him what had happened to him if he didn't remember.

Snape had no such reticence. He leaned over Remus and grasped his chin, none too gently, forcing Remus to look at him instead of Hermione.

"Lupin, what did you hear?" he demanded.

"What did I hear?"

"From Greyback."

"Greyback?" Remus tried to turn out of Snape's grasp, but in his weakened state he couldn't escape.

"Stop repeating everything I say and think!"

"Stop it, Severus," Hermione said, reaching out and grasping Snape's forearm. "You're hurting him."

Snape turned away from Remus in disgust.

Remus fell back against the pillow, and his eyes closed.

"He might as well have died if he can't tell us what he overheard," Snape said.

"He can't help it if he doesn't remember. Maybe Greyback *Obliviated* him,"

Hermione said as she tried to reason with him.

"I'll find out what he heard," Snape said. He turned back toward the bed as he reached for his wand.

"No!" Hermione shouted. "He's too weak! Do you want to turn him into another Frank Longbottom?"

Snape's head shot around.

"I'm going to use Legilimency, not the Cruciatus."

"If he's been *Obliviated*, even Legilimency won't help."

"He knew who you were," Snape said, "and he found his way back here. If Greyback had used a memory charm, he wouldn't have been selective. He would have wiped out everything."

"Then maybe he's just confused and in pain. He's only had two doses of the healing potions, and they haven't completely kicked in yet. I'm sure that he'll remember soon. He was asking for you when he arrived; he would have told you then if he hadn't passed out. Will a few hours make that much of a difference?"

"Since I don't know what information he has, I can't answer that," Snape said. "But I concede your point. I'll be back in a couple of hours to see if he's making any more sense."

"Severus! Hermione! Lunch is ready." Molly's voice carried all the way up the stairs from the kitchen.

"Tell Molly I'll be back later," Snape said as he opened the bedroom door.

"Where are you going?"

"That is none of your business," he said as he moved down the hall toward the stairs.

"Severus, wait," Hermione said.

"What is it now, *Miss Granger*?" he snarled as he turned back and glared at her.

Hermione resisted the urge to snarl back. After all, he *had* just returned from Voldemort. She could see the slight trembling of his hands and the white line of leftover pain around his thinned lips. Doubtless he'd been punished for some imaginary transgression. His sickness indicated that he'd been subjected to even more than a bout of the Cruciatus, and she had no doubt that not all his pain came from the curse. Nor was it all physical.

All these thoughts went through her mind in a moment, and she pushed back her anger at his treatment of her.

"Do you need some pain medication, Severus? I've stocked up on the ibuprofen."

"I don't need anything from you except that you address me in a more respectful manner, Miss Granger."

"So that's the way it's to be, then?" she asked in a quiet voice. "I'm to be 'Miss Granger' again, and you're to be 'Mr. Snape, sir,' and we're to pretend that nothing happened between us?"

"Nothing happened between us," he hissed.

"I wanted you to kiss me."

"Do you really think I care about your foolish, romantic notions?" he asked.

"You wanted to kiss me, as well," she insisted.

"You. Are. Wrong." Snape bit the words out. "Now, get out of my way, you stupid, silly, *little girl*!"

With those words, Snape pulled his travelling cloak more tightly around his body and hurried down the stairs.

Hermione heard the front door open and then slam closed.

A moment later there was a loud crack of Disapparation.

Chapter 10

Chapter 10 of 16

Book 7 -- The Way it Should Have Been. In Chapter Ten: Remus has been badly injured, but has found his way back to Grimmauld Place. After nearly dying, he is ready to tell his story.

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Ten

"Is it beginning to storm out?" Molly asked a few minutes later as she ladled out soup. "I thought I heard thunder."

"That was Snape," Ron said around a mouthful of cheese sandwich.

"Are you sure?" Molly asked. "I've never heard Severus make so much noise when he Apparates."

"We saw him when he came down the stairs," Harry said. "He looked piss ... er ... hacked off about something."

"Course, he's *always* pissed off about something," Ron added.

Hermione opened her mouth as though to speak, but Molly spoke before she could.

"Maybe if you studied and practiced like he told you to, he wouldn't be angry with you all the time," Molly admonished.

"I wasn't the one who pissed him off this time," Ron countered. "Hermione was with him."

Three pairs of eyes turned toward Hermione.

Hermione was spared having to come up with a plausible explanation for Snape's rotten mood by the sound of a small bell tinkling upstairs.

"That's the warning charm I put over Remus," she said as she jumped to her feet. "I'd better go check on him."

Molly put her spoon down. "I'll help you, dear."

"Finish your lunch," Hermione said. "I'll call you if I need you."

"Well, if you're sure ..."

"I'm sure. Likely he'll just fall back asleep."

Molly nodded, and Hermione left the kitchen to run up the stairs.

When Hermione entered Remus's bedroom, he was sitting on the edge of the bed, grasping the bedpost, and trying to pull himself to his feet.

"What are you doing?" Hermione exclaimed as she rushed to his side. "Are you trying to reopen that wound so you can bleed to death?"

"I need to talk to Severus and Harry right away," Remus said. His face had the white, pinched look of a man in tremendous pain and trying to ignore it.

"Lie back down this instant," Hermione said as she pushed at his shoulders to force him back against the pillow not a particularly difficult task considering how weak he was.

"They have to get to it before he moves it! Get Severus and Harry," he insisted.

"Harry and Ron are downstairs."

"Where's Severus?"

"He left the house about fifteen minutes ago. He didn't say where he was going, but I've an idea where he might be. I'll go get him."

"Quickly, Hermione."

"I have to go downstairs and get my cloak before I can leave. I'll have Harry and Ron come up and sit with you until we get back.

"Please, Remus, rest until then. You're still weak."

Remus nodded and then let his head drop back down onto the pillow.

Harry and Ron hovered near the foot of Remus's bed.

"We thought you were a goner, for sure," Ron said.

"So did I," Remus replied.

"What happened, Remus?" Harry asked.

"Can we wait until Severus and Hermione get here?" Remus asked. "I don't think I have the strength to go through this more than once."

Harry and Ron exchanged glances.

"Don't worry," Remus assured them. "I won't die before they arrive."

"We didn't mean ..."

"Yes, you did; and if I look only half as bad as I feel, I understand. But, really, I'm going to be fine. Werewolves heal quickly, you know. I'm over the worst of it already."

"Do you want some soup, then, while we wait?" Ron asked. "My mum made it, so you know it's good."

"I'd love some soup," Remus replied.

Although Hermione knew how important it was for her and Severus to return to Grimmauld Place as quickly as possible, she couldn't resist Hereward's request for a tickle. She stroked and lightly scratched his long scaly neck for a few moments.

"I'm sorry, Hereward," Hermione said as she patted him one last time. "I really need to speak to Severus. Is he here?"

"He wouldn't give me a tickle at all," Hereward said in a rather petulant tone. "He yelled at me."

"He has a lot on his mind. I'm sure he didn't mean to yell at you."

The door jerked open before Hereward could reply.

"I most certainly *did* mean to yell at him," Snape snarled at Hermione. He then turned his attention to Hereward.

"Didn't I tell you I wasn't to be disturbed? Why haven't you done your duty and cremated this ... this interloper?"

"Hermione has the password," Hereward said.

"I specifically told you not to let her in!"

"She has the password and may enter any time she pleases. You did not withdraw your protection."

"That is an oversight I will remedy as soon as I have a spare moment," Snape said as he glared at Hereward.

Then his glare shifted from Hereward back to Hermione.

"Well, since you're here, there must be news. Is Lupin dead?"

"Remus is awake and aware. And he's asking for you."

"Did he say what he overheard?" Snape asked.

Hermione shook her head. "No, only that something has to be moved quickly."

"The Dark Lord has requested my assistance with something later tonight. I'll wager it's one of the Horcruxes, and Lupin knows where it is.

"We need to get back immediately."

Hermione nodded.

"I have to get my cloak," Snape said. "Go back through the passage and wait for me at the entrance."

It was while they were walking back to the Apparition point that Hermione brought up Snape's threat to remove her from his protection, thus denying her access to the hidden laboratory.

"You're not really going to lock me out of here, are you? That's a bit extreme, even for you."

"I'm seriously considering it," he replied. "I don't appreciate your following me around like a ..."

Hermione stopped walking.

When Snape realised that Hermione was no longer walking beside him, he stopped and turned back to find her glaring at him.

"I didn't follow you!"

"You're here, aren't you? I certainly didn't send for you."

"I came because Remus said it was important that he speak to you."

"How did you know I was here? I didn't say where I was going. Did you go to Spinner's End as well?"

"Oh, wait thanks to the bloody Ministry I no longer have a home at Spinner's End, which is why I'm forced to live at Grimmauld Place where I'm surrounded by bothersome children, and I have no privacy and no peace."

Hermione scowled at him.

"How about Knockturn Alley, then? Did you ask around like a shrieking fishwife trying to track down her errant husband?"

"Don't be insulting. And make up your mind am I a bothersome child or a shrieking fishwife?"

Snape opened his mouth, but Hermione cut him off.

"It wasn't that difficult to figure out. I know how much you enjoy brewing. It soothes you. And this place soothes you, as well."

"You know nothing of the kind," Snape retorted.

"I've been here with you many times in the past few weeks. I've seen how this place grounds you. It strengthens you, fortifies you ..."

"We don't have time for your epideictic ramblings, Miss Granger," Snape said as he resumed walking.

When they reached the Apparition area, Hermione turned to him.

"You're right," she said. "We've no time for drama mine or *yours*. This discussion, however, is far from over."

She took a deep breath and Disapparated without a sound.

"What a surprise," Snape mumbled to himself. And then he was gone as well.

Only moments after they returned to Grimmauld Place, Snape and Hermione were standing next to Harry and Ron at the foot of Remus's bed listening to him relate what had happened to him.

"As you know, Voldemort has been easing up on his attacks against Muggles," Remus began. "That didn't keep Greyback from staging the occasional raid, however. He usually kept them relatively tame. He liked to frighten and intimidate people, but he didn't kill. As long as the raids were in isolated areas and didn't attract the attention of the Muggle authorities, no one cared.

"A couple of weeks ago during one of those raids, Greyback took a fancy to a Muggle woman. She didn't run screaming when he showed up, but stood on the front porch of her home with a knife in her hand prepared to defend herself.

"Whether it was her looks or her defiance, I don't know, but he seemed to become obsessed with her after that night. He would return, night after night, to the woods around her house and watch for hours. He talked about her incessantly and was determined to turn her during the next full moon."

"Is there a point to this story?" Snape asked impatiently.

"Yes, and I'm getting to it."

"Soon, I hope."

Remus ignored him and continued speaking.

"The full moon was on Sunday. As soon as we all transformed, Greyback led us back to the woman's home. He'd arranged with several of his followers to gain entry to the house. Two of them leapt through a window, shattering it. He followed them into the house, only to find it empty. The woman was apparently a lot smarter than Greyback had thought. She was gone.

"Greyback was incensed. He believed that someone had warned her away.

"On Monday night, Greyback sent for me. As soon as I entered his tent, he put a Body-Bind Curse on me. I didn't even have time to raise my wand. I couldn't move, but he made sure I could *see*.

"He had the woman. He'd already raped her. He'd already *questioned* her, as well. By the time I got there, she was dead."

"He then told me that the woman had named *me* as the person who had warned her away."

"You didn't, did you?" Snape asked.

"I'd wanted to, but I knew I couldn't compromise my position to save just one person."

Remus closed his eyes as though to block out the painful memory.

"Someone pretended to be you. Someone set you up," Harry surmised.

Remus nodded. "Probably Peter," he said. "He's hated me since the incident at the end of your third year. He visits the pack frequently to relay orders from Voldemort to Greyback."

"He would have used Polyjuice Potion," Snape said. "It's one of the potions I brew on a regular basis, so it would be readily available."

"Anyway, once the woman named me, Greyback was convinced. He called in a few members of the pack and invited them to teach me a lesson.

"When he got tired of watching them beat me, he sent them away telling them he would finish the job himself. He'd taken my wand, of course, and I was still under the Body-Bind Curse. There was no way for me to reach my Portkey.

"The entire time he was kicking me around the tent, he was boasting about how crucial he was to Voldemort. He kept talking about how his master had given him an important task. He said he was safeguarding something vital to the Dark Lord."

"Then he decided to finish me off, but he told me he was going to castrate me first, make me suffer."

"He didn't, you know ... you're fine," Ron said.

"Believe me, that's one of the first things I checked when I woke up and realised I had made it out of there."

"Can't say that I blame you, mate," Ron said with a slight shudder.

"How did you get out?" Hermione asked.

"Thankfully, he released the Body-Bind Curse before he sent the Slicing Hex my way. I guess he thought I wouldn't be much of a threat with no wand and nearly unconscious from the beatings. He was right, but at the moment, I wasn't concerned with fighting back. I just wanted to get away. Luckily, I'd activated my Portkey before I entered his tent. As soon as I touched my button, I was on my way. The Slicing Hex caught me anyway, but on the leg instead of ... well ..."

