

Death's Dominion

by MMADfan

Severus Snape's life was changed when he was hit by an errant spell, and he comes to a decision that defies Dumbledore's wishes. Even the fate of the wizarding world is altered by this one ill-cast curse and Snape's subsequent resolve. Long after the spell itself has dissipated, its effects continue echoing in the lives of Severus, Albus, Minerva, and Hermione, and they bring with them a shadowy figure whom Snape does not trust and whose motivations and influence on Minerva are murky. Conspiracies and schemes swirl around Severus as he continues on his path of deception to his final confrontation with the Dark Lord. Canon-divergent post-July 1996 in the HP universe. Not DH-compliant. (Partially HBP-compliant.)

A "Light" fic of love, loyalty, and redemption.

Pertinent warnings in individual chapter summaries.

Voted First Place, Gen Fic: Best Legacy Story, in the HP Fanfic Fan Poll Awards for Spring/Summer 2013.

Prologue: And the unicorn evils run them through

Chapter 1 of 34

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Because the story is set in 1996 - 1998 (HP Years 6 & 7), there will be **some deaths** and **some violence** throughout the story, though the violence will generally not be explicit and will usually be described by a character after the fact.

See individual chapters for warnings and author's notes.

The chapter titles are taken from the opening poem by Dylan Thomas.

Secondary category of "Potions Under Duress" for eventual SSHG friendship.



Prologue: *And the unicorn evils run them through*

24 March 1997

And death shall have no dominion.

Dead men naked they shall be one

With the man in the wind and the west moon;

When their bones are picked clean and the clean bones gone,

They shall have stars at elbow and foot;

Though they go mad they shall be sane,

Though they sink through the sea they shall rise again;

Though lovers be lost love shall not;

And death shall have no dominion.

And death shall have no dominion.

Under the windings of the sea

They lying long shall not die windily;

Twisting on racks when sinews give way,

Strapped to a wheel, yet they shall not break;

Faith in their hands shall snap in two,

And the unicorn evils run them through;

Split all ends up they shan't crack;

And death shall have no dominion.

And death shall have no dominion.

No more may gulls cry at their ears

Or waves break loud on the seashores;

Where blew a flower may a flower no more

Lift its head to the blows of the rain;

Though they be mad and dead as nails,

Heads of the characters hammer through daisies;

Break in the sun till the sun breaks down,

And death shall have no dominion.

When Minerva's voice died away, the final word barely whispered, audible only because of the *Sonorous Charm*, Filius Flitwick, eyes filled with tears, raised his wand in a signal to the others. Together, the four Heads of House waved their wands in a well-orchestrated set of spells, creating a tomb over the shrouded body of Hogwarts most beloved Headmaster. With one final swish, Filius set white flames to dance about the tomb. They would remain flickering until the final mourner left.

"He was a fool, Minerva."

"A fool who loved," she answered softly. "And you should not speak of him that way."

"No? He has left the boy to go on alone. He has left you...he has left you," he continued more quietly at Minerva's sharp look, "and not only to run the school without him. He would not even take his potions at the end. Not even the standard potions." His voice seemed to crack. "He wouldn't allow me to try anything new, nor even to brew for him. He . . . he might as well have slit his throat and been done with it."

"Do not say such a thing. And he did it for you, after all," Minerva answered coldly.

"I never should have said anything to you. He was right . . . I thought . . . I thought you should know, but then . . . Do you know that, after you confronted him about it, he came to me that very night? I was sure he would be angry. I was prepared for that. But he was sad. And I didn't understand . . . but he said he would find another solution for me, if it meant so much." Severus swallowed and narrowed his eyes. "He was a fool, but I was a greater one."

"This is neither the time nor place, Professor. We will meet later."

Severus nodded sharply. Whether either of them liked it...and neither of them did, though for wholly different reasons...Minerva was now to be his primary contact within the Order, regardless of who might become its leader. They would meet secretly, and Minerva would decide what, if anything, would be passed on to the rest of the Order, and she would direct his activities as spy. Severus had very strong reservations about the latter, in particular. She was not a tactician, nor was she, in his opinion, temperamentally suited to such a task. She felt things too strongly and allowed her emotions to affect her judgment, despite her controlled exterior. Although Severus could hardly expect that Minerva's judgment would ever be clouded by her fondness for him . . . whatever fondness she had had for him, he had destroyed, and had done so knowing full well what he was doing, but willing to make the sacrifice of her friendship, believing he was saving something more important. As with so many of his well-laid plans, however, this one did not have the result for which he had hoped. Oh, one small part of his hopes had been fulfilled, but not at all in a way he had anticipated. He had failed to anticipate how others would react; he had fundamentally misunderstood their emotions and their motivations. And now he suffered for it, as did Minerva and the rest of the wizarding world.

The crowd was dispersing, the mourners having filed one final time past the flaming tomb, comforting one another, stopping to speak with friends...friends of the deceased and of their own. Aberforth had turned and left as soon as the ceremony was concluded, appearing stiff and emotionless. Scrimgeour and other Ministry officials were behaving as though this was their own great personal loss, and Umbridge, most distastefully, held a pink handkerchief to her eyes, dabbing at nonexistent tears. But few did more than glance at Hogwarts Acting Headmistress. Her friends had offered their condolences earlier, and there were no others who might guess that the Transfiguration mistress had suffered a loss greater than that of any other colleague who had worked beside Albus Dumbledore for decades. The new Transfiguration teacher, an old friend of Albus and Minerva's from Amsterdam, stood a few feet away, looking on. But only Severus stood beside her.

When he saw Scrimgeour headed their way, no doubt to speak with Minerva, not with him, Severus took silent leave of her and began to walk back up to the castle. It was becoming overcast after the bright morning; the world lay now in the shadow of the grey clouds above, and it would likely rain before the day was out.

"You're probably glad, aren't you." Not a question; a statement. From a familiar and extremely annoying voice.

Severus stopped. The person, who was behind him, stopped as well. Severus was not going to turn around to speak to him, so he began to walk again.

"Makes your job easier, doesn't it? Whatever *that* might be." The voice dripped with contempt.

Severus stopped again. "Potter, in honour of the Headmaster's memory, on this day, at least, I will not argue with you." He swallowed, a sudden wave of grief overwhelming the coldly burning anger he had felt for the last few days and weeks. "I know you grieve him..."

"What do you know about grief? What have you ever lost? You don't know..."

Severus turned only slightly and, his voice low, only a mild edge to it, replied, "I would not speak of my losses to you, boy. But neither will I discipline you as I should; you may mourn the years you will not have with him, but do not believe that greater years make this loss any easier to bear for those who loved him longer, nor that others do not mourn more greatly or more deeply than you, though your own grief may be sharp and painful. Look to others, Potter. Not just to yourself."

"And you loved him? Ha! And 'look to others,' that's a crock coming from you, Snape."

"I did not say I spoke of myself," he replied sharply. "It was foolish of me to think for a moment that you might prove . . . less selfish. I will not be such a fool again, Potter. Now leave; go have your adolescent hysterics with your little friends!" Severus strode off, paying no heed to the derisive comments following him, whipped away by the cold March winds.

Note: The poem that opens this prologue is by **Dylan Thomas** (1914-1959). You may find his work published in many places, including undermilkwood.net (which seems to have vanished, hopefully temporarily). One of his most well-known poems is, "Do not go gently into that good night." You can read more about this Welsh poet and enjoy more of his poetry on the [poemhunter](http://www.poemhunter.com/dylan-thomas/) site (www.poemhunter.com/dylan-thomas/). I recommend my own favorite, "Fern Hill."

While "Death's Dominion" does not precisely disregard DH entirely, it is **not** DH-compliant, neither with regard to Year Seven nor with regard to any of the pre-HP-Year-One (1991) "historical" details. The story is set in the same universe as *Resolving a Misunderstanding* and is a sequel to *An Act of Love*, but it is not necessary to have read either story in order to read and enjoy *Death's Dominion*, which can stand alone. (*Resolving a Misunderstanding* and other stories in this fanfictional universe were begun prior to the publication of *Deathly Hallows*.)

From the nice people over at the SSHG Quiz:

* SSHG Quiz ~ Epics II ~ 17 June 2011 *

Chapter One: Where blew a flower

Chapter 2 of 34

When Dumbledore won't be persuaded, Severus makes a decision and prepares to take matters into his own hands, despite the consequences he foresees for himself.



Chapter One: *Where blew a flower*

Autumn & Winter 1996

In those first days after the *Adfectus* curse had been lifted and Minerva had returned to teach after having been sequestered away supposedly suffering from a serious illness, their relationship had been awkward. And hardly surprising, given that in order to lift the curse and prevent his death, Minerva had allowed him to make love to her. But as the days passed, Severus fell back into his old routine, as did Minerva, and their relationship began to return to normal.

When, late in October, Albus had asked to meet him one evening, Severus had assumed it was to discuss Order business, but instead, the old wizard had led him up to the sitting room of his private suite, where Minerva sat reading.

"You said you would come for drinks after Minerva returned, Severus," Albus said. "So I thought tonight would be good. I am home for a few days and you and I can discuss business tomorrow." The wizard smiled at him. "This evening is just for old friends."

Severus had not been entirely happy with the unexpected social occasion, but he had stayed, had a drink, tried to make small talk, and then left after an hour. Before he left, however, Minerva caught his arm.

"You said you would try some alternate Occlumency practices, Severus. Have you been doing that?"

Snape paused, looking down at Minerva. If he were ever going to lie to her, it would not be about something like this. "No. I have not. My standard practices have served me well. I see no need to change them. I do not anticipate being struck with another similar curse at any point soon."

"I know that, Severus, but I think . . . I think you should at least try. You might be happier, and I would like to see you happier."

Although no longer afflicted by the *Adfectus* spell, he was not unaffected by Minerva's desire to see him happier. He knew it was impossible, but he was nonetheless touched by her concern.

"I do not believe that happiness is my lot, Minerva," he answered softly. "And I do not believe that merely changing my practices, allowing myself a few lucid dreams, not Occluding daily and hourly, will change any of that. However, if you wish it, I will . . . experiment with some other practices."

"Oh, good!" Minerva said, smiling warmly. "You know, I might be able to help, as I had promised I would. I am no Legilimens, but since you are already an accomplished Occlumens and the purpose of these practices is not to keep someone out of your mind, but to allow yourself some freedom within your own, perhaps I might be able to help you."

With some reluctance then, Severus agreed to begin meeting Minerva to practice some lesser Occlumency exercises that would allow him to maintain a greater range of emotion while still remaining closed to any cursory attempt at Legilimens. When he met with the Dark Lord...or with anyone else who might be adept at Legilimency...he would still practice the complex Occlusion that he always had, allowing the Dark Lord to see what he wished him to see while appearing not to Occlude at all, with little moments of sham struggle when the Dark Lord approached "personal" memories. But when he was in the school, he would merely use a thin veil between himself and the world; if he felt someone probing his mind, he could immediately replace the veil with an iron wall. Severus would also no longer practice the Occlusion that kept him from dreaming. As Minerva had pointed out, he had no one trying to break into his mind while he slept, and if, by some remote chance, someone were able to even attempt such a thing, if he were dreaming lucidly, he could wake himself up.

The two had met several times, occasionally in her quarters, occasionally in his, and twice in the Headmaster's suite, when Severus had finally come to his decision. He had argued, cajoled, and even threatened, but had been unable to budge Albus from his planned course. Not that the planned course was set in stone nor that the outcome was certain, but Severus believed that without an alternate plan, without actively seeking a different solution, their paths would lead inexorably to doom for both of them, regardless of the good it might do for the wizarding world. And after one final futile argument, Severus saw that he had only one path left to him.

In despair, Severus had paced and shouted, "And Minerva, don't you love her? You claim to, but you are willing to just abandon her?"

For the first time in all of their arguments, Albus became truly angry. If one had looked at a Muggle snapshot of that moment, one would have noticed little difference in his demeanour, but his magic had crackled and Severus could feel it beating against him, not in gentle waves, but like a pounding surf. He Occluded and attempted to sit, to maintain his dignity in the wake of the old wizard's wrath, but he found he could not move, not because of any spell, but because of the overwhelming energy that surrounded him. For the first time in a very long time, Severus was genuinely frightened of the ancient wizard seated behind the desk. But Albus maintained sufficient control that the energy merely surrounded him and did not invade him or his own magic.