"It still nearly killed you," Hermione said.

"I'm tougher than I look," Remus said with a smile.

"Did he say what it was he was protecting?" Hermione asked.

"I thought you were the smart one, Hermione," Ron said. "It's got to be one of the Horcruxes, doesn't it? He didn't need to say it."

Hermione turned to Ron.

"And just what object is the Horcrux *in*, Ron? How will we recognise it?"

"It's something that belonged to Godric Gryffindor," Remus said. "He made a point of telling me that, since I was in Gryffindor."

"It can't be his sword," Hermione said. "We know that's still in Dumbledore's office."

Harry's eyes lit up. "Yes, but the *scabbard* has been missing for decades!"

"It has?" Ron asked.

"Your research has borne fruit, Potter," Snape said. Then he turned to Remus.

"Did he say that's what it is?"

"I'm not sure he knows exactly what it is, but he did say *where* it is the Potter house at Godric's Hollow."

"That makes sense, of course," Snape said. "That house is where he suffered his greatest *only* defeat. It would have great personal significance to him.

"We have to go there immediately."

"If we just take the scabbard, he'll know when he returns there tonight that you lied to him," Hermione said.

"We'll duplicate it, just like we did the cup," Harry said.

"That means we'll have to destroy another artefact to get rid of the Horcrux," Hermione said.

"It can't be helped," Snape said.

"Well, we'd best work out some sort of plan, then," Harry said. He'd long dreamed of returning to the house in which he'd been born, the house his parents had died in, but he'd never dreamt it would be under such circumstances.

Remus tossed back the covers and attempted to swing his legs over the side of the bed.

"Where do you think you're going?" Hermione asked. She moved to the side of the bed and put a hand on his shoulder to keep him from getting up.

"I might be able to help," Remus said.

"You're determined to see me dead, aren't you, Lupin?" Snape bit out.

"What? Of course I don't want you dead," Remus protested.

"I told the Dark Lord you were dead. I *convinced* him you were dead. If you are seen to be alive, he would know I lied to him. He would be ... displeased."

"He thinks I'm dead?" Remus said. "How? Greyback knows I'm alive."

"Greyback really *is* dead," Snape replied. "Once you escaped with such sensitive information, he had no choice but to go to the Dark Lord and try to explain what had happened. He tried to shift all the blame to you, of course, but Riddle managed to extract the truth from him. He paid for his mistake with his life."

"Can't say that I'll miss him," Remus said as he shifted back under the covers.

Hermione adjusted the covers a bit and placed her hand on his forehead, checking for fever.

"I'm fine, Hermione, but if I'm 'dead' then I guess I'm confined to this house for the duration."

"We'll get you out of the country perhaps Australia or even America," Harry said.

"I could still be of use here, couldn't I? I could work with all of you on your defence lessons. That would free up a lot of your time, Severus."

"I'm not banishing you, Lupin," Snape said with a scowl. "You'll probably go stir crazy within a month, however, and be begging to be sent to America."

"I'd rather stay and do what I can here," Remus insisted.

"It would be Minerva's decision in any case, not mine."

"I'll convince her to allow me to stay."

"That's between the two of you," Snape said. "And it will be a moot point if we don't win the war."

"We'll win," Harry said with quiet determination. "There's too much at stake for us to lose, isn't there?"

"If that's the case then we'd better take care of old Godric's scabbard, hadn't we?" Hermione said.

"Indeed," Snape replied.

The five of them then spent an hour working out a plan to find and destroy another of Voldemort's Horcruxes.

Chapter 11

Chapter 11 of 16

Book 7 -- The Way It Should Have Been. In this chapter, Harry and the others prepare to find and destroy another of Voldemort's Horcruxes. And Snape overhears something he wasn't supposed to -- again!

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Eleven

It was decided that Harry and Ron would ride their brooms to a small wooded area about half a kilometre from Godric's Hollow. They would walk into the small village from there. Since Ron had never been there, and Harry had no memory of the place, Apparating blindly could be dangerous.

Ron had offered to bring Hermione on his broom, but just the thought of it was enough to send her into a minor panic. She'd ~~been~~ *ated* flying.

She'd turned to Snape and asked him if he would bring her with him, via Side-Along-Apparition. He ~~had~~ *ad* been to Godric's Hollow, and it wouldn't be necessary for him to ride a broom to get there.

Snape's first instinct had been to refuse. The further away from Granger he stayed, the better off they'd both be; but he couldn't help but be swayed by the look of abject terror that crossed her face at the mere thought of a broom.

"Oh, very well, if your Gryffindor courage won't stand up to a mere broom flight," he'd sneered.

Hermione had been too grateful to even be offended by the implied insult.

"Thank you, sir," she'd said.

He'd simply nodded and they'd continued making their plans.

Because travelling by broom took longer than Apparating, Ron and Harry left Grimmauld Place immediately. Snape and Hermione would rendezvous with them, and then Snape, wearing Harry's invisibility cloak, would go ahead of them into the village itself to reconnoitre.

The three of them talked quietly while they waited for Snape to return. After a few minutes, however, Harry was no longer actively participating in the conversation. He wandered away from Ron and Hermione a bit and sat on a fallen log.

Harry's thoughts turned to how he would feel when he entered the house in which he'd been born the house in which his parents had died. He'd been just fifteen months old when Voldemort killed his parents. He had no memory of that night, or of them. He wondered if he would feel any sort of connection to the place. He hoped he would. It would make him feel closer to the parents he'd never known. He'd certainly never felt any connection to the house on Privet Drive, or even to his aunt and cousin.

While Harry sat deep in thought, Ron and Hermione continued to talk in near-whispers. They had moved out of the small clearing to stand behind a large tree that sheltered them from the cold wind.

"How much time do you reckon we'll have to find that scabbard?" Ron asked.

"I guess it depends on how big the house is," Hermione replied.

"Maybe Harry knows," Ron said.

Hermione shook her head. "He was just a baby; he wouldn't remember."

"Well, I hope we finish up early. My mum's got some Christmas shopping to do in Diagon Alley; she's not going to be at Grimmauld Place tonight. And Snape's already said he's got a meeting with You-Know-Who."

"Remus is at the house."

"Yeah, but he's still recuperating. He'll be asleep early."

Ron leaned down and placed a sloppy kiss on the side of Hermione's neck.

"Stop that, Ron!" Hermione said. She reached up and wiped a bit of drool off her neck.

"You should be glad we'll have the chance to be together," he said. "I'll sneak down to your room after Harry goes to sleep."

"There's so much going on now, what with learning everything and finding the Horcruxes, I'm not sure that's a good idea."

"Come on, Hermione, It's been nearly two months since ..."

"What do you do, mark it on the calendar?"

"Well ... not exactly, but I sort of keep track in my mind."

"That's vulgar."

Ron grinned. "What can I say? I'm a man; I've got needs, you know."

"What about my needs?" Hermione shot back.

"It's not my fault you can't ... you don't ..."

"I've news for you, Ron I *can*; and maybe if you weren't always in such a hurry, I would!"

Ron face darkened in anger.

"I never got any complaints from Lavender," he said in a sharp tone.

"Then maybe when this is all over, you should go back to her."

"Is that what you really want, Hermione?" he asked, his mood changing abruptly. "I thought you loved me!"

"I do love you. I'm just not sure that we're suited to be a couple rather than just friends."

"I'll try harder to satisfy you, I promise," he coaxed.

Hermione bit her bottom lip nervously.

She knew she should refuse. She knew that if she were completely honest with herself, her feelings for Ron had changed. She knew that if she encouraged him now, it would be that much harder to end their romantic relationship later. But she also knew that if she refused, Ron would sulk and be angry. She was afraid that his anger would distract him from the work they had to do to defeat Voldemort, and that wouldn't be fair to Harry.

"I don't know ..."

Her thoughts flitted back to the incident with Severus outside of Remus's door. He'd later denied that anything would have come of it. He'd made it clear that he didn't reciprocate any 'foolish, romantic notions' she might have. She thought that he might be trying to convince himself more than her, but still, his words had stung.

"Please?" Ron grinned at her in the charming way that had first attracted her back in their third year.

Still not sure she was making the right decision, Hermione succumbed to Ron's entreaty.

"Oh, all right," she finally murmured.

"Brilliant! I'll slip Harry some Dreamless Sleep Potion."

"Ron!"

"Don't get your knickers in a knot; I was just joking. Besides, I think Harry knows what's going on. He won't say anything to my mum."

Hermione just shook her head. For someone who'd just proclaimed himself a man, with a man's needs, he was awfully concerned about what his mother might say.

"We'd better get back to Harry," Hermione said. "Professor Snape should be back any minute."

Ron made a face, but he followed as Hermione stepped out from the behind the tree and started walking towards Harry.

Snape hadn't meant to eavesdrop at least not at first.

After his reconnoitre of the old Potter house, he'd Apparated back to the same spot he'd left twenty minutes earlier only to find the small clearing empty.

He had immediately suspected that the three of them had fallen into a trap. He was grateful for the invisibility cloak as he began his search for the missing trio.

He spotted Potter sitting on a log just a few feet outside the clearing. His elbows rested on his knees, and he was turning his wand over and over in his hands.

A moment later he saw Weasley and Granger standing a little deeper in the woods, partially hidden behind a large oak tree.

Although Potter hadn't been very vigilant, he'd at least had his wand out. The other two were deep in conversation, completely oblivious to their surroundings, and completely vulnerable as neither one of them had a wand in hand.

He approached them silently, hoping to catch them unawares, thus proving how ill-prepared they were to face down their enemies. He intended to hit them both with a Babbling Curse. They would learn a valuable lesson about never letting down their guard.

As he neared them, what had been indistinct murmurs became clearer.

"... was just a baby; he wouldn't remember."

"Well, I hope we finish up early. My mum's got some Christmas shopping to do in Diagon Alley; she's not going to be at Grimmauld Place tonight. And Snape's already said he's got a meeting with You-Know-Who."

"Remus is at the house."

"Yeah, but he's still recuperating. He'll be asleep early."

Snape had been just a second away from throwing the hex at them when he saw Weasley lean down and kiss the side of Granger's neck. His breath caught, and all

thoughts of lessons and Babbling Curses fled.

He stood, not moving, barely breathing, and listened as Weasley tried to cajole Granger into a tryst for later that evening.

If asked, he wouldn't have been able to explain why he had found it impossible to walk away from them.

He smiled wryly at Granger's naïveté and her outrage when she discovered that Weasley kept track of their sexual encounters. He was a teenaged boy of course he kept track!

And he'd had to hold back a snicker of amusement as she brought Weasley to task for his lack of sexual prowess the oaf.

Based on the way the conversation was going, Snape was sure she would refuse.

Although he would have denied it, he felt a sharp stab of disappointment when she finally agreed to the meeting.

And then he shook his head, disgusted with himself. Since when did he concern himself with the sexual antics of two Gryffindors with raging hormones?

He watched them walk back toward where Potter was still sitting on the fallen log, and then he Apparated once again.

A minute later, still under the invisibility cloak, he approached the trio from the opposite side of the clearing.

Snape shuffled his feet a little as he walked toward them, making the dead leaves rustle.

"Snape?" Harry called out, his wand raised.

Hermione had her wand out in a second and moved to stand shoulder to shoulder with Harry.

Ron was still trying to fumble his wand out of his back pocket when Snape threw off the invisibility cloak, his own wand ready.

"*Expelliarmus*," Snape said, and Ron's wand flew into his waiting hand.

"So much for your vaunted skills," Snape said with a sneer.

"I wasn't expecting you to attack me!" Ron said angrily.

"Do you think the Death Eaters will send you a memorandum outlining their plans?" Snape countered.

"Although I am loath to agree with Moody about anything, he has the right of it when he warns about constant vigilance."

"You're right," Harry said. "We should have been more alert."

"Had my intentions been malevolent, I could have killed the three of you before you even knew I was here."

"Yeah, well you were hiding under the invisibility cloak, weren't you? Do all the Death Eaters have one of those?" Ron asked scornfully.

"Invisibility cloaks aren't the only way to get around without being seen," Hermione said.

"Which you would know if you'd ever read any of the books I told you to read," Snape added.

"Why do you always take his side?" Ron asked as he turned an angry look on Hermione.

"Perhaps because I'm always right?" Snape said.

Ron turned back to Snape, his hand automatically reaching back for his wand.

He flushed when he remembered that his wand was gone.

"Lose something, Weasley?" Snape taunted.

"Bastard."

A moment later, Ron's wand flew from Snape's hand to Harry's.

"We all get distracted once in a while, don't we, sir?" Harry asked calmly as he handed Ron his wand.

It was Snape's turn to flush. He drew a breath as though to speak and then realised that Potter was right. He ~~had~~ been distracted and careless.

"Touché, Potter," he said with a sardonic little quirk of his lips. "You've just proven that one is never too old to learn an important lesson."

"Can we get on with why we're here, then?"

Ron shrugged, and Snape nodded curtly. For his part, he was quite happy to move on.

"What did you find out?" Harry asked Snape.

"There are no guards posted on the one road that leads into the village. There are also none posted on the perimeter of the property or at the either of the doors to the house itself at least not outside the doors.

"The house is warded, of course, and I didn't want to take the time to break through the wards to go inside. I thought it best to come back here and have you enter the house to determine if there are guards posted inside."

Snape picked up the invisibility cloak and held it out to Harry.

"What makes you think I'll be able to get through the wards in anything less than a week?" Harry asked as he took the cloak from Snape.

"You don't need to break through the wards, Harry," Hermione said.

"I don't?" Harry seemed genuinely puzzled.

"It's *your* house," Ron put in.

"You were not aware of this?" Snape asked.

Harry shook his head. "No."

"When you were born, your parents would've adjusted the wards to recognise you," Ron explained. "Since you were inside the house when Volde ... when they died, they couldn't have changed the wards. The house will still recognise you and let you in."

"Couldn't Voldemort have changed the wards? He got inside."

"He gained entry only because Pettigrew gave him the password," Snape said. "He still wouldn't have been able to change the wards. Only your parents could do that."

"And now you can," Ron said. "You could change the password and keep You-Know-Who out!"

Hermione shook her head, and Snape sighed.

"What? If he can't get in, he can't retrieve the Horcrux."

"You will insist on seeing me dead, won't you?" Snape said.

"This situation is the same as with the Hufflepuff cup, Ron," Harry said. "If I change the password, Voldemort will know that Snape is the only one who could have warned me."

"Oh. Well, it was just an idea."

"A very bad idea," Snape grumbled.

"What are we going to do, then?" Ron asked, ignoring Snape's comment.

"Another duplicate?" Hermione suggested.

"Indeed. It seems to be a solution that works."

"Go to the house, Potter. There's an outbuilding behind the main house. If I'm not mistaken, you'll find there's an underground tunnel connecting the two structures. Based on similarly built houses I've seen, the tunnel should lead to the cellar of the main house. There will likely be a staircase that opens into the kitchen. Once inside you can ascertain if there are any guards posted within. If the house is clear, return here and we'll all go and search for the scabbard."

"How far is it?" Harry asked as he wrapped the cloak around himself, leaving only his head visible.

"Less than half a kilometre that way," Snape said as he pointed to the east. "You can't miss it; there are no near neighbours, and the yard is badly overgrown."

Harry nodded and then pulled the cloak up to cover his head.

Chapter 12

Chapter 12 of 16

Book 7 -- The Way it Should Have Been. In this chapter, Harry returns to the Potter house in Godric's Hollow. He's searching for a Horcrux, but finds something else.

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Twelve

Although they'd all told him that the wards would recognise him, Harry was sceptical. Still completely hidden under the invisibility cloak, he grasped the knob on the door of the outbuilding and gave it a twist.

To his amazement, the knob turned, and the door swung open. He stepped over the threshold and felt a slight tingle as he passed through the wards.

In the dim light that filtered through the high-set windows, he could see that the outbuilding was empty. He had no idea what it had once been used for, but it seemed his parents had never used it for any purpose at all, not even storage.

He found the tunnel that Snape had told him to expect, and he stepped into it. After only a few steps, even the feeble light that spilled in from the entrance was gone.

"*Lumos*," he barely whispered, and his wand tip began to glow weakly.

He moved slowly along the sloping floor of the tunnel, being careful not to make any noise.

After a few minutes, he found himself in front of another door. This one opened as easily as the first one had, and again he felt a tingle of magic as he passed through the wards.

The cellar was stacked with dozens of mouldering old boxes. A few of them had been knocked over, their contents strewn across the floor of the cellar. Old books, a stained pair of dragon-hide gloves, and out-dated school robes spilled out of one box. Tiny jumpers and knitted caps and booties overflowed another. As he looked around, he realised that he was looking at the detritus of his parents' lives and his own brief and unremembered role as a part of those lives.

He picked up one of the booties. It was blue with a white stripe running through it. It seemed impossibly small, and he couldn't believe that he had ever actually been able to wear it. On impulse, he stuffed the bootie into the back pocket of his jeans.

He would have liked to look through the other boxes. Who knew what mementoes they held? All he had of his parents were the photographs that Hagrid had given him and

the invisibility cloak he was now wearing. He cherished them, but they really gave him no insight into the people his parents had been.

He knew there was no time for such an indulgence, however. He made a vow to himself to return to this house someday and get to know his parents.

"Assuming the sodding bastard doesn't kill me first," he muttered to himself.

He shook off that thought and made his up the staircase that led up to the kitchen.

He eased the door open, alert for any sound from within the house.

He heard nothing.

He moved from the kitchen to the dining room and then into the parlour. In each room, there were signs of the battle that had taken place here on the night his parents died. The furniture lay in splinters; there were scorch marks on the ceiling and on the walls; the curtains hung in tatters from the front window. He swallowed the sudden lump in his throat as he realised that it had most likely been his father who had caused all this damage. He would have tried to hold Voldemort off, giving his mother time to try to save herself and him.

He climbed the stairs that led to the upper level. On his right, he saw a nursery his nursery. The door had been blasted from its hinges and lay on the floor just inside the doorway. The crib still held rumpled bed clothes and a soft, brightly coloured stuffed dragon. There were puffy white clouds painted on the pale blue ceiling. He must have fallen asleep every night gazing at those clouds.

How he wished he could remember.

He backed out of the room and entered the room on the left side of hallway the room that his parents had shared. The large four poster bed was still neatly made, though the linens had yellowed. So had the lace curtains on the window and the crocheted doilies on the bureau. A set of robes was hung on one of the bedposts. He recognised it as the set his father had been wearing in one of the photos Hagrid had given him. He stepped further into the room. There was a small dressing table against the wall near the door. A comb and brush sat on a mirrored tray. Several strands of long red hair were stuck in the bristles of the brush.

He picked up the brush and held it to his nose, hoping to find some lingering trace of her, but he smelled nothing. He pulled one of the strands out of the brush. He wrapped it around his finger, rubbing the silken shaft between his thumb and forefinger. He closed his eyes and imagined his mother sitting there, drawing the brush through her hair.

He reached out with his mind and with his heart, trying to touch her, to feel her, but again he felt nothing.

In a far corner of his mind a corner he had finally learned to keep strongly shielded, even in sleep he sensed the evil presence of the man who had ended his mother's life. He reflected on how unfair it was that he could sense nothing of her the woman who had given him life and had died trying to protect him but by simply lowering that shield he could connect to the man who had murdered her.

For a moment, for just the briefest of moments, he considered dropping that barrier. If he did, Voldemort would know exactly where he was and would surely come to him. He could finish this, right here, in the same place where it had all begun.

Except that it wouldn't really be finished, would it? He chided himself gently. It won't be finished until all the Horcruxes are found and destroyed. When that's done, I can end it.

Or he'll end it, and I'll be with my parents again.

He pushed the thought away. His parents had died to save him; he wouldn't insult their memory by giving up. Voldemort might very well kill him, but he would die fighting, just as his parents had.

Harry replaced the brush and backed out of the room.

He quickly looked through the two other bedrooms, but although they were furnished, they had an unused look and feel about them. He surmised that they had been guestrooms. He briefly wondered if Peter Pettigrew had ever slept in one of them. Had he made himself at home under his parents' roof, eaten the food his mother had prepared, and lain on the sheets she had washed while he plotted how to betray them? And was it here he had devised the plan to blame another friend for his own treachery?

And where was he now? Was he celebrating his belief that he had been responsible for Remus's death, as well? Was he proud to be the last marauder standing?

Knowing that such speculation was useless and distracting, Harry refocused on the task at hand.

There was one more room to check.

He opened the door at the far end of the hallway and stepped into what could only have been his father's study.

Three of the walls were covered with Quidditch posters. That seemed to fit with the stories Remus and Sirius had told him about his father.

The fourth wall had to be his mother's handiwork he realised as he examined the many photographs, both wizarding and Muggle, that adorned it. Here was a picture of the four marauders: Sirius and his father trying to push each other out of the frame; Peter stretching himself up, trying to appear as tall as the others; and Remus standing behind the other three as though trying to blend into the background. He recognised a picture of a much younger Aunt Petunia smiling down fondly on the over-large blue bundle perched on her lap. There were pictures of his parents taken at their wedding, and then a picture of his mother, standing sideways and turning back and forth a bit to show off her rounded belly. There were dozens of pictures of him. In some he was alone and in others he was with his parents, or with Sirius. There was even one of him with Remus. The pictures were hung in chronological order and gave him a glimpse of what his life had been like before before he'd been banished to the cupboard under the stairs; before he'd been subjected to the cruelties of his cousin Dudley; before he'd been targeted by a madman.

Harry closed his eyes and his mind. He couldn't dwell on a past he didn't remember and couldn't change or else he'd never be able to concentrate on the things he could affect the present and the future.

He drew a deep breath and turned toward the large desk that was pushed into the corner. The desk was obviously very old. Its wood surfaces were scarred and nicked. One of the legs had broken off, and that corner rested on a pile of books. The top of the desk was littered with rolls of parchment, broken quills, and dried up ink bottles. Several copies of *The Daily Prophet* were stacked on one side, so yellowed and brittle-looking that Harry knew if he touched them, they would crumble to dust.

A golden snitch sat at the back of the desk, its wings drooping, and its surface dulled by dust.

He could imagine his father sitting here, working and reading; or leaning back in his chair, his feet up on the desk, tossing the snitch and then catching it.

Harry smiled at the thought and looked around one last time.

There were no Death Eaters lurking here. The house was empty and had been since the night his parents died. Voldemort may have returned and left a Horcrux behind, but he'd known that no one would be able to get through the wards. He'd had Greyback hovering around the perimeter of the village, but only recently. Harry guessed that maybe Voldemort had given Greyback the task simply to keep him busy and out of trouble. And although he was planning to move the Horcrux, he hadn't felt a sense of urgency to do it before full dark. That meant he had believed Snape's information that Remus was dead.

He would go get the others so they could search for the Horcrux. He glanced at his watch and was horrified to discover that he'd been gone for nearly an hour. Hermione and Ron would be worried; and Snape ... bloody hell, Snape would be furious! Harry would be lucky if he made it through Snape's tirade with his own balls intact.

It was as he turned to leave the room that he saw it old, burnished leather with a large, ornate "G" branded near the top, and the Gryffindor lion stretched out along the length of it.

It had been mounted on the wall over the doorway. His back had been to it the entire time he'd been in the room.

"You cocky bastard," Harry said. "You didn't even try to hide it."

He did a revealing spell and detected nothing, but he knew he needed Snape to check it before he touched it.

"I'll be back in just few minutes," he murmured. He spoke as though the scabbard was alive and quite capable of understanding him. "I'll be back, and one more piece of your rotten, black soul will be gone."

Harry quickly made his way back down the stairs, into the cellar, and through the tunnel into the outbuilding. As soon as he was clear of the door, he Apparated back to the clearing in the woods.

Hermione spotted him first as he pulled off the cloak.

She rushed over to stand in front of him.

"Harry, where have you been?" Although she spoke in a whisper, she managed to convey her concern.

Snape didn't bother to whisper, and when he spoke, his sarcasm conveyed fury rather than concern.

"How nice of you to join us, Potter. I was beginning to think we'd have to pitch a tent and camp out in these bloody woods while we waited for you."

"Can't think of anything much worse than spending a night in a tent with Snape," Ron put in.

Harry flushed slightly. "Sorry. I got distracted. I found ... things things that belonged to my parents and to me. I ... I was ... looking at them."

"Now is not the time for reminiscing," Snape spat out.

"Since I don't remember any of it, I was hardly reminiscing. I know you don't care, but I never knew them. This was like ... like meeting them for the first time. I was just ..."

Snape sighed and held up a hand, interrupting him. "Although you think me a heartless bastard, Potter, I do understand. Right now, however, we have more pressing matters to attend to."

Harry nodded. "You're right. I'm sorry."

Snape nodded. "Now, what did you discover? Are there guards?"

"The place is empty. It looks like it hasn't been disturbed since ... since that night," Harry replied.

"In an hour it will be too dark to see. Let's hope we find the scabbard before then."

"I've already found it," Harry said.

"You weren't supposed to search for it on your own, Harry," Hermione said. "We could have helped."

"I wasn't actually searching for it. It's hanging out in the open."

"You didn't touch it, did you?" Snape asked.

"Of course not. I did a revealing spell and didn't find anything, but I know you've got more experience in that area than I have. I knew you needed to check it before we did anything."

"Then we'd best get to it," Snape said. "You'll have to go in first and open the door. Otherwise, we won't get through the wards. You and I can both Apparate to the back of the outbuilding. Leave the cloak for Weasley and Granger."

Harry nodded and handed the cloak to Ron.

A moment later he was gone.

"Half a kilometre due east," Snape said to Ron. "I trust you won't get lost."

"We'll find it," Hermione said. She placed her wand across her open palm.