"You will not speak of that again. Do you understand me? I have given you great liberties, and I have done so out of my sympathy for you, but you will not speak of that again. You will not even mention Minerva's name unless it is in conjunction with school business or *legitimate* Order business. Never again, Severus. You cannot pretend to imagine even one shadow of a dream of what I feel for Minerva, and you may not speak of it nor of her."

When Albus finished speaking, the energy that had coursed so threateningly through the room subsided and drained away into its holder, but Albus himself slumped back in his chair and closed his eyes. Severus did not know whether it was the display of power that had exhausted him or whether it was the control exercised to keep it in check, but the old wizard held his withered right hand cradled in front of him, his face pale and drawn.

"Go. We will finish this meeting later," he rasped.

He nodded to Albus, though the older wizard's eyes were still closed and unseeing, a shadow of pain veiling his face, and Severus turned to leave.

"I am sorry, Severus," Albus whispered.

"No, I am sorry, Headmaster. I am sorry for this, for everything. I will do what I can to make it right."

"I know you will, my boy. I know." The old wizard opened his eyes and smiled wearily. "Don't forget your meeting with Minerva tonight. She is expecting you."

Without answering, Severus left. And thus was born his ill-fated plan, beginning with his decision to tell Minerva of what Albus had been keeping from her. He hadn't told her that evening, deciding to choose his words carefully and to have some alternative to offer. He had already begun working on new potions to treat the curse that afflicted Albus's hand, and he was now fairly certain that he had developed two promising new formulas that might very well not only provide the limited relief of the current potion, but which might provide Albus with much more time, and more comfortable time, at that. They might not be cures, but at the Headmaster's age, staving off the final results of the curse for a dozen years or more might be as good as one.

Albus had discouraged him from working on any potions to cure the curse, saying that Severus's current duties were sufficient to take all of his spare time, and besides, there were certain inevitabilities in life, and he had come to terms with that one most inevitable event. Severus continued to work on the potions, however, and had even given him a modified potion the week before that final argument. Albus, still the Alchemist and Potions master despite years in his other roles, took one sniff and handed it back.

"There's something wrong with this, my boy, not to put too fine a point on it," Albus said bluntly.

"No, it's a new formula. It's improved, I think."

"The standard regimen has worked well for months. Let's stick to that."

"I haven't any of that potion made up. At least try this. I don't believe it will harm you, and I hope it will give you some greater relief."

Albus had agreed to take the potion, but would not say whether it was more or less effective than the old potion and had insisted that Severus return to brewing that one.

"If you do not, I am still quite capable of brewing it for myself, Severus. I have appreciated your doing it for me, as it means I have a steady supply. Given my work and my travels, my brewing time would be quite limited."

And so Severus returned to brewing the old potion, more than irritated at the Headmaster's obstinance. Severus suspected that the only reason Albus would not consider any of the other potions was because he wanted to make it easier on Severus in the end...but all that he was actually doing, Severus believed, was ensuring the inevitability of the outcome. Severus had been reluctant to accede to this course when they had set out on it over the summer, but after having been hit by the *Adfectus*, his reluctance had become utter repugnance.

The *Adfectus* might no longer be acting on him directly, but it had opened something in Severus that had long been closed, and Severus found that he could no longer interact with others in the same manner as he had before. Not that most people would have noticed a difference; his temper was still always on edge, held just in check, threatening to lash out at the first person to test him too far. He still had little appetite. He still found sleep eluded him. He still disliked attending gatherings of any size. He still hated Potter. Well, perhaps he didn't hate him. He found him revolting, disgusting, annoying, peevish, self-centred, willful, narrow-minded, immature, undisciplined, and slovenly. Of course Severus recognised, with no little measure of self-loathing and appreciation of the irony, that many of those adjectives could equally apply to himself. But at least he wasn't undisciplined...or slovenly. Whatever any of the students said about him being a "greasy git," he wasn't that. Well, he was a git, but he wasn't greasy. A bit too diligent in his use of Shed-Stop Potion on his hair, but one couldn't be leaving masses of hairs everywhere, not when one was a spy and suspected by those on both sides.

By the end of November, Severus had successfully reduced his daytime Occlusion, but he still had difficulty at night. It seemed impossible for him, after so many years of suppressing his dreams, to now dream and to remain asleep in the dream long enough even to attempt any of the new practices Minerva was urging him to try. Because waking up screaming from nightmares tended to put him in a miserable mood the next day...or more miserable than usual...he began to attempt this only on Friday and Saturday nights.

It was early December and the students would be leaving soon for their winter holiday and Christmas celebrations; Minerva was meeting Severus in his rooms on this occasion. She had been quite optimistic when Severus so quickly mastered the other Occlumency exercises that permitted him to control his emotional responses and his physiological reactions but without completely Occluding. She believed that his temper was improving, as well, and if the number of House points taken for no particular reason were any indication, he was becoming less volatile. He did complain now of other intrusive thoughts and emotions, ones that confused him and that he now had to find other ways of ignoring. The rebound effect from excessive Occlusion was definitely subsiding; Minerva had tried to convince Severus that the other feelings he was experiencing, though not all were positive...well, most were not positive, it seemed...were perfectly normal and that, rather than ignoring them, he should explore them and work through them. He laughed at that, a genuine laugh with only a slight edge of cynicism to it, and asked her how, after an entire lifetime of dysfunction, he was suddenly to acquire the ability to identify these emotions, let alone explore them or work through them. But what worried Minerva most was his inability to get through an entire night without Occluding...or using a potion, which was just as bad. If he didn't Occlude at all, he got no more than a few hours sleep at most.

Minerva had even bought Severus books on sleep and dreaming, including a few by Muggles, in hopes they would help him. That evening, they had been going to discuss the ideas in a few of them, as she had bought herself an identical set of books and had spent what little free time she had reading them.

"And this one, Minerva!" Severus threw down the book in disgust. "Claims I just have to know what my dreams mean and everything in my life will be rosy! I know exactly what my dreams mean. They mean that I am fucked up and have seen and done too many evil things in my life, and have seen, caused, and experienced too much pain. There is no mystery there, and no help for understanding it, either!" He leaned forward in his chair, elbows on his knees, head in his hands, close to admitting defeat.

"That's good, Severus! Not what you have experienced or done, of course, but just think, a few months ago, you wouldn't have said any of that. And perhaps that is the key to gaining some control over your dreams. Begin to see your dream-self as . . . as an ideal Severus. Not the one who is, as you put it, 'fucked up,' who has seen and done and experienced all those horrific things, but the Severus who can put an end to it. The part of you that survives to do that . . ." Minerva trailed off, thinking that Severus had dismissed what she was saying and lost interest, but he suddenly looked up from his curtain of hair.

"Albus said something like that once. He said . . . he said that it was all just . . . burying who I was. That I never would have come to him, and I wouldn't have stayed all these years, and continued even after the Dark Lord returned, if there wasn't still some part of me . . . some part of me that was still the best of me, and that was what drove me, more than the anger, resentment, loathing. He said those were just tools that my . . . my best self used because they were the only ones available." Severus seemed to wince. "He said I should . . . find other tools. He said that my regret was another tool, but that it, too, had limited usefulness. Is that what you mean, Minerva?"

Minerva hadn't been thinking in quite those terms, but now that Severus had voiced them, she nodded. "Yes . . . and I think that in your dreams, your best self has even greater possibilities because he can call forth new tools, invent them right there, try them out, discard them, use them, find what works to change the dream into something that is no longer a nightmare. Your best self needs to feel he can come forth in the dream and assert himself. There is no real danger...or very little...in your dreams. If something doesn't work, he can try something different, or he can wake you up."

"I already wake up. I'm surprised I don't wake half the castle, despite the charms on my quarters," he joked.

"You need to be able to wake yourself deliberately, Severus, not simply because you scream yourself awake," Minerva said bluntly. "Try to wake yourself as soon as you begin dreaming tonight. It's not a practice that you want to continue...you might as well Occlude or take Dreamless Sleep, in that case...but as a way for you to learn to gain control of your dreams, I think it would be a good first step."

"I don't know I'm dreaming, Minerva," Severus said quietly. "I still don't understand how I am supposed to recognise that."

"Is it so real, then?"

"Sometimes, but it is more that . . . I just . . . experience the dream. I can't reflect. I am asleep, not conscious. I don't understand how to be asleep and aware. . . ," he admitted.

Minerva reminded him of the particular exercises that he should do before falling asleep, had him practice a few as she monitored him using some diagnostics she had had her niece show her, and finally, she excused herself for the night.

"I am afraid I am becoming very sleepy, myself, Severus. I hope you have better success tonight. Let me know how you do. I think that Albus will be coming home tomorrow, so I don't think we can meet tomorrow evening, but after the students leave, we can meet a few extra times."

Severus nodded. "I hope that he returns soon."

"You need to see him?"

"No, I mean . . . for you." His lips twitched in a slight, brief smile. "I know how you miss him. And worry."

Minerva beamed at him. "Thank you, Severus." Her eyes filled with sudden tears. "You are making progress . . . and I know it is hard, and I will never be able to know exactly how hard, especially when you have to leave here and . . . do what you must do. But I hope that you are having some little amount of satisfaction in your life that has not been there before."

Severus nodded curtly. "Yes. Perhaps. There is a different quality to my life. A certain . . . calm." He looked at her intently. "I owe that to you, Minerva. Entirely. And to Albus, as well, indirectly. And not just because of what occurred in September and the assistance you gave me then, but all that you have done before and since. Thank you. I will do all I can to repay you and to come to deserve all that you have given me."

"I am sure you are already deserving. But you are welcome. I am glad you are working on it. I am very proud of you."

Two weeks after that conversation, Severus made his decision to tell Minerva all that Albus would not. He could not carry through on the Vow, and yet if Albus was unprepared for that, that would be disastrous, as well. He could not act unilaterally, as much as he wished to. And Minerva not only deserved to know what was being planned, but she might be the only one who could persuade Albus to make alternative preparations and to begin taking the improved potions. He knew what happened to messengers, bearers of bad news, and he knew, too, that he himself would appear to have made a colossally large error in making the Vow, regardless of why he had done so. Minerva would be upset with him, possibly angry beyond any healing, but Severus was willing to take that risk. She may have forgiven him his past sins, grave as they had been, but this was an act of an entirely different quality. He had no doubt that Minerva loved Albus too much to remain irretrievably angry with him; she would likely redirect any residual anger at him...if there was one thing that Severus understood well, it was redirected anger.

He never should have taken the Vow, whether Albus had desired it or not. Of course, neither of them had been prepared for precisely that turn of events...but Albus had said to do whatever he had to in order to get into Bella's and Narcissa's good graces and, most importantly, to protect Draco from the Dark Lord. Taking the Unbreakable Vow had seemed both unavoidable and in accord with Dumbledore's wishes. If only there hadn't been that last provision . . . And Severus had been doubly angry when he learned that Albus had strongly suspected, to the point of practical certainty, what Draco's task would be as soon as he learned of the Vow.

And so on Boxing Day, Severus prepared to destroy two friendships. The only friendships he still had, unless one included Lupin's regular attempts at socialising with him. "Only two of us left, Sev," Lupin had said in a drunken state the week before; it was a sign of Severus's increased tolerance...or soft-headedness...that he hadn't hexed Lupin for shortening his name. "Just the two of us . . ." Severus also forbore mentioning that out of the forty students in their year, surely at least half of them were still alive. Of course, many of them were Death Eaters, and Severus didn't mention that, either.

Ready to surrender, Severus prepared for Minerva's arrival, Occluding and awaiting the winds of Fate to tear from him those shreds of peace whose ephemeral tatters he had only so recently found.

Note on the Actus Adfectus Amor Verissimus: *For those who haven't read An Act of Love, or for whom it has been a while, here's a quotation from Albus in the third chapter of that story that somewhat describes the Actus Adfectus Amor Verissimus spell that hit Severus in September 1996:*

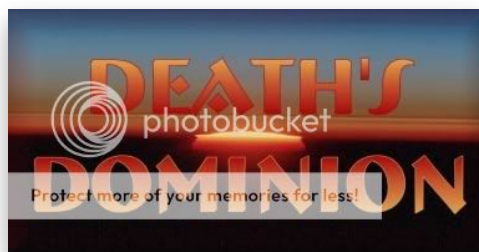
"From the research I was able to fit in today, it seems as though one can theoretically, at least have more than one 'true love' in one's life, and that in the case of this spell, 'true love' refers to a love that is of a lasting, abiding nature. Even if Severus were to go on and find another love, perhaps even another 'true love,' his love for you would never leave him. I believe that is why the spell does not wear off by itself. The kinds of emotions that the other *Adfectus* spells are aimed at are, for the most part, of a more ephemeral, fleeting nature such as jealousy, desire, lust, hatred, anger, and loyalty and although loyalty and hatred can come very close to having the same lasting quality, even the greatest loyalty and the strongest hatred can wane or be eclipsed in a way that true love cannot . . ."

Chapter Two: Faith in their hands shall snap in two

Chapter 3 of 34

Snape undertakes an unpleasant task.

Note: AU. Not DH-compliant.



Chapter Two: Faith in their hands shall snap in two

26 December 1996

"What do you mean, he won't try any of the more effective potions? Why wouldn't he? Isn't it possible that the one he has you brew is sufficient?"

Severus resisted the urge to put his head in his hands, and he looked steadily at Minerva. "He hasn't told you, then . . ."

"What? What hasn't he told me?"

"I did not believe he had, but I had hoped that at least in this . . ." Severus fought the urge to look away from her. He owed her this much. Without flinching, he said, "The curse is killing him. The Headmaster will be dead within a year. Likely within six months, if he continues as he has done."

Minerva looked at Severus, unblinking. "No . . . no, you are mistaken. It is no worse. And he . . . he would tell me."

"Perhaps he plans to. I do not know. He will no longer discuss it with me, neither that nor the larger issue."

Minerva scarcely heard what he said; she shook her head. "No. He would have told me. He would have told me this. You are wrong. There is no change."

"I am not wrong. The curse is slowly killing him from within. I believe that up until the last few weeks of his life, he will look much as he does now, appear no more ill. But he will eventually succumb to it, and before he does, his body will begin to fail. His magic will gradually weaken. Then . . . he will die. In great pain and lengthy agony."

Minerva's breath came in great gasps; hardly would she exhale when she would take another gasping breath. "No . . . no." She attempted to stand, but Severus took her shoulders and urged her back into her chair.

"Breathe slowly, Minerva, please. Calm yourself. Just . . . just breathe."

"Why? Why! Why do you tell me this? And why didn't he? Gods, what is he thinking?" She shook off his hands.

"He is thinking . . . perhaps of you. But also of me and what he has asked of me." Severus sat back down across from her.

"What is this thing he has asked of you that would make him think that this . . . this course of action is remotely acceptable?" Minerva demanded. Her hands gripped the arms of her chair, but tremors passed through her as she attempted to regain control of herself.

"First, before I tell you...and I will tell you...I wish to give you some of the potion I have made up for him. There are two different ones. I believe both to be far more effective than the one he is currently taking. They are, by no means, cures, but they could extend his life quite comfortably for a decade or more. During that time, perhaps a cure could be found, or his . . . natural lifespan might obviate the need for one." Severus spoke evenly, calmly.

"His natural lifespan?" Minerva asked, voice cracking.

"All I mean is that, at his age, a potion that could fend off the effects of the curse for a dozen years or so . . . might be as good as a cure."

Minerva clenched her jaw but did not rebuke him. Severus rose and crossed the room. He opened a cabinet and removed two large bottles in a wire carrier. Returning to Minerva, he handed them to her, then he reached into his pocket and pulled out a parchment, which he also gave her.

"What is this?"

"The formulas, with some notes on some possible improvements that might be made. In case I am no longer able to brew for the Headmaster."

Minerva looked up at him sharply. "What do you mean by that?"

Severus sat again, drew a breath, and let it out slowly. "There are a few possibilities. The first is that, upon learning that I have informed you of these things, the Headmaster will no longer wish me to brew for him, even if you are successful, as I hope you will be, in dissuading him from his current course; the second is that I will no longer be able to brew for him through some incapacity or unavailability of my own. There are, of course, other scenarios, but those are the primary ones."

Minerva looked with unseeing eyes at the parchments in her left hand. "I don't understand . . . why would he do this? And why would he do this and not tell me?"

"You will need to ask him the second question. I cannot answer it. I can answer, in part, at least, your first question, however."

At this point, Severus was no longer able to look at Minerva. He had already imagined a thousand times what expressions would cross her face when he told her what he must tell her now.

"You see, Minerva, Albus . . . I . . . Albus believes I will kill him."

"What?" Minerva let out a snort of disbelief and Severus winced at her faith in him. "Have you lost your mind, Severus? He would never . . . why would he?" She paused, looking at him, and she shivered suddenly. "Or why would *you*?"

Severus looked up at Minerva and, knowing he was about to sever his last tie of friendship, he said, "Because at the beginning of the summer, I took an Unbreakable Vow to do so."

The parchment slipped from Minerva's fingers. Severus caught the potions bottles with an *Arresto Momentum* before they hit the floor and Levitated them to the table beside Minerva's chair.

Minerva's mouth moved, but no sound emerged from it. Severus sat calmly and waited. Finally, she said, her voice barely a whisper, "You wouldn't have."

"I did. I did not know at the time what I was agreeing to do. But the Headmaster had made certain requests of me that made taking the Vow seem . . . prudent. I was unaware for a number of weeks precisely what it was that would be required of me to fulfill the Vow. The Headmaster . . . he was fairly certain from the moment I told him of the Vow. He told me that he had little doubt even when he first heard . . . he said he believed taking it was the right thing to have done. And that he would prefer it to any other outcome.

"It bothered me even then, Minerva, please believe me. And I tried to urge him to find ways around it. But he seemed to feel this was all fated to be, and he has never seriously considered any alternatives. However, I will not carry out the Vow. Yet if he is unprepared for that, it will go badly for him...he must at least begin taking the stronger potions. And Albus must prepare for what will happen when I fail to carry out the Vow."

"You will die." Minerva said, looking at him hard.

"I took the Vow. You said once that I make bad choices, that I am self-destructive. And here is your final, incontrovertible proof of it. But it was my choice. I made it. I will pay for it. I am sorry that it will make things difficult for the Order when they lose their spy, but this is the one final choice that I can make that will..."

"How could you! How can you! How could you do such a thing...take the Vow, not even knowing what would be required of you? Of all the absolutely stupid, idiotic, boneheaded...Severus! And then to actually contemplate carrying it out? And you would have, wouldn't you? He would say jump, and you would jump, killing Albus and condemning yourself..."

"I did this for Albus, because he asked me, not because of the Dark Lord."

"I don't care who you are obeying anymore, Severus! I could kill you right now, I am so angry with you. And to think that Albus . . . he must have a plan. He must. He wouldn't just let you do that. How could he? How could he do it . . . to any of us?" Tears of anger, frustration, disbelief, and pain coursed down Minerva's cheeks. Severus thought that she looked a decade older than she had when she had entered his sitting room that evening.

"His plan is to pass on to Potter all he can between now and the event and, I believe, to sicken and to allow me to see him weaken. He also believes that events will force our hand. That it will be inevitable. That circumstances will come together so that either I kill him and live or I don't kill him and we both die, with perhaps others dying with us. Potter . . . and others. But because he believes this, he is creating those exact circumstances. And I will not conspire with him to bring them about. Whatever happens, I will not kill him. I will not do it to him, I will not do it to you, and I will not have yet one more death on my soul, and certainly not his. Yet if he is unprepared for this, it is quite likely that the only alternative course of events is the one that he foresees...both of us dead, and others along with us, the future of the wizarding world in the hands of the

Dark Lord. I am quite willing to die rather than kill, but I do not want to bring him and everyone else along with me. That is why you must talk to him. He forbids me to even speak to him of . . . of the consequences of what he is planning. Soon, I fear he will not even allow me to speak of alternatives. Not," Severus spat, "that he ever considers any alternatives."

Minerva sat still now, numbly. "I do not know whom to be more angry with. You or him. And you have both known this. And you have both just . . . gone on . . . for months . . . as though I do not matter. As though I do not need to be considered, let alone consulted." She looked up at Severus. "You would have just gone ahead with this, wouldn't you, if it hadn't been for that spell? Wouldn't you?" Minerva asked harshly, not naming the curse that had afflicted Severus that September, and from which she had freed him at no little cost to herself.

"I do not know," Severus replied quietly. "Possibly. Probably. Albus . . . Albus has been most adamant. And he usually knows what is right, as you have pointed out yourself. But now . . . I cannot . . . and I have been trying to get him to take the improved potions for weeks now, hoping that he would see that there might be some other course if he took them and knew that . . . knew that the curse would not kill him within months. I do not know whether he refuses in order to make it easier for me or to make it easier for himself. And I no longer care. I will not kill him. And I will tell him that. You need not."

"I need not? You give me these potions," she said bitterly, gesturing at the bottles, "and you tell me that Albus has been plotting his own death for months, and you ask me to get him to change his mind, but you say that I need not tell him that you refuse to be the instrument of his suicide? For that is what you would be . . . how could he be so damned idiotic? And unfeeling?" Minerva began to weep again.

"I think he does appreciate that I do not wish to do it, he simply believes..."

"I do not mean about you, man! Me! What of *me*? Almost forty years together, and now...how do I believe in anything now?" Suddenly she was heaving great, violent sobs, her head in arms, and her magic began crackling around her.

"Shh, shh, Minerva, please, shh, shh," Severus said, alarmed and without a clue of how to calm the nearly hysterical witch. He reached out and touched her shoulder, trying to offer some little comfort. His hand was thrown back with a bright burst of yellow sparks.

"Do NOT TOUCH ME! Never, ever, ever touch me again!" Minerva shouted, raising her head and glaring at him, tears streaming down her face, scarcely reining in her magic. But as she collapsed back into the chair, cradling her head in her hands, she seemed to regain some control over herself, although her sobs did not cease.

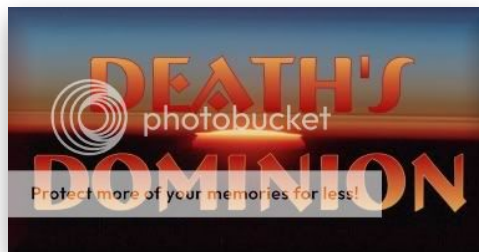
"I . . . I will be in my office," Severus said. "You may stay or leave, as you wish." He turned and went to leave. Reaching the door, he paused and said softly, "I cannot ask and do not deserve your forgiveness. But please believe me when I say that I knew of no other way. Not today and not last summer." He waited a moment, and when there was no sound but the continued quiet weeping of the witch behind him, he opened the door and left, knowing he had wrought the destruction of his last tie to human warmth and friendship.

Chapter Three: Heads of the characters hammer through daisies

Chapter 4 of 34

In July 1997, a surprised Harry sees a secret plan unfold before his eyes as he leaves Privet Drive for the last time.

Note: AU. Not DH-compliant.



Chapter Three: *Heads of the characters hammer through daisies*

July 1997

Vernon Dursley pounded up the stairs and banged on the closed door at the end of the hall.

"Potter! Get out of there! Some of your freaky friends are here."

There was a shuffling, then Harry opened the door and looked up at his uncle, his eyes dull and blank, betraying no emotion.

"Get down there and get rid of them as soon as possible! Can't have your friends doing anything freaky and unnatural and having the neighbours seeing. So GET RID OF THEM!"

Harry hurried down the stairs, almost tripping on his shoelaces and coming to a sudden halt when he saw who was waiting for him.

"Professor McGonagall! What are you doing here? And what are you doing dressed . . . like that?"

Minerva was carefully dressed in a blue Muggle skirted suit, a classic style, but clearly not of recent purchase, and was carrying a blue handbag. Her companion, standing in the shadows behind her, was wearing a grey fedora and a long, unbuttoned, rumpled, grey raincoat, under which he wore a drab mouse-grey suit, a wrinkled white shirt, and a dull blue tie that seemed to suck up what little light there was in the dimly lit front hall.

"We have come to remove you from this house, from your . . . family home," Minerva said, looking around her with distaste, "a bit early."

"But . . . Professor Dumbledore said someone would come on my birthday, or the night before." Harry took one step back up the stairs, almost bumping into his uncle. He swallowed. Death Eaters couldn't kidnap him from his home while he was underage, but . . . could they impersonate people he trusted and lure him from it?