"Point me," she said, and her wand dutifully spun to point north.

"Weasley, bring a large branch to transfigure into the duplicate scabbard."

"Why do I have to carry a log half a kilometre?" Ron complained.

Snape rolled his eyes, but Hermione spoke before he could make the scathing comment she knew was coming.

"So we don't disturb anything in the house, Ron. We don't know how long it's been since Voldemort was there. He may notice if something is missing especially something large enough to transfigure into a scabbard for Gryffindor's sword that thing is huge."

"Oh."

"Potter and I will be waiting," Snape said.

"We'll be along directly," Hermione said.

Snape nodded and disappeared.

Half an hour later, Snape was lifting the duplicated scabbard into place on the wall in the Potter house.

And an hour after that, the four of them were staring down into a cauldron that now held nothing but the black, dust-like remnants of yet another piece of Voldemort shrinking soul.

Chapter 13

Chapter 13 of 16

Harry, Ron, and Hermione learn a new skill. Snape answers his master's summons. Ron and Hermione have a 'romantic' interlude.

Disclaimer: All characters and settings of Potterverse are the property of J.K. Rowling and other sundry entities. Only the plot belongs to me. I am making no money. I play in this universe for the sheer joy of it. My only payment is the kind reviews and comments of those who read and enjoy my tale. This story is canon-compliant through HBP. DH has, for the most part, been happily disregarded, especially that sappy epilogue!

Special thanks go to my beta reader, JuJuJenn. She makes sure I stay focused.

Thirteen

After dinner that evening, while waiting for the Dark Lord's summons, Snape began teaching the three of them a spell to alter the voice.

"Sounding like a friend instead of a foe may give you just enough time to raise your wand or activate your Portkey," Snape said.

Much to Snape's surprise, it was Ron who managed to perfect the spell first.

"Constant vigilance!" Ron said in Alastor Moody's gravelly voice.

It took only a few more tries for Hermione.

"I'm sorry, my dear," Hermione said in Sybill Trelawney's wispy, ethereal voice, "but you are hopelessly Mundane."

Harry finally managed it, and had Ron loudly guffawing as he imitated Percy's supercilious tone.

"Do you know how many accidents there are each year because cauldron-bottom thickness is unregulated?"

Even Snape smiled at that, but his smile turned to a grimace when he felt his Dark Mark begin to burn.

"It seems the moment of truth has arrived," he said as he picked up his cloak and headed for the door.

Hermione opened her mouth as though to speak, but Snape raised a hand.

"I'm always careful, Miss Granger. Take care of Lupin."

Hermione just nodded.

"All of you keep practicing."

Then he opened the front door and slipped away into the night.

"Good evening, Severus," the Dark Lord said as Snape arrived before him.

"My lord," Snape said as he dropped to one knee and humbled himself before his master.

"We have an important task tonight," Voldemort said.

"As always, I am at your service, my lord," Snape replied.

"It's still a bit early to be out and about, however."

Snape tensed. He could imagine how Voldemort might want to kill a little time.

"I have something to attend to before we leave," Voldemort continued. If he'd noticed Snape's reaction, he chose to ignore it.

"You will stand there," Voldemort said as he pointed, "and wait for me."

"Of course, my lord," Snape said with a little bow of his head.

It was three in the morning before Voldemort returned. Snape had stood in the spot Voldemort had indicated, not daring to move even the six inches that would have enabled him to lean against the wall. He knew that he was being observed, whether by Voldemort or by one of his fellow Death Eaters. Either way, he knew that if he so much as lifted a foot to ease the cramping of his toes, he would be punished.

"Ah, Severus," Voldemort said as he swept back into the room. "I'm ready to leave now."

"Yes, my lord."

Because he, Snape, wasn't supposed to know where they were going, Voldemort had taken him via Side-Along-Apparition. Not content with merely having Snape hold his arm, Voldemort had insisted on enfolding Snape in both arms and holding him tightly pressed against his chest. He'd seemed to delight in Snape's discomfiture.

When they arrived at the Potter house, Voldemort waved his wand at the front door as though he owned the place and walked right in, Snape on his heels.

He'd climbed the stairs and walked directly to the room at the end of the hall, not even glancing at the nursery on his right.

Snape had figuratively held his breath as Voldemort lifted down the duplicate scabbard. This was the critical moment. If the substitution was discovered, Snape's life would be forfeit; and he wouldn't die an easy death. He doubted he'd even have the opportunity to use the emergency Portkey he'd activated before he left Grimmauld Place.

"Do you know what this is, Severus?" Voldemort had asked as he stroked the scabbard in an almost sensual manner.

"A scabbard, my lord," Snape replied.

"Not just any scabbard, old friend. This is the scabbard that once held the sword of Godric Gryffindor."

"I was not aware that the Gryffindor sword had a scabbard," Snape replied.

"Oh, yessss," Voldemort said sibilantly. "Dumbledore, the old fool, managed to keep the sword from me, but not this." He stroked the scabbard again. "No, this I kept safe along with three other relics from the founders.

"And do you know *why* I've kept them safe?"

"No, my lord."

"Because by possessing these relics, I prove that I am descended from all four of the founders of Hogwarts."

The fact that he possessed the relics only because he had stolen them was an irony that Voldemort had apparently chosen to ignore.

"Did you know that Potter and I are related, Severus?" Voldemort asked.

Snape quirked a brow.

"No, my lord."

"We are actually distant cousins. His line has been diluted, of course. His Pure-blood father defiled himself by taking a Mudblood to wife."

Snape kept his face carefully blank. He didn't think it would be prudent to mention that Voldemort's own father had been a Muggle a Muggle whom his Pure-blood mother had bewitched into a doomed marriage.

"That doesn't change the fact, however, that he is also descended from the founders," Voldemort continued. "His line is most direct from Godric Gryffindor, while mine is, of course, most direct from Salazar Slytherin.

"Once I gain control of the Ministry and of Hogwarts, I will see to it that the ideals of my greatest ancestor will become the standard. Only those who are worthy will be allowed to develop their magic. Undesirables will have their magic bound. Never again will a Mudblood be allowed within the walls of Hogwarts, and Half-bloods will have to prove themselves before they are admitted. Sub-humans will be neutralised. Werewolves, centaurs, goblins all will be eliminated. We'll keep the house-elves, inferior creatures though they are, because at least they are useful. They also understand and accept their proper place under our boot heels!"

Snape had heard this all before ... ad nauseam ... but he nodded in all the appropriate places.

"It will take time to bring all my plans to fruition; I have taken steps, however, to insure that I have all the time I need. In three or four generations, no one will even remember the name 'Harry Potter!'"

"Yes, my lord."

Voldemort finally finished his litany of self-aggrandisement.

"Come, Severus," Voldemort said. He opened his arms, and Snape stepped into them.

Apparition requires intense concentration, and uses a lot of magical energy. It soon became apparent that while Snape had been standing at rigid attention for five hours awaiting his master's return, Voldemort had been sleeping, or at least resting.

They spent the next hour Apparating from one bleak and isolated destination to the next until Snape was even more exhausted than he had been and was completely disoriented.

Voldemort had never bothered to learn how to Apparate without making a sound. Or, as was more likely, he didn't feel the need to move about silently.

In fact, Snape decided after a particularly thunderous arrival, he seemed to be trying to make as much noise as possible.

They stayed on the freezing moor only a few seconds before Voldemort decided they were leaving. Snape couldn't keep from wincing in pain as they Apparated once again with a loud, reverberating crack.

When he opened his eyes, he was astounded to discover that they were once more standing in front of the Potter house in Godric's Hollow.

"Perhaps I should just leave this here after all," Voldemort said. "The wards are impressive. I have to give the old fool his due; when he set the Fidelius Charm, he made it a strong one. I would have gotten through anyway, of course, but I doubt anyone else would be able to."

Snape knew what response was required of him.

"Your skills are beyond compare, my lord," he murmured.

"Yes, I know."

Once again, Voldemort waved his wand and moved into the house as though it belonged to him.

Once again, they went up the stairs, down the hallway, and into the study. Voldemort hung the scabbard in the same place he'd taken it from more than two hours earlier.

He turned and left the room. Snape followed.

Just before they reached the top of the stairs, Voldemort paused and looked into the nursery.

"No ... not there," he murmured. "This is the place it should be."

He spun on his heel and retraced his steps.

He took the scabbard down again and brought it into the nursery.

He placed it in the crib and drew the rumpled blanket up, smoothing the pale blue wool over the scabbard as though tucking in a sleepy child.

"I'll be back," Voldemort crooned. "When the time is right, I'll be back to reclaim you."

He straightened and looked to Snape who had stationed himself just outside the doorway.

"This is where it will end, Severus," he said. "This is where I will finally fulfil the prophecy. When the time is right, he will come here to me. He will come to this house to this room and 'the Boy Who Lived' will live no more!"

"That will be a glorious day, my lord," Snape said.

Voldemort approached Snape, trailing a long, thin finger down his cheek.

"And will you be by my side on that glorious day, old friend?"

Snape willed himself not to flinch away from that cold, disgusting touch.

"Of course, my lord," Snape replied as he bowed his head slightly. "It is my honour to serve you."

Voldemort glanced at the window and sighed. The very first pale pink fingers of dawn were beginning to colour the eastern sky.

"It's really too bad we don't have more time. I do so enjoy receiving your ... service."

Snape flushed, and Voldemort smiled his haughty, condescending smile.

They left the house only moments later.

As soon as they stepped outside the wards, Voldemort turned to Snape.

Snape steeled himself to step into Voldemort's repulsive embrace once more.

"Although I know how much you enjoy being close to me, Severus, I find I'm rather fatigued. I'm afraid I'm going to have to ask you to find your own way back."

"As you wish, my lord," Snape said.

"Do your best to hide your desolation."

"Every moment away from you is a desolate one, my lord," Snape said as he dropped to one knee and lifted the hem of his master's cloak to his lips.

"Would that all my followers were as faithful as you, old friend," Voldemort said, and with another loud crack that had Snape grimacing in pain, he was gone.

Snape reached deep within himself to gather the energy he needed to Apparate back to London.

"I'm so bloody tired I'll probably splinch myself all over the Bristol Channel," he muttered to himself.

And then he drew a deep breath and disappeared without a sound.

Snape was nearly stumbling with fatigue when he arrived outside the wards around Grimmauld Place.

As he passed through the wards and trudged up the pathway that led to the back door, he reflected that it was at times like this that he most missed his house at Spinner's End, mean and simple though it had been.

Although there were a few Ministry officials and Aurors who knew where his true allegiances were, he was officially a wanted man. The Ministry had warded him out of his own house and frozen his account at Gringotts. Minerva, of course, had been forced to terminate his employment, so Hogwarts was closed to him, as well.

That meant that other than his retreat in the Himalayas, which really was too far for everyday purposes, Grimmauld Place was the only location he could move in and out of freely.

Not that he had anyplace to go, he reflected ruefully.

Oh, he could visit Knockturn Alley once in a while because it was so corrupted and overrun with Death Eaters and other supporters of the Dark Lord that not even the Aurors went there unless they had no choice. And when there was a raid planned, Mad-eye or Tonks always managed to warn him to stay away, so it was relatively safe. He could occasionally visit Lucius or another of his so-called brothers, but after the abuse he'd suffered at their hands, he was understandably reluctant to be in their company.

He entered the kitchen, moved through the house and went up the stairs to the second floor bathroom. He used the facilities, thankful that he'd taken a shower the evening before, and that the bloody bastard hadn't done more than run a finger up and down his cheek. He always had an urgent need to shower after most of his encounters with his master once he vomited, of course.

Although his students wouldn't have believed it, Snape had always been fastidious in his grooming. He had, unfortunately, inherited his father's fine, thin hair which tended to become oily very quickly, in spite of frequent shampooing.

The only time he'd ever been less than scrupulous about his personal hygiene had been during a misguided attempt to discourage the Dark Lord's attentions. He'd gone several days without showering or washing his hair.

Voldemort's nose had wrinkled in distaste, but he'd said nothing. He'd merely cast a Body-Bind Curse and then a cleaning spell. Unfortunately, the cleaning spell he'd cast was one generally used to remove burnt food particles from pots and pans that had been left too long on the stove.

It had taken nearly two weeks for the deep scrapes and abrasions to heal.

He'd never neglected his toilette after that incident.

He left the bathroom and moved down the hall. He fully intended to go straight to his room and fall into bed, but as he neared Remus's bedroom, he noticed that the door was ajar, and there was a soft spill of light coming from within the room.

Snape decided that he should check on the injured man. It was just about time for him to have another dose of the potions, anyway.

Snape pushed the door open quietly.

Remus was leaning back against a pile of pillows and appeared to be sleeping. The young witch sitting in the chair by his bed, however, was quite awake.

Hermione jumped to her feet and rushed across the room. Just when it seemed she was going to throw herself into his arms, she halted.

"Are you all right?" she asked in a soft whisper as she glanced over her shoulder toward the bed.