Minerva smiled, seeming to recognise his difficulty for what it was. Ignoring Vernon Dursley on the stairs behind Harry, and his aunt and cousin, who were now standing in the hallway outside the living room, Minerva popped into her Animagus form. Dudley took a single step forward and peered down at the cat, Petunia pressed herself against the wall, Vernon stepped back up two steps, but Harry came down the stairs, smiling.

Minerva returned to her ordinary form then turned to Petunia and Dudley. "You are ready?"

Petunia nodded and held out a clear plastic bag, her hand trembling. Harry blinked. Hair. He glanced over at Dudley, who had had a recent haircut. A home haircut, which he'd not had since he was four.

The wizard took the bag from her with a nod, then let go of it, letting it float in front of him as he withdrew a dark jar from one of his capacious pockets. He removed the lid, put a pinch of the hair into the jar, and handed it to Harry.

"Drink up, Harry! To your health," the soft-spoken wizard said.

Harry looked into the foaming jar, then up at Professor McGonagall. "Polyjuice?"

"Yes, but before you drink, you need a haircut, as well." She took her wand from her purse and looked over at the wizard standing beside her. "Robbie, the other jars. And Petunia, if you have another bag, an empty one?"

Petunia nodded. She had it ready and held it out. One swish of Minerva's wand, and Harry had a short, spiky haircut, and his trimmings were all neatly deposited in the second bag, which the older wizard took and added evenly to three jars of Polyjuice before recapping them.

"You can follow the directions we gave you?" Minerva asked as the wizard handed the three sealed jars to Petunia and Dudley.

Surprisingly, it was Dudley who answered. "Yes, ma'am. Every fifty minutes to an hour unless I'm someplace where I can't be seen at all. Sleep in Harry's room with the doors and windows locked and the curtains closed. If I get up in the night to use the loo, drink some of this stuff. Never come near a window when I'm not lookin' like him, but let myself be seen as Harry a few times a day, but only through a window or in the back garden close to the house." Dudley looked over at Harry. "Until his birthday. Then we get more instructions."

"And someone will come for us. You said someone would come for us," Petunia said, finding her voice.

"Yes, you will be taken to safety. And then Dudley can return to being himself all of the time," Minerva replied. "We will continue to have someone watching the house, however, and if there is an emergency, you may be moved sooner."

"But . . . but . . ." Harry was flabbergasted.

"Need-to-know, Harry," the older wizard said gently. "We arranged this before you left school. If we hadn't managed this, we would have had to think of a different plan. Possibly kept you away altogether, as unsafe as that might have been. Drink up, now, both you boys."

"Wait just a minute, there!" Vernon Dursley shouted, having recovered from being stunned by Minerva's Animagus performance and his wife and son's apparent perfidy. "You can't go doing freaky things to my son! Making him a freak, like you are! And that's what you are no offense meant by it," he blustered as he saw Minerva fingering her wand. "But we're nice, normal people here. A normal family, once this one's gone." He gestured at Harry.

"You will be a nice, normal, *dead* family if you don't do as we say, Dursley," Minerva said, her voice hard and her burr strong. "Do you have a nice, normal family plot? Of course, I do believe that your wife and son may feel differently about it than you do, and choose not to join you in it quite so soon."

"Vernon, he's my blood, and he's Dudley's, too," Petunia interjected. "It's the right thing to do, finally. And even if . . . if I didn't want to for his sake, they'll be after us. You-know-who will come for us, and don't pretend you don't know what I'm talking about. He killed Lily and her husband, and he'll kill us and have an easier time of it. He'll do it whether Harry is here or not. So we are helping Harry, then we are going wherever they take us where we will be safe."

Vernon spluttered, but Dudley turned to Harry and raised his jar.

"Cheers, Harry, and good luck." Dudley took a swallow of the potion. For a moment, he looked as though he would spit it back out, but he gamely took another swallow, then shoved the jar at his mother who took it and watched, somewhat horrified, as her son's skin began to writhe and his bones began to remould themselves beneath his flesh. A moment later, two Harrys stood in the front hall.

Harry laughed, looking at his cousin. "You don't even need to change clothes, Dursley." He looked at him appraisingly. "My old glasses are in my underwear drawer. You should probably wear them when you're me."

Dudley was trying to hold his pants up. Harry took off his belt altogether, handed it to his cousin, and swallowed down the noxious potion. Eyes widening, he looked at Minerva, who took the jar from him just in time. Harry turned and threw up at his uncle's feet, whose complexion shifted from crimson to purple, but the potion worked, and within moments, his baggy clothing fit him, even a little tightly, and he was the exact image of his cousin Dudley. Harry removed his glasses and handed them to Robert, who put them in his pocket, then he pulled off his trainers and traded them for his cousin's.

"But . . . but . . . Dudders is supposed to go on a special course! He can't stay here, looking like a freak for the next week!" Vernon shouted.

"We *are* the special course, Mr Dursley," the rumpled-looking wizard explained patiently. He smiled at the blotchy-faced man. "We are taking Dudley away or Harry, as Dudley which is why he cannot be seen for the next week. Then, your son will be returned, supposedly, and you three will all go out . . . and not return. But you cannot bring anything with you. A few small trinkets, perhaps, but otherwise . . . it must appear to anyone who enters the house looking for you as though you just stepped out for an evening."

"But I have a job!"

"You need to have a life to keep a job," Minerva said bluntly. "Come, we are wasting time." She glanced once more at Petunia. "Lily would finally be pleased with you, Petunia."

"Hey, Harry," Dudley said.

Harry turned.

"Good luck, mate." Dudley nodded with Harry's head.

Harry nodded back. He hesitated and then asked, "Why?"

Dudley shrugged. "That thing. That thing you saved me from, I guess."

A car horn tooted impatiently, and Robert opened the door.

"Wait, what about my things? What about Hedwig? And my broom?" Harry asked. "And . . . and my photographs! Photos of my parents . . ."

Minerva shook her head. "You can't bring anything with you, Harry but Hedwig, of course. And your wand. You have that, I see," she said, glancing at the end of a dark stick emerging from one of his trouser pockets. "We don't want anyone else to see it, though. Put it under your shirt, Potter." She turned to Robert. "Run up and let the bird out. Tell her to go to Hogwarts Owlery and that Harry will be along later."

The grey-eyed wizard slipped past Vernon Dursley without even looking at the man, then he turned, looking back at Harry. "Where are the photos, Harry?"

"Under a loose floorboard in my room. In an album," Harry replied.

Minerva sighed, but said nothing as the wizard disappeared up the stairs.

Petunia shoved a knapsack and jacket at Harry. "Here. Sandwiches and a few other things. And Dudley's best jacket. Better put it on."

Harry put on the navy blue jacket, smoothed his hair down, and followed Minerva out the door to the waiting car, a small blue Mercedes.

"You get in back, Dudley," Minerva instructed, her voice clear and carrying. She opened the passenger door and sat beside the driver.

"What took you so long?" the woman asked. "And where's oh, there he is."

"Muggles," Minerva said under her breath.

"Watch what you say about Muggles, Minerva," the curly-haired woman replied, waiting as Robert got in beside Harry, then backing out of the drive and heading down Privet Drive away from the Dursleys'.

"Melina, this is Harry Potter, looking like his cousin, Dudley, at the moment," Minerva said. Melina gave Harry a friendly wave, glancing back at him briefly. "Mr Potter, this is my niece, Healer Melina O'Donald."

Harry didn't know what to say, so he just said, "Hello."

The dishevelled wizard reached into one of his capacious raincoat pockets and pulled out a small item. He drew his wand from the other pocket, tapped the object and unshrunk it.

"Your photo album, Harry."

"Thanks, Professor." Harry smiled and stuffed it into his knapsack, then turned to look out the window, watching the signs as they drove.

"We will try to collect a few more of your things when we come for your aunt's family next week," the wizard replied.

"Robbie, don't make promises you may not be able to keep," McGonagall admonished from the front seat.

"That's all right, Professor. I'll understand if you can't. But if you can . . . there are a few things at the bottom of my trunk. And my broom "

"I don't think we will be able to manage your broom, Harry, but I will see what I can do, otherwise," the quiet wizard said. "You can buy new things."

After a few minutes of awkward silence, Harry glanced back over at the wizard beside him. "We're going to London, Professor?" he asked.

"That is our destination, yes," Robert responded softly.

"We are going to London and staying the night at Grimmauld Place," McGonagall said. "Then tomorrow, we are proceeding to the Weasleys via Portkey. I am as yet undecided whether you are to come with us or await our return. I dislike the idea of leaving you there on your own. For your safety, not because we do not trust you."

Harry nodded. "But what about the wedding? Bill and Fleur . . . they already postponed it twice. That's next week. Everyone will be there."

Minerva looked back at the older wizard, who nodded at her.

"Everyone will *not* be there, Mr Potter and before you interrupt with protests, allow me to inform you that the bride and groom will also not be in attendance. Apart from Robert and myself, only Arthur and Molly Weasley are currently aware of this, so you are not to share this information with anyone, do you understand, Potter?"

Harry nodded, and Minerva continued. "Last week, Bill and Fleur were married in a very small Muggle ceremony at a registry office. There will be no large wedding, for them or any other Order members, until after Voldemort is defeated. The wedding will appear to continue as scheduled, but the guests will all be whisked back to their homes, and it will be . . . a surprise for any uninvited guests, shall we say." Minerva turned to Melina. "Aren't you driving too fast?"

Melina laughed as she changed lanes, overtaking a lorry. "You always say that, Auntie Min."

Minerva ignored her and looked out the window.

Harry looked back over at Robert. "Are you going to be teaching Transfiguration again, sir?"

Robert shook his head.

"Oh. Do you know who will be?"

"One of my cousins," the wizard said softly. "My cousin's son, Alroy MacAirt."

"Oh." Harry looked out the window. The name meant nothing to him.

"I will be at the school, however," the older wizard said, "in a different capacity."

Harry looked over at him quizzically.

"The announcement has yet to be made public, Potter," Professor McGonagall said. "Robbie, don't tease the boy."

Robert laughed lightly. "What about those sandwiches, Harry? I am a mite peckish. And you can put your glasses in your bag."

"You clean up the crumbs, Robert!" Melina said, reaching over and turning on some music. A Golden Oldies station.

The rest of the trip was spent eating surprisingly good sandwiches and drinking sodas, Harry washing down another dose of Polyjuice with a coke. Melina dropped them all off at the grimy little park across from Grimmauld Place.

"Good luck, Harry, Dudley! I'll see you, Min, Robert. I'm on a double yellow, so I can't stay. Take care of yourselves!"

Robert turned to Minerva. "I will return in about an hour." He nodded to Harry, then strode over to a tree and walked around it, out of view of the road. A moment later, there was a crack of Disapparition.

"Come on, now," Minerva said to Harry. "You and I are going in, while he sees if he can't find someone to stay at Grimmauld Place with you while we go to the Weasleys tomorrow. If not, you will come with us. Either way, not a word of what we told you in the car. Even about Hogwarts. The letters will be out soon enough."

Harry nodded and followed Minerva across the street, where number twelve Grimmauld Place emerged as he thought of the location of the headquarters of the Order of the Phoenix.

Inside, Minerva dismissed him. "You can use the bedroom you usually do, Potter. I have some work to do. I will be in the library. You are welcome to do whatever you wish, as long as you remain within the house." She looked him up and down, a slight curl to her lip. "And do let the Polyjuice wear off but don't discard what's left! I have more hair and more Polyjuice base, and although I don't anticipate your having to walk around like that again, if for some reason we have to move you before the first of September, it would be best to do so while you bear the appearance of another. And that one . . . may not be the most pleasant appearance, but it is convenient."

Thus, Harry began the final weeks of his summer holiday, lying on a lumpy bed in Grimmauld Place, waiting for the Polyjuice to wear off, and hoping that when Professor McGonagall returned from the Weasleys, she brought Ron with her. And maybe Hermione. She had been going to do something to ensure the safety of her parents, and it had all sounded quite complicated to him. But the three of them were going to have to make plans, decide how to proceed.

Harry stared up at the ceiling, watching dust motes float through the air, remembering Albus Dumbledore, and going over in his mind all that the old wizard had told him and all the memories he had shown him in the last few months before he died, thinking of Horcruxes, magical objects, and a long path ahead, a path he would have to take without Dumbledore and without his godfather.

Tears drying on his cheeks, Harry fell asleep and dreamed of the dead.

Chapter Four: Though they be mad they shall be sane

Chapter 5 of 34

It's late September 1997, Harry and his companions are driven from Hogwarts to set off on their mission, and Hermione has a decision to make.

Note: AU. Not DH-compliant.



Chapter Four: *Though they be mad they shall be sane*

September 1997

"Late again, Potter?" Snape said, almost crooning the words. "Off . . . *gallivanting*? The Headmistress may look the other way, but I do not." Severus turned his head slowly and gazed unblinking at the young wizard who had skidded to a stop behind his friend. "And Weasley. Of course." The Potions master looked around the room. "I do seem to see a classroom filled with diligent students. Or at least, ones who care enough to come to class . . . on *time*." He turned abruptly. "Miss Granger," he said. "Tell me. How long does it take to prepare the base for today's potion?"

Hermione hesitated, turning her head slightly in the direction of the two boys.

"I did not ask you to consult those nitwits, Miss Granger."

"Working efficiently," Hermione said softly, "it takes one hour and nineteen minutes, according to the textbook."

"And how long is this class?"

"One hour and forty minutes, sir."

"And how long have you and your classmates been working on the potion?"

"Ten minutes, approximately."

"Ten minutes, *approximately*," Severus parroted. "Why 'approximately,' Miss Granger?"

"Because you lectured for approximately ten minutes before we began, sir."

"Hmm, I see." He pivoted sharply on a heel, turning back toward the two boys. "Now, Potter, if you retain your Potions genius from last term, of which I have seen not a scintilla of evidence, do you believe that you and your . . . pasty friend could complete the assignment before the end of the class?"

Harry stuck out his chin and narrowed his eyes defiantly. "I could try. If I could just get on with it . . . *sir*."

"You *could* try. But first, you must decide: are you a student here, Mr Potter?" He raised an eyebrow and looked at Ron. "Mr Weasley? Or is this a . . . *hobby* of yours? If it is a hobby, leave. Now. If not, and you are, indeed, a Hogwarts student, the same as all of the others in this room, then you will spend the next month, both of you, every evening from now through Halloween, in detention. With me. Brewing this same potion. Until you can do so *efficiently* in one hour and nineteen minutes. Decide. Now."

The entire classroom had gone completely quiet as soon as Snape had asked Hermione how long it took to prepare that day's potion. Now, it seemed impossibly quieter, as though everyone were holding their breaths.

Suddenly, a look of resolution crossed Harry's face. "I can't decide for you, Ron...or you, Hermione," he said, turning to look at her, "but . . . I have made my decision." He cast one last glance at Hermione, ignored Snape, then turned and left the classroom. Ron barely hesitated before running out after him.

Hermione shifted, looked at the door, looked at her potion, then looked up at Professor Snape, an expression of consternation on her face.

"Back to work! All of you!" Snape barked. He took a few deliberate steps forward, raking his eyes across the classroom, and came to stand beside Hermione. In a low voice, still looking out over the classroom of now-diligent students, he said, "Potter was right about one thing, Miss Granger. He couldn't decide for you." He turned his head slightly, looking at her through a curtain of hair. "And neither can I," he said softly.

Snape walked to the back of the classroom and surveyed the students, showing no reaction when Hermione began to carefully slice her Shrivelfig into one centimetre sections, his mind turning to the conversation he had had with Minerva a few days before.

"The boy is in peril every time he leaves and then returns to the school. He is a dangerous fool. I have done all I can to misdirect the Dark Lord, but he is becoming impatient with me...as you are aware."

The last time he had returned from a meeting with his false master, he had barely been able to stand, let alone walk, after several extended bouts of the *Cruciatus*, and Severus had thought that, just for a moment, he had seen some compassion in the witch's eyes, some softening toward him, but then it was gone, and Minerva seemed as unyielding as ever and began to debrief him on his latest encounter with the Dark Lord.

"Each time I see him leave the castle," Severus continued, "I wonder whether the next time that he returns will be the occasion of his capture or death. For all that I have provided misinformation to the Dark Lord, he has other spies. You know as well as I that Hogsmeade, the Hogwarts gates, and even the Forbidden Forest, are under constant surveillance. And I do not know or recognise all of his agents." Severus shook his head and looked out the window at the sky darkening over the forest, trying to ignore the presence of the third person sitting in the shadowy corner of the room. "I am not as trusted as I once was, and he has always harboured doubts about my true loyalties, but ever since the Order helped Draco and Narcissa disappear following the Headmaster's death and I was unable to provide any information about their location, his trust in me has diminished further. Bella has proven very effective at undermining my position. I do not have the access to him that she does; my duties here at the school provide her the opportunity to sow further seeds of doubt in his mind, and I have little opportunity to counteract that doubt."

"And what do you see as the consequences of this? What avenues are open to us?" Minerva asked.

"At some point, fairly soon, I believe, the Dark Lord will have discovered the various methods that Potter is using to reenter the school grounds, if he has not already, and he will not waste time in laying his traps. Potter, in the current circumstances, would have little chance of escape or survival from such a trap, and I have no doubt that his friends who accompany him on these *expeditions* of his would likewise suffer," Snape said, sneering. "Even if, in some fatalistic saviour complex, he is willing to chance his own safety, he should consider that his three friends do not share whatever protective nimbus he believes destiny has placed about him. You must convince him to leave the school and not return."

Minerva appeared troubled. "I have tried to tell him that it is best that he wait until he has left Hogwarts to do whatever it is he is trying to do on these outings of his, hinting as broadly as possible that he can leave school immediately, if he wishes. I cannot very well tell him that he should leave school now; if I were to do that, I cannot say that he would do as I recommend. Harry has a peculiar interpretation of some of what the Headmaster imparted to him during those last weeks, and he has developed some notion that it is important that he maintain a tie to Hogwarts in order to demonstrate his loyalty to him...there seems to be some other reason for it, as well, but whatever that reason may be, he will not discuss it with me."

She shook her head, poured herself some tea, and then continued. "Harry could also very well believe that I was trying reverse psychology in order to persuade him to abandon his quest until after his NEWTs. I was surprised that he returned to Hogwarts at all, to be quite frank, but he insisted to me that there was something of importance he had yet to accomplish at Hogwarts. I rather doubt, however, that he has even attempted whatever that may be, but he will not tell me any more about it. Our conversations have been most unproductive. I have indicated that the Headmaster entrusted me with certain secrets regarding his mission, but even after I had named the key element of his primary search, he would not speak with me about it. He will not tell me what he is doing or where he is going; when I offer the assistance of the Order, he insists he must continue on his own...in which he is correct; in the end, he must go on alone...but he is taking this belief to an extreme. In our conversations last winter, the Headmaster and I discussed the necessity of creating some delays in order that the final encounter not come before Harry is fully prepared; however, it appears that our tactics have become somewhat too successful, yet it is now too late to change them. And if we were to tell Harry what we have done in order to . . . pace his progress toward that crucial moment, he would not believe either of us, of that I am completely certain. The only person he may have believed about it was the Headmaster, and he is . . . unavailable." Minerva grimaced as she pronounced the peculiar euphemism. "Harry may have resented the manipulation, but he would have believed him. He will not believe me. And he certainly would not trust your participation in the plan."

Severus snorted. "His trust in me, ironically, is lower than it was when the Headmaster was here." As much as he disliked using euphemisms for the word "dead," Severus disliked even more causing Minerva pain, and as she never referred to Dumbledore as dead, he would avoid reminding her of what she no doubt felt keenly her every waking moment. "I think that even the suggestion that I was involved in creating a set of roadblocks for him to overcome would raise his suspicions of you. But I do not understand why he has isolated himself from you and from the Order."

"Despite the Headmaster's reassurances to Harry last winter in their final meetings together, I believe that Harry blames the Order for what happened to him and, by extension, blames me as well," Minerva replied. "He also seems to have interpreted the Headmaster's activities as being something separate and apart from the Order's work, and as a result, he has separated himself from the Order, believing its role to be something so wholly different from his own that involvement with the Order would hinder his progress. This means, as you can deduce for yourself, that we are unable, except through very indirect means, to help him either to overcome the roadblocks we ourselves set in his path or to dismiss them as irrelevant, let alone help him to achieve what he truly must before the last encounter with Vo You-Know-Who." Minerva sighed. "In addition, I have reason to believe that the little group Harry does have around him is becoming divided. That could be as detrimental to Harry as deciding to leave them all behind and proceed entirely alone."

This news alarmed Severus, though his expression did not change. "I have seen no sign of this. How do you know?"

Minerva allowed herself a small, brief smile. "It is difficult for me to . . . to completely relax these days, as you may imagine, let alone sleep. For that reason and others, I have taken to napping in my Animagus form for a short while most afternoons. I long ago found that I could learn some of the most intriguing things while in my tabby form. Lately, I nap in a particular tree at the edge of the forest when I am able." A genuine grin flitted across her face. "Last week, Masters Donahue, Cauldwell, and Whitby were most confused to discover that they had lost House points and received detentions for activities that they had theretofore believed were undiscovered."

Minerva grew more serious. "But I also overheard a conversation among Harry, Ron, and Hermione a few days before their last outing, and when Luna Lovegood joined them, the argument grew more heated, not less. I had hoped that we could subtly provide Miss Granger with information that would speed Harry's progress, but the kind of information I had planned to provide her would not have been well-received by Harry and the others. Harry has become quite a leader over the last few years, but that is not always to the best, I am afraid. His judgment, while not as bad as you make it out to be, is still that of a very young man...but the kinds of errors he is making are the sort we all make all of the time, regardless of our age, I am afraid. He has become convinced of certain facts, and all that he sees reinforces his convictions. Anything that contradicts his strongly held beliefs, he explains away. Hermione seems to have the greatest ability of the four to actually look at all of the facts before them, sift them, weigh them, and make determinations about their relative veracity or utility. We had hoped to be able to make use of this ability, but something has changed in their dynamic. Although we knew that Miss Lovegood might be a factor to consider, neither the Headmaster nor I realised the extent to which she would become involved in their plans. She has become a wildcard, but I fear that trying to interfere with the group and with her involvement would have worse consequences than allowing events to

play themselves out. Albus always assures me..." Minerva stopped, catching herself, then swallowed before continuing, "He always assured me that events will unfold so that Harry will have his final encounter with Riddle and be in a position to overcome him. And yet . . . it is so important that he achieve certain other goals before that time comes. We thought we were helping him do that . . . now I am not so sure."

"The fact remains that Potter must not continue to come and go as he has," Severus answered. "He is at his most vulnerable each time he leaves and each time he returns. Here he is safest, but I believe we are agreed that it would serve no purpose for him to remain here in what is, at best, temporary shelter, while growing no closer to achieving what he must prior to his encounter with the Dark Lord. I have little faith in his skills at this point, and I do not see how he could possibly defeat the Dark Lord, but I do not believe that further training would be sufficiently effective in what little time we have left, and any training would be moot if he did not first accomplish his other goals."

Severus had forgotten the presence of the third party, sitting there silently in the corner of the gloomy sitting room, like a bizarre chaperone, and he startled to suddenly hear his voice.

"While I agree with you regarding the mootness of further training if Mr Potter is first unable to finish the other tasks laid before him, I disagree with your estimation of his ability," the voice said softly from the shadows.

Severus turned his head slightly toward the dark figure. "Do you?" he asked evenly. "And your experience is so vast as to make you a better judge of his competence?" It was difficult to keep his resentment from his voice.

This wizard, this . . . this *interloper* was now the Defence Against the Dark Arts teacher. Severus had protested his appointment strenuously. The man had been an apothecary in Amsterdam, for Merlin's sake, not an Auror. He may have fought against Grindelwald, but that had been decades before. When the previous June, Minerva had announced to the staff that Alroy MacAirt was going to teach Transfiguration beginning in September and step into the position of Gryffindor Head of House, Severus had anticipated continuing to teach Defence. He was not unaware of the curse on the position, but he had made it through an entire year of teaching, and he had presumed that he would continue in the fall. However, it appeared that Slughorn wanted to return to retirement now that Dumbledore was no longer Headmaster, and Minerva had asked that Severus step back into his old job in Potions. It was bad enough he would have to teach in the same school with this unsettling wizard, but now the man was taking the Defence position...a job for which Severus was convinced the older wizard was entirely unsuited.