"Has he had his latest dose of the antibiotics?" Snape asked, ignoring her question.

"About ten minutes ago. He just fell asleep."

"He's been awake all night? He'll never recover if he doesn't rest."

"He couldn't sleep. We sat up all night talking. I finally slipped a dose of a sleeping draught in with the rest of his potions."

"Are you all right?" she repeated.

"The bloody bastard took great delight in leaving me standing for five hours and then dragging me back and forth across the continent, but other than a headache and exhaustion, I'm fine. He didn't discover the substitution."

"Do you need a pain reliever? I put a bottle of the ibuprofen in the bathroom."

"I've already taken three."

"You should get some sleep, then," she said.

Snape noted the dark smudges of fatigue under her eyes.

"You should take your own advice," he said. "I see Potter and Weasley haven't lost any sleep worrying about my welfare."

"They sat up with Remus and me until after one o'clock," she said. "I finally insisted they go to bed."

"You should have gone to bed, as well."

"I will now that I know you're back safely."

"If you sit up keeping vigil every time I'm called away, Miss Granger, you'll lose a great deal of sleep," he said with a scowl.

"It's my sleep to lose, isn't it?" she said with equanimity.

And then she turned and headed for the stairs that led to her bedroom on the upper level.

Hermione was dragged from sleep when a hand crept over her waist and cupped her breast, the fingers pinching uncomfortably through the thin cotton of her nightshirt.

"Wha ... wha ..." she mumbled as she tried to twist away from the unexpected assault to reach for her wand.

"Calm down, Hermione," a husky voice whispered in her ear. "It's just me."

The clutch of fear she'd experienced as she awoke faded quickly when she recognised Ron's voice, but it was replaced by anger just as quickly.

"What do you think you're doing?" she hissed as she pushed his fingers away from her breast.

"We had a date, remember? I'm just getting you in the mood."

"If you think twisting my nipple off is going to get me 'in the mood', you've got another bloody think coming!"

Ron was immediately contrite. He moved his hand slowly over her stomach and then her breast in a soothing manner.

"You know I'd never hurt you, Hermione. I just like touching you."

He was spooned behind her on the narrow bed, and Hermione could feel his erection.

He nuzzled her neck and rubbed against her. He moved his hand down to cup her mound through her knickers.

In spite of being angry and exhausted, Hermione felt herself beginning to respond.

"Don't need these, do we?" Ron murmured and began tugging on her knickers. Hermione turned onto her back and lifted her hips to allow him to slide them down her legs.

Ron pushed her nightshirt up, exposing her breasts.

"So pretty," he murmured, and then he bent his head and drew a nipple into his mouth, sucking gently.

Hermione felt a jolt of pleasure radiate outward from her belly. She moaned softly.

Ron moved over her, covering her body with his. He fumbled between them, freeing his cock from his y-fronts, and guided himself into her.

"Bloody hell," Ron said in a ragged voice. "You feel so good."

Hermione concentrated on the gentle friction as he moved in and out of her. She moaned again and thrust her hips upward against him.

Far, far too soon, however, he began to drive into her erratically, his breathing becoming irregular.

"Wait, Ron," Hermione said in a frantic whisper. "Slow down!"

"Can't. Oh, fuck, I'm gonna come," he panted.

Two more quick thrusts and he spilled into her. He collapsed on top of her, his face buried in her neck as he drew in great gulps of air.

"Get off me, you prat! I can't breathe!" Hermione said as she pushed at his shoulder.

"That was bloody brilliant," he wheezed out as he rolled off her to flop down on his back beside her.

"Well, I'm certainly glad *one* of us enjoyed it."

"You mean you didn't ..."

"No, I didn't."

"Well, I heard you moaning. Something must have felt good."

"It *did* feel good. That doesn't mean I was ready for it to end."

"I couldn't help it. You're just too sexy for me to hold back," Ron said with a cheeky grin.

"No, Ron, I'm not 'too sexy' you're too selfish!"

Ron scowled at her. "What do you mean by that?"

Hermione sighed. "Never mind. If you don't know, I'm not going to try to explain it to you *again*."

Ron got out of bed and reached for his wand.

"Oh, I get it; you're still thinking it's *my* fault you're frigid!"

Hermione felt her temper rising, but she forced herself to speak calmly.

"You just keep on believing that; I'm too tired to argue with you," she said as she picked her wand up from the bedside table and cast a cleansing charm on herself before she pulled her nightshirt down.

"Well, I didn't tell you to sit up all night waiting for the greasy git to get home," he sneered as he used his own wand to cast a similar charm on himself before he pulled his y-fronts back up.

She couldn't hold her temper this time.

"Just get out, Ron!" she snapped. "Along with the emotional capacity of a teaspoon, you have all the sensitivity and compassion of a wounded hippogriff."

"I'm leaving," Ron said as he pulled on his jeans and a tee shirt. "My mum'll be here any minute anyway; it's nearly time for breakfast. We can talk after."

Hermione rolled her eyes. Not even insults could distract Ron when he had food on his mind. Maybe if she put a piece of chicken between her legs he'd concentrate on her long enough for her to be able to respond. She shook her head. The way he ate, it wouldn't take him but a few seconds longer than it took him now. Maybe not even as long, depending on how hungry he was and he was *always* hungry.

"I'm going back to sleep, but I do have one piece of advice for you," she said as she adjusted the covers and plumped her pillow.

"Yeah? What?"

"The next time you crawl into a woman's bed, you could at least take your socks off!"

She turned onto her side, settled her head down, and closed her eyes.

"What's wrong with socks? It's bloody *December*, and my feet were cold," Ron explained.

"Go away, Ronald."

"Aren't you going to have breakfast?" Ron asked.

"I'd rather sleep than eat," she mumbled into the pillow.

"Not me, I'm starving. I'll see you at lunch."

Hermione didn't answer, and Ron Apparated back to the bedroom that he and Harry shared.

Hermione tried to fall back asleep, but Ron's fumbling attempt at lovemaking had aroused her just enough to keep her awake and on edge.

With a sigh, she reached down and touched herself. She closed her eyes and tried to recapture the good feelings she'd had when Ron first entered her. She thought of her lover touching her, slowly and sweetly, arousing her and taking the time and effort to make sure she was satisfied.

It was just as she was falling asleep, after she'd brought herself to a shuddering climax, that she realised that the man in her fantasy didn't have red hair, but black. And the eyes gazing into hers, encouraging her to come over, hadn't been blue, but a deep, intense black.

Author's note: This story was written in response to the Post DH Challenge on The Petulant Poetess.

I chose prompt #5: Harry touches his scar; it hasn't pained him in 19 years. He

hears hooting, rolls over in bed to see Hedwig sweeping in the open

window at Privet Drive, and realizes that his 17th birthday isn't far

off. Go for it... a new seventh year for the lot.

I've basically begun my story where Half Blood Prince ends. This is the way seventh year and beyond might have gone; even, dare I say it should have gone!

Additional Author's note: My special thanks to Sampdoria. With her permission, Ron has left his socks on!

Chapter 14

Chapter 14 of 16

It's Christmas at Grimmauld Place. In the midst of war there is a brief interlude of peace and near-normalcy.

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Special thanks go to my beta reader, JuJuJenn. She makes sure I stay focused.

Fourteen

There was a lull in the war over the next several days. Christmas was coming, and it seemed even the Dark Lord was taking a break. There were fewer reports of attacks against Muggles. There were no appearances of the Dark Mark in the night skies. Snape was summoned less frequently, and when he was summoned, he was gone for only brief periods of time.

Although Ginny wasn't an Order member, she had been sworn to secrecy about Remus. The only other choices would have been to make her remain at Hogwarts over the holidays, or to hide Remus somewhere else. Neither alternative was attractive, so Arthur and Molly had sat down with their youngest child and explained the situation to her.

For her part, Ginny had been very happy to learn that Remus was still alive almost as much for Harry's sake as for Remus's own. Harry had already lost far too many people who were important to him.

While it wouldn't be on the scale of previous Christmas Eve celebrations, Molly still planned a small party for those confined to Grimmauld Place for the holiday. A Christmas tree, covered with magically non-melting icicles and ever-burning candles, stood in a corner near the fireplace. Knit stockings hung from the mantle, each with a name embroidered on the cuff. Even Snape had a stocking, much to his chagrin. He'd grumbled when Molly had hung it along side the others, but he hadn't insisted she remove it.

Molly set Harry, Ron, Hermione, and Ginny to dusting and cleaning the drawing room. When they were done, Remus, his wounds now completely healed, helped Molly string garlands of ivy and holly across the room.

Minerva left a mostly deserted Hogwarts in the care of Filius Flitwick and joined the others for dinner on Christmas Eve. Fred and George closed up their shop early and arrived at Grimmauld Place in plenty of time to sneak a few 'special' Christmas crackers in with the ones Molly had already bought.

The group ate the roasted goose, mashed potatoes, creamed spinach, and cranberry relish that Molly prepared and then retired to the drawing room for brandy and Yule cake.

Arthur tapped his wand on a small wooden box in the drawing room and tuned into the Wizarding Wireless Network, which was broadcasting a special program of Christmas music featuring Celestina Warbeck.

"Oh, I adore Celestina Warbeck's music," Molly said as she levitated a large tray into the room.

"It's a good job Phlegm ... er ... *Fleur* isn't here," Ginny said.

Harry, Ron, Fred, and George all snickered.

"Ginny!" Molly said as she cast a baleful look at her daughter. "You should be ashamed speaking so disrespectfully of your brother's wife."

"Oh, come on, Mum," Ginny said, not looking at all ashamed. "Last year she spent all of Christmas Eve rolling her eyes and complaining."

"Still ..."

"Where are Fleur and Bill tonight?" Remus asked, diverting Molly's attention from Ginny. "I would have liked to have talked to him."

"They're with Fleur's family. They did spend last Christmas with us, so it's only fair that they be with her family this year. Besides, with Fleur expecting, they thought it might be ... less stressful there."

"Oi," George said, "it's not like they didn't *want* to spend half the night snogging under the mistletoe."

"True enough," Fred agreed. "Their lips turning purple might have been a bit much, though."

"That was a simple design flaw," George said. "That piece of mistletoe was just the prototype. This year's model is much better."

Molly glanced at the piece of mistletoe hanging in the archway.

"George, you didn't!"

"Course not, Mum," George said, far too innocently. "No one's lips will turn purple tonight, I promise."

"Why don't we have our brandy now?" Arthur said. "And I'd love a piece of that Yule cake you baked today, dear."

Molly allowed herself to be distracted and cut the cake.

Arthur handed out snifters of brandy while Hermione and Ginny passed the plates around.

Alongside each piece of cake was a Christmas cracker.

Molly and Arthur pulled one of the crackers. There was the customary small bang, and two paper hats fell from the cracker.

Molly unfolded hers and put it on her head.

"How do I look?" she asked.

"Oh my," Minerva murmured.

"What?"

"Molly, dear ..." Arthur began.

Molly scowled and picked up the discarded cracker.

"This isn't one of the crackers I bought," she said with a sharp glance toward George and Fred, who were holding on to each other's shoulders, doubled over with laughter.

"What have you two done now?" Molly asked.

She flicked her wand, and a large hand mirror appeared. She grabbed it and peered into it.

And then she shrieked.

Under the paper hat, Molly's auburn hair was now striped red-and-white like a candy cane.

"Don't worry, Mum," Fred said. "Those stripes will be gone in a couple of days."

"A week at the most," George added.

"Are they all the same?" Ron asked as he picked up one of the crackers.

He and Harry pulled on opposite ends and grabbed the paper hats that fell out.

"That'd be boring, wouldn't it?" George said.

"Go ahead and try one on," Fred encouraged.

Ron happily unfolded one of the hats and put it on.

There was laughter as his hair turned a bright, emerald green.

The laughter ended abruptly when Snape jumped to his feet, clutching his arm.

"My apologies for spoiling the party," Snape said through lips thinned with pain.

"Oh, no," Hermione said softly.

"Minerva, I'll be ready to report to you in the morning."

"I'll Floo you," Minerva said.

He nodded.

"Do be careful, Severus," she added.

"Always."

His gaze swept the room.

"Don't wait up for me," he said, and then he strode out of the room. A few moments later, there was the sound of the kitchen door opening and then closing.

Although he'd just been sitting quietly in a chair in the corner, not really participating in the conversation or the laughter, the party lost its spirit after Snape left. His summons had been a graphic reminder of the reality of war. The dinner, the Yule cake, and the twins' outrageous Christmas crackers had been but a brief interlude.

Minerva, looking tired and worried, bid them all a Happy Christmas and returned to Hogwarts.

Fred and George gathered up the unused crackers, and a large piece of the leftover Yule cake, and returned to the apartment they shared over their shop.

Molly cleaned up the kitchen, and then she, Arthur and Ginny returned to the Burrow, promising to be back first thing in the morning.

"Anyone want another brandy?" Ron asked, holding up the half-empty bottle.