Severus had argued to Minerva that it made far more sense to have him continue as Defence teacher, and for this wizard who had been teaching Transfiguration since Dumbledore's death to become the Potions instructor, since Crouch had been a successful apothecary in Amsterdam, but Severus's arguments fell on deaf ears. Minerva would sit, appear to listen to him, but then offer no answer whatsoever except that Severus was free to leave Hogwarts if he preferred. Minerva knew very well that Severus would not now shirk his duty. Even had he not promised Dumbledore that he would stay on at Hogwarts and support Minerva, he would have done so, and continuing his work for the Order was the only thing that made his continued survival meaningful to him and that gave any meaning at all to Dumbledore's sacrifice on his behalf.

Chapter Five: With the man in the wind

Chapter 6 of 34

Severus watches Hermione brewing her potion as he recalls his startling introduction to Robert Crouch in early January 1997, and a conversation with Dumbledore late the following month, when he first learned of one of the Headmaster's most daft schemes yet. Severus considers Hermione and her role.

Note: AU. Not DH-compliant.



Chapter Five: *With the man in the wind*

September 1997

Despite their rocky introduction in the Headmaster's Office on his arrival the previous January, the older wizard had been civil to Severus. Robert Crouch had originally come to assist the Headmaster and his Deputy during the former's final illness, and, from all accounts, he had been a surprisingly effective Transfiguration teacher even under the circumstances that had brought him into the position with Minerva's elevation to Headmistress following Dumbledore's death in March. Severus had also heard no criticisms of the wizard as a Defence teacher this year, either, even though he questioned his Slytherins closely. It even irked him that the man appeared to have no favourites and treated the Slytherins just as he did all the other students. In fact, the annoying former apothecary seemed to have an uncanny knack with the students, knowing how to treat each of them in order to get their best work and their best behaviour. What was most irritating, however, was the way in which he had insinuated himself into the Headmistress's life. Severus felt there was something unsavoury there, irrespective of the fact that the two had known each other for more than four decades.

The man slunk about the castle, too often appearing in the shadows behind the Headmistress, always seeming to speak in a near-whisper, and seemingly incapable of any emotion stronger than mild amusement. Severus could not imagine how this person could possibly teach Defence Against the Dark Arts...and certainly not as well as he himself had the year before. Yet his Slytherins had no complaints whatsoever, and that was perhaps the most suspicious thing about him of all. If it hadn't been for what he had learned of the wizard's background on that cold, bright afternoon in early January when they were both waiting for Dumbledore to arrive in his office, Severus would have believed him to be one of the Dark Lord's followers, perhaps even sent to spy on him.

Sitting there now in the meeting with the Headmistress discussing Potter's future, Severus bit back a caustic remark about the Defence teacher's abilities and experience and remembered what the older wizard had told him that day in the Headmaster's Office months before: that his father had been killed by Grindelwald, and his mother, attacked and permanently injured by Voldemort's Death Eaters. Severus shivered at the memory . . .

"Yes, my father, brave Gryffindor that he was, spoke against Grindelwald, and Grindelwald killed him personally. That was in nineteen thirty-five." The stranger's words were careful and precise but oddly accented, the speech of an English expatriate who had spent almost his entire life abroad, man and boy, rarely speaking his mother-tongue. "Then in nineteen seventy-nine, my mother was targeted by He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named-in-the-Presence-of-One-Who-Bears-His-Mark. But you knew that." The grey eyes were unnerving in their direct gaze, and the use of the decades-old and almost-forgotten circumlocution to refer to the Dark Lord raised a chill up Severus's spine.

Severus racked his brain, trying to think of a Crouch whom the Dark Lord had targeted...any Crouch at any time during his first rise...but he could think of none. On seeing Severus's expression, the apothecary had smiled thinly.

"You knew her, too. And she knew you." The wizard's voice was soft, almost caressing.

Severus still did not know what the man was talking about, but the tone in his voice caused an unaccustomed clenching in his gut, a peculiar fear that had nothing to do with physical danger.

"She taught you, and she would have recognised you . . . anywhere." The words were almost a whisper.

"I don't know what you are talking about. You must be confused," Severus said. "I never had a teacher named Crouch." But even as he said these words, Severus did remember a teacher, a teacher who had recognised him. A teacher who had recognised him when he had failed to kill her. Whose attempt to flee he had impeded . . . until a wave of shame had overwhelmed him, and he had finally let her go, dropping the Anti-Apparition wards, but only after she had been grievously injured, perhaps fatally so. He swallowed. "I don't know what you are talking about," he repeated.

"My mother was an accomplished Arithmancer; she taught Arithmancy at Hogwarts until she retired in nineteen seventy-six." The wizard's gaze never wavered.

"Gamp," Severus croaked, and the memory flooding back to him of the old witch, gloriously defiant, battling with a ferocity he had not believed possible from her, and almost defeating the four Death Eaters whom the Dark Lord had sent to kill her...all four of them wizards whom she had taught.

A blood-traitor and Muggle-lover, the Dark Lord had called her, and an ally of Dumbledore. It was one of the memories Severus had packed, stowed, locked, and sequestered safely away from his everyday life at Hogwarts as a Hogwarts teacher who walked the same halls that she had once walked and who taught beside those whom she had once called friends and colleagues. One of the many evils he had seen and done, one of those evils for which he had sought atonement when he had finally, and too late, repented his allegiance and sought out the Headmaster. But it had not even been on her account that he had turned away from the Dark Lord, despite the feeling of sickness that had arisen in him at the sight of her wand arm, separated from her body yet still twitching, and which arose in him even on that day in early January when he met her son Robert for the first time.

"And she had thought she lost everything when her husband was killed by He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named-in-the-Presence-of-One-Who-Bears-His-Mark," Robert had continued quietly. "But she lost still more that day, even unto being forced into exile so that she could not be found again."

"But...your father..."

"Was killed by Grindelwald. Then she found happiness with another, after many years. But he was a brave Gryffindor, too, and not one to shirk his duty. He was killed before you left Hogwarts. You wouldn't remember Malcolm McGonagall or his assassination the day before his wedding anniversary. You were still a student," Crouch said softly, "though you would not have observed Minerva's grief, as her brother was murdered in July. The July before your . . . seventh year, I believe."

Severus sat there, and had he been stunned before, he was sickened by this revelation. In all the years he had taught at Hogwarts, he had never heard mention of a McGonagall killed by the Dark Lord, nor had he heard of it from any of his fellow Death Eaters, though he did not know all that occurred even now, and certainly not everything that had happened prior to his taking the Mark. And yet Minerva had never mentioned it, either. Of all that she had forgiven him . . . how could she have done it? It was hardly any wonder that the forgiveness and affection had evaporated after he had told her of his Vow and Dumbledore's plan. The greater wonder was that she had ever forgiven him at all.

And now here *he* was, sitting beside Severus in the Headmaster's Office on a brightly frozen day in January more than a decade later, and in her son's grey eyes, Severus could see the witch whom he could not kill, the witch who had been married to Minerva's murdered brother, the witch who had vanished, never to reappear after that day.

"Yes, Gamp," responded Crouch with a slow nod. "Uncle Albus told me that they could not kill her easily, that she almost defeated them, but that one Death Eater, one who could not kill her, that one Death Eater impeded her long enough that she lost almost all that was left her in life but life itself, and then . . . and then the Death Eater let her go. Uncle Albus said that he had been her student, too. Was it mercy that drove him, or was it cruelty?"

Severus had no answer for the quiet wizard. He could only have admitted to a kind of cowardice, which was repugnant no matter what side one was on, and which certainly was nothing to boast of, even if it had saved an innocent witch's life. She had already taken several curses, but stood fast, when Severus lopped off her wand arm. There had actually been some amusement in him as he had done it; a clever thing, he thought it. But then he saw the blood rushing from the witch's shoulder as she slumped to the ground, yet still able somehow to grab on to her wand with her left hand, taking it from her own severed limb. She had looked up at him. He had seen her eyes. He felt ill and ashamed, not powerful, not clever. He slashed his own wand through the air, dropping the Anti-Apparition wards, sure that the witch was a dead woman, certain she would be unable to escape even with the wards down, but she closed her eyes, held her bloody wand to her chest, and Disapparated. Until that day when he met Robert Crouch, Severus had believed it at least as likely that the Gamp witch was dead as that she had survived.

And less than nine months after that unsettling introduction in the Headmaster's Office, that wizard who had so easily stepped into the Transfiguration position in the spring, who was now teaching Defence to *his* Slytherins in *his* former classroom, who followed the Headmistress about like a silent shadow, whose appearance had made Severus's gut clench, whose words had brought a chill to his spine, and whose constant presence reminded him of all that he wished to escape, that wizard was sitting there behind him in the gloomy sitting room, telling him that he disagreed with his estimation of Potter's skills. And Severus acquiesced.

He nodded sharply in the older wizard's direction. "The Headmaster always had faith in Potter, too. I hope you are correct. But that still leaves the fact that he must take a decisive step forward; he cannot continue as he has."

In his peculiarly accented speech, the Defence teacher said, "I believe that Minerva has articulated our approach and that you are best suited to the task, Professor."

Severus turned fully to face him, and he could sense Minerva's own puzzlement. "And that approach would be?"

"You will get him to leave school permanently. Force the choice on him. Not precisely reverse psychology, but if Mr Potter believes you wish to hinder his ability to carry on as he has and is presented with the alternative that we wish him to take . . . his dislike of you may be the final push that he needs. Uncle Albus's death was insufficient, despite his hope that it would lead the boy to take the first steps on his path."

Severus nodded. A plan was already forming in the back of his mind, but he asked, "Your recommendations?"

"Uncle Albus had faith in you, as well, Professor, and he often expressed high regard for your . . . ingenuity. I bow to your judgment in this. It is important, however, that his companions leave with him."

"Minerva?" Severus turned back to the Headmistress.

"It is as he says," she answered stiffly. "I am sure you will engineer an appropriate encounter, and I need not impress upon you the urgency of the situation."

Severus had agreed to "persuade" Potter to leave school for one last time, not to return, and although he had never explicitly said that he would do anything to encourage his three friends to leave with him, that had been understood. There was little he could do to affect Lovegood, and she hadn't been present when the perfect opportunity

had presented itself to confront Potter. Weasley, predictably, had followed his friend out the door, and Severus believed it quite likely that had he not spoken to Hermione, she would have followed suit. It was still possible that she would, but as he watched the young witch carefully drop her sliced Shrivelfig into her pale green potion bubbling in its glass cauldron, Severus felt an unaccountable, and completely unfounded, hope that she would not follow the boys when they left the castle grounds and headed into danger that would never entirely disappear until either the Dark Lord was dead or they were. Although it was possible they would be careless enough to depart the grounds in broad daylight, it was more likely that Potter and Weasley would wait to leave until after dark. This meant both that Hermione still had time to decide to accompany the boys and that Lovegood might catch up with them, as well.

Minerva and her shadow might not appreciate it if they knew that he had even hinted to Hermione that she needn't go with the others, but if there was already strife within the little group, taking Hermione out of the equation might actually be helpful to them in the end. His own motives for suggesting to Hermione that she had another option were not entirely clear even to himself. It just seemed . . . a waste. And if they used Grimmauld Place as a base of operations, they could meet with her there occasionally. She could still help the others with her research; indeed, she would be of more use to them. If they were tramping around looking for the objects of their quest, she could scarcely make use of any magical libraries. By staying here, she would have access to the Hogwarts library. And he could help her. Subtly, of course, and hopefully without coming to the attention of anyone who might be averse to it...whether that was the Headmistress or the Dark Lord. He could certainly at least steer her toward the clues he had fed the Dark Lord and then toward the information that would prove those clues as the empty and false leads that they were.

He still remembered snorting in disbelief when he first heard of the plan from Albus's mouth the previous February in the Headmaster's dimly lit sitting room, just a few weeks before his death. Albus was reclining on the sofa, propped up by several pillows, his wasted hand resting on another one.

"And who would seriously believe such a thing, Albus? Children and madmen!"

"Which is our audience, Severus. Unless you have changed your opinion of the Dark Lord's sanity and Harry's maturity."