"Now that Molly isn't here to 'tut-tut' over me, I think I want something a bit stronger," Remus said. He went to the sideboard and found a bottle of Firewhisky.

"I'll have some of that, then," Ron said with a grin. "She not here to 'tut-tut' over me, either." He held his brandy snifter out, and Remus poured him a couple of inches.

"Gonna have some, Harry?" Ron asked.

"Why not?" Harry held out his glass and Remus poured.

"Hermione?" Remus asked.

Hermione hesitated a moment, and then she shrugged.

"Maybe just a little."

Remus poured an inch of the Firewhisky into her glass.

"Sip it, don't gulp it," he warned. "It's quite potent especially if you're not used to it."

Ron apparently didn't feel the need to heed the older wizard's advice. By the time Remus had finished pouring Hermione's drink, Ron had swallowed half the Firewhisky in his glass and was ready for more.

"Top this off would you?" Ron said to Remus.

"Maybe you shouldn't drink too much, Ron," Hermione said.

"And maybe you should drink more. Might loosen you up a bit," Ron said with a grin as he slipped his arm around her waist and drew her closer. "You know help you shed some of your inhibitions, like."

"And I see you have no inhibitions at all," Hermione said in a scathing tone as she ducked out of Ron's clumsy embrace.

"Why don't we have a game of chess, Ron?" Remus asked, stepping between him and Hermione. "I haven't played in while."

"I'll set up the chess board," Harry said. He seemed glad to have something to do to remove himself from an uncomfortable position between his two best friends.

"Fine," Ron muttered.

Harry sat next to Ron offering suggestions, most of which Ron ignored.

Hermione sat next to Remus, but although he asked for her opinion on each move, it was obvious that her mind wasn't on the game.

After every third or fourth move that he made, Ron would get up and pour more Firewhisky into his glass.

Harry matched him drink for drink and after about ninety minutes, both of them were close to being totally pissed.

"Check and mate," Remus said.

Ron stared at the board for a moment, and then he started to laugh.

"I must be drunker than I thought. I don't remember the last time I lost a game of chess."

"You won't remember losing this one, either," Hermione murmured under her breath.

Ron either didn't hear her, or chose to ignore her, but Remus grinned.

"Maybe it's time you two went to bed," he suggested.

Harry yawned hugely. "Yeah, I'm knackered. Come on, Ron."

Ron got to his feet, swaying slightly.

"Are you coming up, Hermione?" Harry asked.

"No, I'm not tired."

"He told us not to wait up for him," Ron said.

"I'm not waiting up ... I'm just not tired yet," Hermione insisted.

Harry shook his head slightly, but didn't say anything more.

Ron just shrugged. "Suit yourself, then. See you in the morning."

As soon as Harry and Ron had gone upstairs, Hermione got to her feet and started pacing.

Remus went to the sideboard and poured himself another drink. Without asking, he poured one for Hermione and handed it to her.

"Thanks," she said. She took a quick sip. "I'm not usually much of a drinker, but ..."

"I know it's none of my business, but I couldn't help but notice that things are a bit ... strained ... between you and Ron. Everything all right?"

Hermione shook her head. "I love Ron, I really do," she said. "But I think we made a huge mistake by changing our relationship."

Remus sat down on the sofa and patted the seat next to him.

"Sit down, Hermione. You're making me tired just watching you pace."

Hermione took another sip of her drink, and then she went and sat next to Remus on the sofa.

"He was a better friend than he is a boyfriend."

Remus arched his brow at her, and Hermione blushed.

"That's probably more than you wanted to know."

Remus smiled. "I understand. But maybe it's not entirely Ron's fault. These are difficult times, difficult circumstances. You and Ron haven't had the opportunity to allow your relationship to develop in any kind of normal fashion. You can't go out on dates. You have no privacy to speak of ..."

"I never said it was all Ron's fault," Hermione said.

"Maybe it's not anybody's fault," Remus said gently. "Maybe you two just weren't meant to be together."

"He thinks we are."

Remus shrugged. "You both have to want a relationship to make it work. If you're not sure, or you're not comfortable with how the relationship is going, you have to end it.

"And you haven't been happy with your romantic relationship for a while, have you?" he asked

Hermione shook her head. "No, I haven't. But we have to work together with the Order, with Harry. And I'd miss his friendship."

"Would you be able to continue working with Ron if you weren't ... involved ... with him? Could you still be friends?"

"I think I could. I'm not so sure about Ron, though."

"Sometimes you have to do what you know is right, instead of what's easy. Once you've reached a decision, the important thing is not to waver not to give false hope. That really would be unfair. You must make a clean break."

"Is that what you did with Tonks?" Hermione asked shrewdly.

Remus gave her a small, sad smile. "Yes."

He drained his glass and put it on the side table.

"And were you able to stay friends?"

"It was a bit awkward at first. Like you and Ron, Nymphadora and I had to work together. It got easier as time went by.

"She's involved with Charlie Weasley now, you know."

"No, I didn't know that. I didn't think Charlie had time for anything but taking care of his dragons."

"In his spare time, Charlie recruits for the Order. Nymphadora was sent to Romania to meet some of those recruits. Things progressed from there."

"Does Mrs. Weasley know?" she asked. "She hasn't said anything, and I'm sure she would have she's been trying to marry Charlie off for years."

"I'm not sure that they're quite ready for marriage. It's a pretty recent development. They haven't told many people."

"How did you find out?" Hermione wanted to know.

Remus smiled. "Because Nymphadora and I have managed to remain friends, she confided in me. She told me when she visited me last week."

"And you're happy for her, aren't you?" Hermione asked.

"Yes, I am. I've never wanted anything but the best for her."

Hermione up-ended her own glass and finished her drink. She put the empty glass on the table next to Remus's.

"I hope Ron and I can work things out the way you and Tonks have."

"You've decided to end it, then?" Remus asked.

Hermione nodded. "I'd pretty much already decided, but talking to you helped me realise that the decision is the right one for me. I just don't feel that way about him. And I can't pretend any longer that I do."

Remus reached out and took Hermione's hand in his. He squeezed it gently.

"He'll be hurt at first, but it's kinder in the end."

Hermione pressed Remus's hand in return.

"I hope you're right."

Before they could say any more, they heard the sound of the kitchen door opening and then closing. They both stood up and turned toward the sound.

A moment later, Snape strode into the room.

He pulled up short when he saw them standing there.

"I told you not to wait up for me," he snarled. "I'm not a wayward teenager out after curfew!"

"You know I'm rather nocturnal, Severus," Remus said in a reasonable tone. "I seldom go to sleep before one or two in the morning and it's barely gone midnight."

"And what's your excuse, Miss Granger?" Snape sneered.

"Remus and I were talking," she said coolly. "Not that that's any of your business."

Snape seemed a bit taken aback by Hermione's response.

"I'll leave you to your little *tête-a-tête*, then," he said curtly.

He brushed past them and went up the stairs. A minute later, they heard the old pipes begin to clang and bang as the shower started.

"I shouldn't have been cheeky with him," Hermione said in a distressed tone.

"You were hardly cheeky. Besides, he was rude to both of us."

"I shouldn't have snapped back at him. It was a bad meeting tonight."

"Are there ever any good ones?" Remus asked.

"He's taking a shower. That means ..."

"... the bloody bastard raped him."

Hermione nodded. "He was probably sick besides."

Remus sighed. "And I thought I had it rough with Greyback. At least I never had to worry about being raped."

"I guess his bad moods are understandable, then."

"When will it end, Remus?"

"I don't know," Remus said as he put a comforting arm across her shoulder.

"I'm so tired of this," Hermione said. "And if I'm tired of it, I can only imagine how he feels."

"We all just have to hang in there and hope it ends soon."

"It feels futile sometimes."

"As soon as we give up hope, he wins," Remus insisted.

"You're right. I know you're right. Thank you," Hermione said.

Impulsively, she threw her arms around him and gave him a hug.

"Anytime," Remus said with a smile as he returned her hug.

Many months later, Remus would wonder if it was at that moment that his feelings for Hermione began to change.

Author's note: My sincere apologies for the long, long delay in up-dating this story. I've repeatedly stated that I would never abandon a story, and I won't abandon this one. That being said, however, I must admit that I've come to realise the folly of beginning to post a story before it's finished. (Or mostly finished, at least.) It seems I've developed a rather large plot hole, and filling it is proving much more difficult than I ever thought it could be.

My New Year's Resolution is to work through the plotting of this story and finish it. I know where it's going, I just have to work out how to get there from here. I appreciate your patience.

I do have another chapter finished and nearly ready to post within the next week or so.

Thank you so much for your support and understanding.

Fifteen

Chapter 15 of 16

The holidays continue at Grimmauld Place. Hermione and Ron have a serious discussion. Fred and George are going to a New Year's Eve party in Muggle London, and they have extra tickets!

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Special thanks go to my beta reader, JuJuJenn. She makes sure I stay focused.

Fifteen

At about seven o'clock on Christmas morning, Hermione knocked loudly on Ron and Harry's door and then slipped into their room carrying two vials.

"Wake up, you two," Hermione chirped in a cheery voice. She shook Harry's shoulder and gave Ron's arse a not-so-gentle kick with her slipper-clad foot.

"Great Merlin's balls my head aches," Ron moaned as he sat up in his bed.

"Drink this, you'll feel better," she said as she handed Ron one of the vials. She turned toward Harry's bed and handed him the other one.

"Thanks, Hermione," Harry said as he gratefully swallowed the potion that she provided.

"Does this come with a lecture?" Ron asked as he squinted against the glare coming in from the window. "Not that we don't deserve one."

"It's Christmas. No lectures today. Just the fact that you realise you deserve one is a step in the right direction."

"Are my parents here yet?" Ron shuddered as he swallowed the potion and then clamped a hand over his mouth, afraid he might be sick.

"She Flooed a couple of minutes ago, which is why I came to wake you up."

"Thanks for that," Harry said.

"Oi, she wouldn't care that it's Christmas; she'd just lecture us anyway ... or me, at least. She thinks Harry's a saint."

Harry flushed. "Nah, she doesn't."

"Of course she does," Ron insisted. "That's why I like having you next to me when I face her."

"Just hurry and get up," Hermione said. "Go brush your teeth and shower; get the smell off you or else she'll know what you've been up to anyway."

"Hey, we're both adults," Ron said.

"Then go down the way you are," Hermione said in a reasonable tone. "See if I care."

"I've got the shower first," Ron said as he threw back the covers and jumped out of bed. His head was already pounding a lot less, and the cobwebs were breaking up.

"Go on, then," Harry said. "You need it more than I do."

"You drank just as much as I did."

"Yeah, but I've got more tolerance for alcohol than you do."

"Right."

"You two are gormless," Hermione said with a grin. "I'll see you both at breakfast."

"Thanks again," Harry said.

"Consider it your Christmas present."

Harry and Ron both laughed, and Hermione left them to their morning routine.

Hermione's quick-thinking intervention had saved Ron and Harry from one of Molly's lectures, and the rest of the morning passed uneventfully.

Minerva Flooed into Grimmauld Place before dinner, and she and Snape locked themselves in the library for nearly an hour. When Minerva came out, she was alone.

"Where's Severus?" Molly asked. "Dinner is nearly ready."

"He asked me to make his apologies," Minerva said. "He's ... not feeling well."

Molly shook her head. "I'll bring him a tray."

"I'm sure he'll appreciate that, Molly. Thank you."

Dinner was a subdued affair, everyone acutely aware of Snape's absence and the reason for it.

Several hours later, Arthur was able to persuade Snape to come down to the kitchen and share a pot of tea and a plate of ginger biscuits with them all.

Snape even managed a small smile as Fred and George teased Molly about her candy-cane-striped hair.

By the time the last biscuit was gone, the mood in the room was more relaxed, and they could almost forget that there was a war on.

On Boxing Day, Hermione pulled Ron aside and told him she needed to speak with him.

"I'll come to your room tonight," Ron said as he grinned at her.

"No. Let's meet in the library," she replied. "Nine o'clock?"

"Sure," Ron said, but he was no longer smiling.

"I'm sorry, Ron."

They were sitting side-by-side on a battered old settee in the Black library.

"I thought you were in love with me!"

"I thought I was, too," she replied in a small, sad voice. "I was wrong."

"You're not in love with Harry, are you?"

"I love Harry like a brother."

"Who else is there, then? Who are you in love with?"

"Sometimes it isn't about being in love with someone else. Sometimes it's about not being in love at all."

"I don't understand."

"I can't make it any plainer. I love you, but I love you the same way I love Harry like a brother."

Ron's eyes narrowed dangerously.

"You've gone and fallen in love with the greasy git, haven't you? Things were all right between us until you started working with him at that 'private lab' of his! What's he done to you?"

"He hasn't done anything to me."

"He's probably got you under the Imperius," Ron declared.

"Don't be ridiculous."

"So you're not in love with him?"

Knowing Ron as well as she did, Hermione had anticipated that he would ask that question. She had searched her own heart to find the answer.

Was she in love with Severus Snape?