That remark elicited another snort from Severus as Minerva handed Albus a glass with cool water and helped him to drink a few sips.

"I have already begun the dissemination of false information again, recruiting a few rather unlikely allies into the plot. I had begun to consider abandoning it, given the current state of my health, but then Minerva suggested that you could be useful to the plan, providing clues and red herrings to Tom while giving him other disinformation. If you pepper your reports with the clues as though you have no notion yourself as to their connection with one another or his own interest in the trail of bread crumbs we already have laid for him, he will likely snap them up."

"Trail of bread crumbs, indeed! The Hallows of Death! A fairy tale!" Severus shook his head in disbelief. "And you say that the Dark Lord has already been bamboozled by some of this? Do you have *any* idea what he will do if he discovers prematurely that this is all just a stalling technique to distract him from Potter? He will know that all of the information he has received from me which is tied to this fool's errand was deliberately planted. It will lead to doubts about everything I have told him, and although I doubt my own fate concerns you, it will likely also bring him to the final conclusion that I am and always have been a traitor. You will lose your spy before you are prepared for it."

"You must simply ensure that he does not discover it prematurely, Severus. I have faith in you and believe that you will tell Minerva if things are moving too fast or if Tom is becoming suspicious. You must do your best to pace things. And as for the bamboozling, as you put it, it was his own wild notions that led me to think of this plan in the first place, over twenty years ago. I simply confirmed some of what he had already hoped was true. I believe he had thought to abandon his search, despite the events in the graveyard, until he happened across the clues I set for him last year."

"And the point to having Potter and his friends go haring off after these figures of fantasy when they have another task to be getting on with, the one without which you assure me that it will be impossible to kill the Dark Lord?"

"Two-fold. It will reinforce Tom's own beliefs if he has the notion that Harry is also on their trail, and it will give Harry more time to prepare for what he must finally do in the end. He still has some maturing to do and must come to certain realisations about himself and his role. He needs that time."

"But involving the Lovegood girl . . ." Severus held back a sigh.

"That was necessary because we were making use of Xenophilius. I am afraid that I had to perform a few memory charms, but it was a very simple matter, given his already firmly held beliefs." Albus took a deep breath and motioned for the glass of water. After another sip, he continued, "And he is strongly opposed to Tom . . . I regret putting him in greater danger, but I believe he would eventually have done something that brought him to Tom's attention, anyway, and at least this way, perhaps his continued existence might be ensured if it is thought he has some important information."

"But if the Dark Lord doesn't get the information from Lovegood . . . I thought Lovegood's information was to be aimed at Potter," Severus said questioningly, trying to ignore the Headmaster's increasingly laboured breathing.

Dumbledore nodded. "Yes . . . but . . . it could prove useful later to have him confirm certain facts . . . You may be able to make use of it."

"The Headmaster grows tired, Professor Snape," Minerva said, interrupting. "Do you have anything of substance to ask of him? If not, I suggest we bring this meeting to an end."

The Headmaster's funeral was a month later.

If he had been able to speak with the Headmaster that morning in late September, Severus had the feeling that he might have approved of his gently steering Granger away from following Potter into danger as long as he didn't hinder her from continuing to help the boy. Minerva and her shadow would no doubt disapprove, though Minerva might be secretly relieved, but Albus would have understood, and Severus believed he would have given his blessing.

He would suggest to Granger that Potter and his friends stay at Grimmauld Place, which was rarely used by the Order now, though it was still the Headquarters. They could always vacate it during the meetings, if they liked. But it would be a safe place for them to meet Granger that wouldn't bring them back to Hogsmeade, which would likely continue to be watched. Of course, she would have to go there and back, but he would watch over her, make sure that she made the journey unharmed. Perhaps this was finally one witch whom he could save, one Gryffindor he could keep from death.

Note: Although I don't normally recommend reading just parts of stories (!), if you would like to see more of Severus's developing relationship with Hermione, see the Epilogue to [An Act of Love](#) here on *The Petulant Poetess*. It's listed on my author's profile page. There's actually quite a bit of fun SS-HG interaction in that fic, not just in the epilogue.

Chapter Six: Though lovers be lost love shall not

Hermione speaks privately with Severus in the Grimmauld Place library on a cold day in January 1998; later that night, Severus spies something in the Hogwarts library that disturbs him. But does he really understand what he witnesses?

Rated for **brief sexual content depicting consenting adults**.

Note: AU. Not DH-compliant.

Rated for **brief sexual content depicting consenting adults**.

(And please remember that there are things that our weary, burdened Severus does not know; therefore his P.O.V. is limited and his interpretations may be based on faulty or scarce information. Thanks!)



Chapter Six: *Though lovers be lost love shall not*

Early January 1998

Hermione paced in the cold library in Grimmauld Place. They were supposed to have been there to meet her more than an hour before. What could be taking them so long? She had even gone upstairs and looked in their rooms, but there was no sign of them anywhere...which was just as well, since only a few people knew that the three were staying at Grimmauld Place most of the time. She, Professor McGonagall, and Arthur Weasley were the only ones who knew officially, although Remus and Tonks had discovered it by accident, and Harry had trusted their promises sufficiently to continue staying there. But perhaps he had changed his mind, perhaps he had taken them off to some other base. They still were supposed to be there for their meeting, though, regardless of where they were staying. What if something had happened to them?

Unofficially, Professor Snape also knew. In a way, it had been his idea that Harry, Ron, and Luna stay at Grimmauld Place while they conducted their searches, something he had suggested to Hermione on the day that Harry had stormed out of Potions three months before. Harry hadn't been very keen on the idea at first, even without knowing its source, but then he decided that it made the most sense, since the house was warded and the *Fidelius* apparently was still in place...though Harry had expressed scepticism about whether the Order's secrets were safe with Professor Snape now that Dumbledore was no longer alive to keep an eye on him. But nothing untoward had happened, and Hermione had pointed out that the Headmistress still trusted Snape. If Harry became aware that Professor Snape knew that they were staying there, though, he would likely leave and never look back, and Hermione had no idea how she would keep in contact with them if that were the case. It was difficult enough as it was, sneaking away to meet them like this, as she had for the past few months. And if they didn't hurry...

A door slammed, and the portrait of Mrs Black began screeching about blood-traitors and filthy Mudbloods. Hermione rolled her eyes. She had been so careful not to disturb the portrait when she had arrived.

"Where have you three been? Do you realise that the Order meeting will start in two hours? And people will likely begin arriving well before then?"

"Oh, put a sock in it, Hermione," Ron said grumpily.

Hermione goggled at him. Then she looked at all three. Luna looked much as she always did, if somewhat more focussed, perhaps, but Ron and Harry were covered in mud...still drying mud. Hermione waved her wand, cleaning them both of the worst of the dirt.

"Sorry, Hermione," Ron said grudgingly. "Just another wild Snidget chase, with nothing at the end of it." He turned to Luna and put his hand on hers. "It's not your fault, Luna. The information you had was good, it was just old, and we all agreed to go."

Luna nodded and gave him a dreamy smile.

"Do you have anything new for us, Hermione?" Harry interrupted.

"A few things . . . but I have to say, this entire quest of yours seems like a wild goose chase...or Snidget chase," she said, looking at Ron, whose hand was now holding Luna's. "Look, I think you're getting distracted from the main purpose. You have to find the Horcruxes. You have to destroy them, or killing Voldemort will do nothing except prolong the war for another generation. And who knows if he even can be killed normally now. He's stronger than he was, Harry. We should be researching the ritual he performed to give himself a new body; we should be trying to figure out what the other Horcruxes are and where they're located and how each one may be destroyed. We have four more left. It is January already. Time is not on our side."

"We *are* looking for the Horcruxes," Harry replied. "But this is important, too. I know it is. Dumbledore said it was."

"Dumbledore is *dead*, Harry!" Hermione said in exasperation. "Time is growing short. It's January already. There have been more killings. They tried to assassinate Scrimgeour last week."

"Kidnap him," Ron corrected her. "We heard from . . . some of our other contacts that they were trying to kidnap him. They tried to kidnap Professor McGonagall the week before that, but it was hushed up...there are a few more Death Eaters in Azkaban today, though. They were looking for us and they think McGonagall and Scrimgeour know where we are. Of course, Scrimgeour hasn't a clue, but if he's going to go about spouting off how great a supporter Harry is of the Ministry, and how the Ministry is providing him 'every assistance,' he deserves what he gets." In response to Hermione's shocked expression, he hastily added, "Not being actually kidnapped, of course."

"So, where's the information? We have to get out of here before people begin to arrive." Harry was taking charge again.

Hermione reached into her bag and pulled out a thick sheaf of parchments. She handed it to Harry, but before she let go, she said, "I still believe it's a mistake to be going after these things; I think someone is leading us astray. I hope that after you look at all of this, you will finally agree with me."

Harry looked at the parchments she had compiled for him. "All of this? I suppose we could split it up, each take part of it..."

"There's a summary, too, and it's keyed to the relevant places in the main text. You can find them using the common indexing spell. I'm sure Luna knows it." Hermione looked at Luna, who now had one arm wrapped around Ron's. She wasn't sure how she felt about that sight.

The four talked a bit longer, Harry finally thanking her for her hard work, done despite the fact that she was sceptical about the existence of the Deathly Hallows. They promised to be careful, and Hermione hugged each of them before they left, even Luna, who gave her a vague smile, then she cast a Disillusionment Spell on a grumbling Ron. Hermione just rolled her eyes and shoed them out of the house.

A few minutes after the door had shut behind them, fortunately more quietly than it had the first time, Hermione heard it open again. Thank goodness! They had left just in time. Other members of the Order must be arriving. She tried to remain calm. She had been sent ahead by Professor McGonagall. Neither of them had ever come up for a good reason for her to be there early, but so far, she had never had to use the excuse, as either the Headmistress herself or Professor Snape had always arrived before anyone else had, and whoever arrived next always assumed that Hermione had come with one of them.

Hermione sat on the old sofa and pretended to read her Transfiguration textbook. She looked up when she heard someone enter the room. A bright smile lit her face, and she stood.

"Professor Snape! I am glad it's you, sir. That is, I thought it might be someone else," she said.

"What took those three so long?" Snape asked with no prelude, bringing the cold January air with him as he swept through the room and took a seat in the old wingback chair across from her.

Hermione explained as well as she could, and Professor Snape listened, gazing at her over steepled fingers. After she had, she said, "But . . . were you watching the house, sir?"

How had he known they were late? He had seen them leave; had he also seen them arrive?

"Yes, Miss Granger, I was watching the house." He gave a parody of a smile. "It's what a good Death Eater does, isn't it?"

"I simply wanted to know how you knew they were late," Hermione said, trying to remind him of her trust in him. She paused, looking at him carefully. "Do you do that every time I meet with them?"

Snape remained expressionless, but he swallowed. "Yes. Each time. It is important to know that you arrive safely and that neither you nor they are followed." His hesitation was perceptible. "It was I who suggested to you that you meet with them here. It is safer for them this way, but you must then leave the security of Hogwarts and Apparate here alone. I follow you. The dangers are not as great as they were when you would leave the school with Potter and then return, but they are not negligible." He waited for an adolescent tirade of some sort, or at least a Gryffindor protest that she could take care of herself, and why was a Slytherin Death Eater following her, anyway?

Hermione thought about what he had said, then she smiled. "In the stories my mother always told me as a child, guardian angels were supposed to wear white and have wings. It seems that was just a fairy story, too."

Severus twitched a slight smile, but an honest one, not the peculiar grimace he had affected earlier. "Fairy story?" he asked.

Hermione let out a sigh. "I don't know how much of this you know, or how much I should say . . . but . . ." She looked up at him. "Can I talk to you, sir? Do you mind?"

Severus felt the urge to smile again. She hadn't asked whether she could trust him; she had asked whether he minded if she talked to him, shared something with him. As though he were a friend, and not . . . not what he was.

He shook his head. "I do not mind, Miss Granger."

"I think they are on a wild goose chase, er, Snidget chase..."

"I know what a 'wild goose chase' is," he broke in, reminding her obliquely that he was the Half-Blood Prince. Of course, he wouldn't look at her blankly like Ron would, even if he hadn't heard the term before; he would be able to figure out its meaning immediately, and he would never look at her blankly...not the vacant way that Ron did, anyway. No, when Professor Snape looked blank, you still knew that there was something going on behind those dark, unfathomable eyes.