She certainly respected him. His intelligence was appealing. His voice had a low, seductive timbre, which she was sure he was aware of and used to his advantage when he needed to. He could be sarcastic, abrasive, and petty, but he had a deep core of honour and morality, as well.

There was no denying she was attracted to him. Given the opportunity to nurture that attraction, she was sure she would have no difficulty falling in love with him.

But as things stood, with all the uncertainties of the war, she could answer Ron honestly.

"No, I'm not in love with him."

"Don't lie to me!" Ron shouted as he jumped to his feet.

"I'm not lying to you."

"I won't let him take you away from me."

Hermione had sworn to herself that she wouldn't lose her temper, but she couldn't help but react to Ron's shouted words.

"He didn't take me away from you / took me away from you! It was my decision, Ron *mine!*"

"And what'll I tell everyone when they ask why we're not together any more?"

"Tell them you broke up with me, if that'll make you feel better. I don't care."

Ron looked at her as if seeing her for the first time. Then he turned and stomped out of the room, slamming the door loudly as he left.

The next few days were tense.

Ron and Hermione avoided each other as much as they could in the confined space of Grimmauld Place. Hermione spent a lot of time at the lab in the Himalayas. There were always potions to be brewed, and even if there weren't, the library there was far superior to the one in the Black house.

When they couldn't avoid each other, Hermione tried to carry on as though nothing was wrong between them.

Ron ignored her, directing his comments to Harry, who was placed in the unenviable position of having to act as an intermediary between his two best friends.

Because Ron had taken Hermione at her word and had told his parents that the break-up was his idea, Molly was actually cooler toward Ron than she was towards Hermione.

Remus remained neutral. He didn't campaign to get them back together (unlike Ginny and Molly), and he offered no advice (unlike Fred and George, who had plenty to say).

Snape, of course, ignored the situation entirely.

By the morning of New Year's Eve, Ron's ire had begun to dissipate a bit. The three of them had just finished breakfast the first time in nearly a week that Ron had actually sat down at the same time as Hermione for a meal.

"It's about time you two came to your senses and stopped acting so stupid," Harry said.

Hermione resisted the urge to point out that she wasn't the one who'd been acting stupidly.

"Yeah, well, it's going to take some getting used to," Ron grumbled.

"I know I've said it before," Hermione said, "but I really am sorry, Ron."

He looked at her and smiled slightly.

"I'm sorry, too, Hermione. I've been acting like a git."

"You'll find someone else someone you're better suited to."

"Of course I will. With my boyish charm and rakish good looks, that's a given."

Hermione rolled her eyes. "You're such a wanker," she said.

"Well, I have to be now, don't I? My girlfriend's gone and thrown me over."

Harry choked on his pumpkin juice, and Ron and Hermione both pounded him on the back.

"Now I know you two are all right," Harry said when he finally got his coughing under control.

"We're fine, aren't we?" Hermione said to Ron.

"Yeah, we're fine."

"In that case, did you finish the chapter that Snape told you to read?"

"Are you going to start nagging me again?" Ron asked with a scowl.

"Of course I am. But as your friend, instead of your girlfriend, it won't annoy you nearly as much."

"Don't bet on it," Ron mumbled. But he pulled out *Dark*, *Darker*, *Darkest* and opened it on the table in front of him.

Early that evening, Hermione, Harry, Ron, and Remus were sitting in the parlour talking when Fred and George arrived.

"What are you two doing here?" Ron asked. "I thought you were going to some party tonight."

"We are," Fred said. "But it won't really get started until at least eight o'clock."

"We've come to invite the lot of you to come with us," George added.

"We can't go to a party!" Hermione exclaimed.

"Why not?" Ron asked. "This is the first year we're old enough to celebrate New Year's Eve, and we're stuck here."

"There's a war on, or have you forgotten?" Hermione scolded.

"Not to worry, Hermione," George said. "The party's in Muggle London. There won't be any Death Eaters invited."

"There may be spies about ..." Hermione began.

"Have you been to the chemist lately, Miss Granger?" said Snape from the doorway.

"What?" Hermione turned to look at Snape. And then her eyes widened as she realised what he'd said.

"Well, that would certainly be a solution. I find it difficult to believe, however, that you would approve of our going to a party," she said with a smile.

Snape shrugged. "It might actually be a good idea. Being cooped up here can certainly put a strain on one's nerves. After an evening of frivolity, you may come back more prepared to concentrate on your lessons."

"Yeah," Ron said. "Snape's right."

Snape gave a soft snort.

"You're a self-serving little tosser, aren't you?" Snape said.

"If that means I'll say anything to get out of this house for a few hours, then, yeah, I'm a self-serving tosser," Ron agreed without a trace of rancour. "Now, what's this solution you're talking about?"

Hermione turned back and stared intently at Harry. Then she raised her wand and aimed it at him.

Before their eyes, he began to change.

His hair lightened and began to wave slightly, and then it lengthened, spilling over his forehead and covering any trace of his scar. His skin darkened a bit, giving it a sun-kissed look as though he had just stepped off a beach on the Riviera, or some place equally warm. His nose broadened, his lips thinned, and his eyes changed from bright green to hazel.

"Well done, Miss Granger," Snape said as he peered at her handiwork.

"Thank you."

"Blimey," Ron said to Harry, "you don't look anything like yourself."

"Your turn, Ron," Hermione said.

"Hey, there's no improving on perfection, but you can try."

Hermione sighed, and Fred and George both snickered.

With a wicked gleam in her eye, Hermione raised her wand.

Ron seemed to shrink as his lanky frame filled out, becoming thicker and more muscular. His nose shortened, his lips became fuller, and his eyes turned from bright blue to muddy brown. Hermione hesitated over his hair. There were still streaks of emerald green visible in between the red locks; the effects of the Christmas cracker hadn't entirely faded yet. His hair looked like the leaves of a deciduous tree one that had not quite completed its Autumnal change.

"Sorry, Ron," Hermione muttered as she waved her wand again.

And then Ron's hair disappeared, leaving him completely bald. As if to compensate, she added a scraggly brown moustache and a wispy beard.

"You look like a boxer," George said.

"Oi, what'd you do to my hair?" Ron said as he fingered the top of his bald head.

"There was no way to get the green out."

"I'd rather have green hair than no hair."

"Green hair would draw attention," Hermione explained.

"And a bald head won't?" Ron whinged.

"Lots of Muggle men shave their heads," George said. "And with all those muscles, the girls will be falling over you."

"You think so?"

Fred and George both nodded solemnly.

Ron didn't seem convinced.

"You can go out bald," Snape interjected, "or you can have your green hair back and remain here this evening. The choice is yours."

"Well, if you're going to put it that way ..."

"I am."

Everyone laughed.

Hermione turned toward Remus and tilted her head thoughtfully.

"I'm not sure I should go," Remus said before Hermione could start forming his glamour.

"Why shouldn't you?" Harry asked.

"Well ... I'm supposed to be dead. What if I'm seen?"

"Believe me, when I get done with you, no one will recognise you," Hermione said.

"No one would recognise any of us," Harry said.

Remus turned to Snape.

"What do you think, Severus?"

"I think in the weeks to come, you'll be heartily sick of this place. Right now, the Dark Lord isn't paying much attention to the Muggle world. Take advantage while you can because you may not have another opportunity.

"Besides, this bunch of reprobates needs someone to keep an eye on them."

Remus grinned.

"All right then, Hermione work your magic on me," he said, and Hermione raised her wand.

Remus's hair turned from sandy-brown to a deep auburn shade. His eyes changed from amber-gold to a bright sapphire blue. His moustache disappeared, but a small, neat goatee graced his chin. His skin paled, and freckles appeared across his nose and cheeks. He looked at least ten years younger.

"You look like one of us now," Fred said.

"Yeah, you could pass for one of our brothers tonight," George added.

"All right, let's party!" Ron said enthusiastically.

"Do your glamour now, Hermione," Harry said.

"Oh, I don't feel like going to a party."

"You have to come; it won't be any fun without you."

"Sure it will. You can have a boys' night out. I'd just be in the way."

"Nonsense, Miss Granger," Snape said. "You need a respite just as much as the others do."

"In that case, are you coming with us?" Hermione said.

"Don't be absurd."

"I'm not being absurd. You're under as much strain as we are more, even. If anyone deserves a night of 'frivolity', it's you."

"I don't frivol, Miss Granger," Snape said. He somehow managed to look disdainful and dignified at the same time.

"Maybe you should," Hermione shot back. "At least once in a while."

"Hermione's right, Severus," Remus said. "You should come with us."

Snape threw Remus a withering glare.

"I have things to see to, duties to perform for Minerva."

"I was with you and Minerva this morning," Remus said. "I don't recall her giving you any additional duties."

"Your recollection is faulty."

"No, it isn't."

"Come on, Snape," Harry said. "You're holding up the party. Let Hermione give you a glamour and let's go."

"I'm quite capable of performing a glamour," Snape replied, apparently affronted.

"Prove it," Hermione challenged.

"Oh, very well," Snape said. "But when I sit in a corner and fail to participate in your foolishness, don't say I didn't warn you."

He closed his eyes and his appearance began to alter.

His hair shortened, became thicker, and developed a wave, although it remained black as sin. His skin, usually pale and sallow, warmed and brightened. His lips filled out, and his nose, while still a bit large, lost its hook. The frown lines between his eyes and around his mouth smoothed out.

He opened his eyes and Hermione noticed that while they were still dark, they no longer seemed cold and unreadable.

"Satisfied?" he said through gritted teeth teeth that were less crooked and less yellowed.

Hermione looked him up and down. He was still formidable looking, but less intimidating. He looked younger and less stressed.

"Holy shite!" Ron said. "Look at that hair it's curly, like a girl's."

"Ron!"

Snape held a hand up, keeping her from further comment.

"I beg your pardon, Weasley it's wavy not curly, and at least I have hair."

Ron's hand flew to his bald pate.

"Yeah, I guess you're right."

Hermione relaxed a bit as a confrontation was avoided.

"Do your glamour, Hermione," Ron urged. "I can't wait to leave."

Hermione nodded and closed her eyes in concentration.

Her hair smoothed out, becoming long and straight. It's colour didn't change, but there were streaks of gold and honey running through it now. Her facial features shifted slightly; her cheekbones became more prominent, her chin developed a dimple, and her nose turned up very slightly. Her eyes changed from brown to violet, and her lashes lengthened, framing her eyes in dark spikes. A small beauty mark appeared at the corner of her mouth.

"Great Merlin's Y-fronts, you're beautiful! Now I wish I hadn't let you break up with me."

"As if you could have stopped her," George said. "And I thought you told us you broke up with her?"

Ron flushed slightly.

"It was a mutual decision, wasn't it, Ron?" Hermione said before Ron could speak.

Ron sent her a grateful look.

"Yeah ... it was mutual."

"Are we going to stand around all night talking, or are we going to party?" Fred asked.

"I'm ready," Hermione said.

"Where are we going?" Remus asked.

"Liverpool," George said. "Some Muggle singing group used to play there before they became famous. The Insects, the Spiders ... something like that."

"The Beatles?" Remus and Snape spoke almost in unison.

"Yeah, that's it ... the Beetles. I knew it was some kind of bug."

Snape shook his head, and Remus grinned.

"Do you know where it is, Severus?" Remus asked.

"Of course."

"Fred or George can take Ron. One of us can take Harry, and the other Hermione."

"I'll take Potter."

"Then I guess you're riding with me, Hermione," Remus said as he held out his arm.

"If I recall correctly, the club's on Mathew Street," Snape said. "We can Apparate to the Victoria Street station. It's only a short walk from there."

"We should all cast Disillusioning Charms on ourselves," Remus said. "The station will be crowded, but I think if the seven of us suddenly appeared, we'd be noticed."

"Did you make reservations?" Snape asked George. "I imagine the place will be packed."

"We've got tickets," Fred said. "One of our Muggle suppliers actually rented the club out for the night. He was giving tickets to all his customers. We got eight of them."

"Good. I'd hate to have to Imperius the bouncer."

They all cast the Disillusioning Charms. Fred took Ron's arm and Disapparated, followed by George, Harry and Snape, and Remus and Hermione.

Only moments later, the seven of them were pushed together in the middle of the crowded station. They made their way to the exit, dropping their Disillusionment Charms one at a time, to avoid being noticed.

"Which way?" Harry asked.

"I'd say we should just follow the crowd," Snape replied. He indicated the stream of people walking down Victoria Street.

"Our supplier did say it was going to be a big party," George said.

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Chapter 16

Chapter 16 of 16

It's New Year's Eve, and Fred and George are taking Harry, Ron, and Hermione to a party in Muggle London. Even Remus is going ... and so is a reluctant Severus Snape!

Disclaimer: All characters and settings of Potterverse are the property of J.K. Rowling and other sundry entities. Only the plot belongs to me. I am making no money. I play in this universe for the sheer joy of it. My only payment is the kind reviews and comments of those who read and enjoy my tale. This story is canon-compliant through HBP. DH has, for the most part, been happily disregarded, especially that sappy epilogue!

Special thanks go to my beta reader, JuJuJenn. She makes sure I stay focused.

Author's note: In one way, I was happy to see this story on the "Haunting You for an Update" list -- that means people like the story and want to read more of it. In another way, it made me sad when I realised that it has been more than eight months since I posted a chapter.

As some of you may know, I lost my dad a few months ago. The toll that took on me made it very difficult for me to summon the emotional energy I needed to get back into this story. I'm trying very hard to get back into my writing, and I've had some success. I have not abandoned this story, and I'm truly grateful to every one who reads it. I promise that it won't be eight months before I update again. I thank you for your patience and understanding.

Sixteen

When they arrived at the Cavern, George handed their tickets to the man at the door, and they were allowed inside.

Their table was a small one in a corner, rather closer to the stage than Snape liked, and more suited for four than for seven. A club employee obligingly found them some extra chairs, and they settled themselves in.

The music was already blasting from the speakers, and a pall of smoke hung in the air.

"I just saw our supplier," George was nearly yelling to be heard over the pounding beat of the music. "He says the buffet will be open in about an hour. Fred and I are going to the bar to get drinks. What'll you have?"

"We'll all be deaf in an hour," Snape grumbled. "And let's not forget the nicotine poisoning, which has probably already begun."

Remus chuckled. "Oh, lighten up, Sev. It's just one night. I doubt you'll develop lung cancer that quickly. Have a drink and try to relax."

Snape snorted, but settled into a chair jammed into the corner, his arms crossed over his chest.

"Scotch," he said to George.

"Any particular brand?" George asked. "I wouldn't want to get you a glass of bad Scotch on your first night off in years."

"There's no such thing as bad Scotch -- there's only good Scotch and better Scotch, but I'll take Glenlivet if they have it."

"Sounds good to me," Remus said.

"I don't guess they'll have Butterbeer, huh?" Ron asked. "Guess I'll have Scotch, as well."

"Make it easy on yourself," Hermione shouted. "Just get Scotch for everyone."

George nodded, and he and Fred began pushing their way towards the bar.

The ear-pounding music made conversation difficult, so instead they settled for watching the crowded dance floor -- at least four of them did.

Snape watched them.

Potter's eyes were bright with excitement. They flitted from one gyrating couple to the next, and his feet tapped the floor in time to the raucous beat of the music.

Weasley was blatantly flirting with a young woman at the next table. She was part of a group, all female, that Snape pegged as shop assistants or secretaries.

Granger's foot was also tapping to the music, but she was watching the musicians rather than the dancers.

And Lupin ... Lupin was watching Granger.

Oh, he wasn't obvious about it. A casual observer might not even notice his guarded scrutiny of the young witch. But Snape had trained himself to notice what casual observers missed. And there was no doubt in his mind that Lupin wasn't looking at Hermione as a former student, or even as a fellow Order member.

Before Snape could speculate further, Fred and George were back. Fred carried a tray with several glasses on it, and George had a bottle clutched in each hand.

"The bar's so jammed, it would take us an hour to get another round," Fred explained as he put the tray down in the middle of the table.

"We thought it was just easier to get a bottle ... or two!" George said happily. He put one bottle down and tore the seal from the second. With a few quick flicks of his wrist, he filled the glasses.

"Good move," Ron said as he picked up one of the glasses and downed the contents in one gulp. He held out his empty glass, and George refilled it.

"Oi, brother, take it easy," Fred cautioned.

"I'm just celebrating the New Year," Ron said as he took a gulp from his second glass.

"Keep drinking like that, Weasley," Snape said dryly, "and you'll be unconscious by midnight – you won't see the New Year."

Ron shrugged, but he put the glass down.

"Want to dance, Hermione?" Fred asked, holding his hand out to her.

"Sure," she replied. She took his hand, and they moved out onto the crowded dance floor.

"Come on, Harry," Ron said as he got to his feet. "Let's ask a couple of those girls to dance."

"I'm not much of a dancer," Harry replied.

"Doesn't matter," George said. "No one out there knows how to dance. But let me show you how it's done."

He walked over to the table next to them, the one with all the young women.

He leaned down and whispered to one of them. She nodded. Then he turned and indicated Harry and Ron, and two of the other girls giggled and then nodded as well.

A minute later, six more gyrating bodies had joined the throng on the dance floor.

Thankfully, the band stopped playing when the buffet was served, so the group was able to sit around their table and talk while they ate without having to shout at each other.

Although they had little fear of being recognised, they centred their conversation on neutral topics, and all were careful to avoid mentioning wizards, Muggles, Dark Lords, or the Order of the Phoenix. Although there were no Death Eaters about, there was no point in stirring up the curiosity of any Muggles who might overhear their words. It was New Year's Eve, a time of celebration; none of them wanted to have to Oblivate someone simply because they'd been careless.

Hermione was curious as to how both Remus and Severus had known of the Muggle group whose roots were sunk deep in the Cavern.

"Remus," she asked, "how did you know it was the Beatles who got their start here?"

"I have a cousin who was a huge fan," Remus said. "We visited that side of the family on a regular basis, so I had a lot of exposure."

Remus then turned to Snape.

"How did you know about them, Severus?"

For a moment Snape considered ignoring the question. Then he shrugged. It was a social occasion, after all.

"While we didn't spend a lot of time with my father's side of the family, there was some contact. The Beatles' influence on the music world and on popular culture was impossible to ignore entirely, no matter how hard one tried."

"Well, their music is certainly more tolerable than the Weird Sisters," Hermione said.

"I like the Weird Sisters," Ron put in.

"I'll have to agree with Hermione on that one, Ron," Remus said.

"As will I," Snape said.

Ron scowled, and for a moment Hermione feared that he would say something that would ruin the pleasant evening that everyone, even an initially reluctant Snape, was enjoying.

Ron, too, must have realised how important it was to maintain the tenuous peace that had been established.

"Everyone's entitled to an opinion, I guess," he said as he scooped up another small sandwich from his plate and took a bite.

Hermione breathed a sigh of relief and returned her attention to her own plate.

When the food was cleared away, the band took the stage once more.

As midnight approached, the sense of anticipation in the room heightened. The music got louder, the crowd got noisier, and the dancers became even less inhibited as they bounced and jounced against each other.

Fred and George, Harry, Ron, and Hermione, along with several of the girls from the table next to theirs, had formed into a loose circle within the larger group of dancers.

Remus and Snape were sitting at the table, watching the madness around them. Remus refilled his glass and held the bottle over Snape's glass with a questioning look.

Snape shook his head. He'd had one full jigger before he'd eaten, and had been nursing a second since his meal. He had no intention of getting drunk.

"Someone will have to see this lot home," he shouted into Remus's ear to make himself heard over the deafening noise.

"Harry and Ron, at least," Remus agreed. "I don't think Hermione's had more than two drinks. And Fred and George seem all right."

"And who'll see you home?" Snape said with a snort.

"Oh, I'm a bit snookered, I admit," Remus said with a slightly off-kilter grin. "But you know that with my metabolism the alcohol will leave my system quickly once I stop drinking."

He upended his glass and then banged it down on the table.

"And now I've stopped. I'll be fine by the time we're ready to leave."

A few minutes before midnight, their host jumped up onto the stage. He waved the band to silence, and there were cries of protest from the sweaty tangle of dancers on the floor.

"It's almost time, folks," the emcee said over the boos and hisses rising from the crowd. "Let's get everyone on the dance floor so we can welcome in the New Year right!"

Although most of the crowd was already on the dance floor, a few stragglers joined the mob.

"I still see a few wallflowers out there," the emcee said a few moments later. "Come on, now – don't make me go out there and drag you out here!"

"As if," Snape muttered as he sank lower in his chair.

Remus chuckled and got to his feet.

"Oh, let's go join the others, Sev. None of us may be here next New Year's Eve. *Carpe diem* and all that."

Snape didn't comment, but he did stand up.

Before he and Remus took two steps, however, Hermione was standing next to them.

"Hurry!" she said, her eyes bright with excitement. "It's nearly midnight!"

"I'm coming, I'm coming," Remus said with a smile as he moved toward the dance floor.

When Snape still held back, she reached out and grasped one of his hands, pulling him toward the crowd.

Snape wanted to balk, but knew he couldn't risk making a scene.

He settled for pushing ahead of her and taking the lead, tugging on her hand when she got momentarily lost in the crush of people.

"I thought you were in a hurry to join the others," he said as he stopped and watched her try to move past a rather large, and very drunken, reveller.

"You can join me any time, ducky," the man said with an idiotic grin.

He brushed his sausage-shaped fingers across the front of Hermione's blouse.

All concerns about making a scene vanished. Snape moved back toward the man and grasped his wrist, twisting his arm back and up between his shoulder blades.

"Hey!" the man shouted.

"Stop it!" Hermione said as she clutched at Snape's hand, trying to break his hold on the hapless Muggle.

"This man assaulted you."

"He made a drunken pass; he won't even remember in the morning."

"In that case, he won't remember how he dislocated his shoulder, either," Snape said as he hitched the man's arm up another notch.

"Let him go. Please, Severus, don't spoil the evening. Just let him go." She pulled at his hand again.

Snape saw the pleading look in her eyes and relented.

He released the man's arm and gave him a not-so-gentle shove away from Hermione.

"I hate drunks," he muttered.

"Ten!"

"Quick – we need to get to Harry and the others."

Since she was still grasping his hand, she pulled him along as she moved toward her friends.

"Seven!"

"There you are!" Harry said with a huge smile across his face. "Here."

He thrust a noise maker into her hand.

"Five!"

Hermione happily blew through the cardboard tube, adding to the din.

"Three!"

"Two!"

"One!"

"Happy New Year!"

Snape wouldn't have thought it possible, but the noise level actually increased as the band burst into a raucous rendition of *Auld Lang Syne*, and the mob on the floor screamed and shouted at each other happily.

The next few minutes passed in a flurry of hugs, kisses, and handshakes.

Even Potter and Weasley shook Snape's hand and wished him a happy New Year. Snape returned their greetings even though he was convinced that their actions, especially Weasley's, were prompted more by the large amount of alcohol they'd consumed rather than any genuine desire to see him 'happy' in the New Year – or any other time for that matter.

The hug and the kiss on the cheek that Hermione bestowed upon him were as impersonal and platonic as the ones she gave Harry, Ron, Remus, Fred, and George. Snape didn't know whether he was relieved or disappointed.

Fifteen minutes after midnight, the band resumed their normal repertoire, and the dancing began once again.

Snape knew that they should return to Grimmauld Place soon. The club was already emptying out. Victoria Station would be much less crowded than it had been when they arrived, and thus it would be more difficult to Disapparate from there, especially as he was sure Potter and the younger Weasley were both too drunk to Disillusion themselves properly. When he mentioned leaving, there was the expected protest from the two of them. Remus, however, insisted that Snape was right, and that the time had come for the party to end. They might have continued to whinge, but a sharp look from Hermione had them falling into line.

Harry and Ron bid a reluctant farewell to the table full of nubile young ladies next to them and followed Hermione, Remus, and Snape out of the club.

Victoria Street was surprisingly deserted. As they walked, Remus and Snape discussed the best way to get everyone back safely.

"We may not need to go as far as the station," Remus said as he looked around.

"You're right," Snape agreed. He turned into one of the many alleyways that branched off the main street. "This one's empty. We won't even have to cast Disillusionment Charms. You take Weasley; I'll take the other two."

"I can Apparate on my own," Hermione said from her place between Harry and Ron, who were both leaning on her as they walked unsteadily behind Remus and Snape.

"Be certain, Miss Granger," Snape said over his shoulder. "There's nothing worse than splinching yourself when you're drunk ... you seldom find all the missing pieces."

All the liquor he'd drunk had finally caught up to Ron; he found Snape's comment inexplicably funny, and he began to laugh.

"Pieces of Snape ... pieces of Snape ..." he said in a sing-song voice between giggles.

Harry started to laugh as well, although he did manage to refrain from singing along with Ron's impromptu performance.

"Shut him up, Lupin," Snape snarled, "or I will."

"Come on, Ron," Remus said as he grasped Ron's arm and led him a little distance away from the others. "Time to go home."

In a moment, they were gone.

"Are you sure you'll be able to Apparate on your own?" Snape asked as he made a lunge for Harry, who had, it appeared, fallen asleep on his feet and was in danger of falling flat on his face.

"I'm sure. I stopped drinking when we ate," Hermione said as she draped Harry's arms over Snape's shoulders.

"Very well, then. You go on ahead; I'll be right behind you with Sleeping Beauty here."

Harry gave a muffled snort. "I love you, Ginny," he muttered as he buried his face in Snape's neck.

"I swear if he tries to kiss me, he won't have to wait for the Dark Lord to kill him," Snape growled. But even as he spoke, he was tightening his grip on Harry's limp body, preparing for Side-Along Apparition.

Hermione laughed, and then she vanished without a sound.

Snape waited a few seconds, and then he and Harry disappeared as well.

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