Hermione took a breath and told him about the Deathly Hallows and Harry's obsession with them. "The thing is, sir, I think that it's all just a story. And not simply because I'm a sceptic. I think there's a . . . a hoax going on. I think that someone is trying to lead Harry from his mission to . . . to do what he's supposed to be doing. I actually don't know why it is that Harry believes so strongly, except that apparently in one of the last conversations that Professor Dumbledore had with him, the Headmaster said something specific, and now Harry has interpreted that to mean that he has to find these . . . these fabled items, and that finding them is just as important as finding and destroying..." Hermione stopped herself just in time. She felt very comfortable with Professor Snape, but there were some confidences she couldn't share, for her own peace of mind and sense of integrity, not from lack of trust in him.

"Best not to speak any further of that, Miss Granger. Even with me," Snape said, struggling with the desire to tell her that he had been one of those leading Harry down a primrose path of sorts, but instead of making things easier for him, only making them more difficult. "Why are you so convinced that Potter is wrong...other than the fact that he so often is?"

Hermione ignored the jibe at Harry, instead reaching into her book bag and pulling out a frayed and tattered book. She held it out to him, but he did not take it.

"This, for one, sir. Not just this...I have been sceptical all along...but this book, I found it just last week." Hermione shook her head. "I would swear that it hadn't been there when I had looked before . . . but that isn't the point. There is a chapter in this book that traces elements of the story back to earlier myths and legends. It is very convincing and well-documented. And Death personified . . . call me a Muggle, if you like, but it sounds too allegorical to me. And there are other things that made me wonder, but this book . . . it solidified my doubt and made it belief. I simply cannot believe that this search is anything more than a . . . a ruse to draw Harry away from what he should be doing. Or I might be paranoid, and no one is actually trying to lead Harry astray, but I still believe that he is veering from the correct path."

Severus stared silently at the book now in Hermione's lap; finally, he said, "You found that book, Miss Granger, because I placed it in the library last week for you to find. And I removed it from the library last spring so that you would not find it too soon."

Hermione's jaw dropped, but she was speechless. Severus waited for an accusation to come from her lips, but none did.

"I returned it earlier than planned, in fact," he continued, anticipating the inevitable display of outrage, ready for her to blame him, to question his loyalties.

"But why?" Hermione asked, having found her voice.

"Because I am in agreement with you. Potter needs to prepare himself for the day when he will face the Dark Lord, and I am not persuaded that hunting down purely imaginary items is the best way for him to do that," Severus answered.

"But why . . . why remove it in the first place? And all of the clues, everything that we found that pointed toward their existence . . . what of those?"

"Many of them false leads, planted, just as I planted that book for you to find."

"Luna's father..."

"Is gullible and highly suggestible, Miss Granger. Much of the information that he has passed on through Miss Lovegood was planted just as the books and other documents were."

"Memory charms?" Hermione asked. The notion of anyone using memory charms of any sort on anyone for any reason appalled her. Her mind and her memories were

precious to her, every one, and the prospect that anyone might perform such a charm on her was terrifying, especially the *Obliviate*, although being forced to remember things that weren't so seemed almost as bad to her.

"Memory charms, among other things."

"Did you do them?"

"No, not I, another." Albus and Robert had each visited Luna's father and given him knowledge of things that did not exist and memories of long-ago conversations that never occurred, supplementing the altered memories with books and old letters stuffed in various nooks in his home, where he would find them and believe he had always possessed them.

"Has anyone done any memory charms on me? Or on Harry or Ron? Or Luna?"

"No, that particular bit of violence was only committed upon Lovegood."

"Oh." That was a relief. "And not on the Headmaster?" Hermione asked.

Severus chuckled mirthlessly. "No, one does not generally cast memory charms on oneself. I do not know if such a thing is even possible."

"Then he . . ." Hermione was trying to comprehend what she had just learned.

"He wanted to distract the Dark Lord from his objectives during the first war, and so he began to plant a false trail for him to follow, knowing that he would not be able to resist. After the Dark Lord vanished, the Headmaster had abandoned the idea, but then it seemed a way to give Potter more time to prepare, so the Headmaster built upon the foundation that he had begun all those years ago. This time, he included Potter in his plans...as he would have to, of course. He had to take into account both Potter's presence in the scheme of things and the goals that he must achieve if he is to play the role that it appears he must play. And so . . . Potter was likewise presented with the trail of breadcrumbs, and he followed them as surely as the Dark Lord did."

"Is the Dark Lord still looking for the Hallows, then?" Hermione asked.

"Yes, and he became more obsessed with them once it was clear that Potter was on the trail as well. It confirmed to him the validity of his search, just as the Headmaster had hoped."

"But why? I still don't completely understand. I do understand distracting the Dark Lord, but why Harry, too? Couldn't he pretend to look for these things, or you tell the Dark Lord that he was? Wouldn't that serve the same purpose?"

Severus shook his head. "That was only one reason that Potter was introduced to the story. The Headmaster also wanted to give him more time to prepare for the encounter with the Dark Lord, which he believed inevitable. He thought that this side quest would help do that by delaying both the Dark Lord and Potter. I don't believe that the Headmaster anticipated how single-minded Potter would become, that he would neglect his other duties, whatever they may be, in order to hunt down these imaginary objects. You were always a part of the Headmaster's plan. He believed that you would be able to keep Potter focussed on the most important aspects of his preparation while at the same time helping him to find and follow the clues laid out for him, but while encouraging him to be sceptical. At the right moment, you would be able to convince Potter that he was wasting his time and that he should expend his energies elsewhere. That has not happened as anticipated, and I am concerned that the opposite is happening."

"I see . . . I do understand why Professor Dumbledore did as he did," Hermione said slowly, "but I think he was a bit too thorough, and he underestimated how much Harry looked up to him. Harry sees this as fulfilling Professor Dumbledore's final wishes, which seems to have taken up as great an importance as anything else. Harry also believes that there is something about gathering these things together that will make it possible for him to defeat the Dark Lord."

"The Headmaster was not infallible, for all his virtues and his brilliance," Severus said, then adding, "He knew this, however, and tried to compensate for his mistakes and misjudgments, but he could be . . . stubborn on occasion. And he is no longer here to correct his error in this instance."

"I always felt that there was something or someone steering us. I do not know if I am happy that I was right," Hermione said thoughtfully.

"Miss Granger, Hermione . . . if the Headmistress asks . . ."

"If she asks, I will tell her everything up to the point where you told me about replacing the book in the library," she said. "I do assume that you weren't supposed to come right out and tell me that it was all a hoax."

"She won't ask you specifically, any more than she would admit to Potter that she knew that he was looking for the nonexistent Hallows," Severus replied. "She did try to get him to talk to her about it, but he was as obstinate as ever. The Headmaster is dead, and still he keeps his secrets, even those that were never intended to be true secrets. But you are correct: I was not supposed to inform you of our deception. Merely plant sufficient clues that would eventually lead you to doubt the existence of the Hallows and then convince Potter of it."

Hermione thought for a moment. "Why did you tell me, then...if I may ask, sir."

"Because you were always sceptical and you are wasting your time trying to help Potter find what does not exist. To the extent that you spend any effort on it at all, you should be looking for things that bolster your argument that he is on a wild goose chase."

"Thank you."

Severus nodded, then he turned his head, listening. "Others are arriving." He looked back over at her. "You should probably not appear so . . . comfortable in my presence."

Hermione blushed. As they had been talking, she had toed off her shoes and drawn her legs up under her, as she often did when curled up on a big chair or sofa, reading or talking with friends. It wasn't terribly dignified, though. And Professor Snape was right: no Hogwarts student would feel comfortable enough to sit like that in his presence. She imagined even all of the Slytherins sat up straight and got their feet off the furniture when he came into their common room. She didn't know what had possessed her.

Hermione slipped her shoes on and picked up her book, which she was reading quite decorously when one of her least favourite wizards and one of her most favourite came into the room together...Alastor Moody, who never hid his disdain for Professor Snape even when there were children present, and Remus Lupin, a kind and trustworthy soul who treated Professor Snape with respect despite the fact that the latter wizard had leaked his secret to the world.

Severus muttered a greeting, said something about his baby-sitting being over, and left the room in a swirl of black robes. He made his way to the kitchen. Unfortunately, others were likely to join him there soon, but at least he had made his escape before Moody could say anything nasty in front of Hermione about leopards not changing their spots. That paragon of virtue might never use Unforgivables when capturing Death Eaters, but he had his own brand of cruelty. He just didn't see it that way. What the old Auror thought of Severus rarely disturbed the younger wizard's mind, and the Headmaster had always known that he had truly repented. When Dumbledore was alive, that had been enough, to have had his confidence. And now Minerva, despite the fact that she was still . . . upset with him and they were no longer friends, she had rebuked Moody just the week before for one of his comments. It didn't bother him what a mad old bugger like Moody said about him. Not one whit.

He still didn't want Hermione to hear it, the way that Moody spoke to him with such derision. Hermione...Miss Granger, he corrected himself...had not once presumed that the hoax he had helped perpetrate had been on behalf of the Dark Lord. She had been surprised that Dumbledore had quite the active role in it, though she shouldn't have been. He had been one of the only people whom the boy would listen to, after all. Severus didn't know why she would think that Dumbledore would have a memory charm

placed on him...he was the leader of the Order of the Phoenix and, as such, the architect of their plans. But Hermione had been surprised by the information he had given her. He could forgive one lapse of logical thinking on the girl's part. After all, she trusted him, and she had kept his secret as surely as she had Lupin's. And she seemed to tolerate his company quite well, possibly even welcoming it. That was an unusual pleasure for him.

Severus was just remembering a visit Hermione had paid him in his office a little over a year before, her small gift, and her words at that time, when two people entered the kitchen. Minerva and her shadow.

"Miss Granger said you had arrived, Severus," the Headmistress stated, taking a seat across from him. Her shadow was . . . in the shadows, his dusky greenish-grey robes hanging limply from his frame, apparently making Minerva a cup of tea. "I had wanted to speak to you before very many others arrive."

Severus nodded. Minerva's shadow put a mug of tea in front of Minerva and a second one in front of Severus.

Minerva looked up and smiled at the Defence Against the Dark Arts teacher. "Thank you . . . Robbie."

Robert returned her smile and sat down beside her, Summoning his own mug from the sideboard. Minerva glanced over at Severus, an eyebrow raised. Severus took a sip of his tea, then grunted his thanks.

Minerva had just finished speaking with Severus, her shadow silently at her side, sipping his tea, when Moody came in. Alastor stopped, and his eyes narrowed when he saw Robert Crouch at the table. That was one thing they had in common, Severus thought. Neither of them trusted the sudden ubiquitous and constant presence of this foreign Crouch, regardless of who his parents had been or how long Albus and Minerva had known him. There was something unsettling about the man, and even more disturbing was the way that he had slipped so easily into life at Hogwarts, in the Order, and with the grieving Headmistress. Severus had always suspected that Moody was more fond of Minerva than she of him, and he didn't know whether it was the new wizard's unexpected role in the Order that disturbed Moody most or some sort of jealousy...or just general Mad-Eye paranoia. Severus almost laughed: if Moody didn't like this former apothecary, perhaps that was reason enough to give him a chance. Then he saw the way the grey-eyed wizard looked at Minerva, and Severus decided it was best to wait and watch. Minerva might feel safe with "Robbie," but if it became clear that she wasn't safe, he would do something about it. He had promised Albus on his deathbed that he would take care of Minerva, and even if he hadn't, he owed it to her and to Albus to look after her, whether she liked it or not . . .

Back from the meeting at Grimmauld Place that night at Hogwarts, Severus returned to the Restricted Section of the cold, empty library to replace more of the books he had removed the previous spring. He would find a way to inform Hermione of their availability. Perhaps, he thought, they could work out a method of communication...he stopped, listening. There was a noise coming from a nearby corner. Severus scowled. Students out after curfew, in the library. Despite the holiday, there would be points taken that night. If they were Slytherins, they would lose double points just for being so clumsy that they were caught.

Severus was about to round the corner, intent on sneaking up on the miscreants, when he heard a familiar Scottish burr.

"Not here. Not now." The Headmistress's voice sounded pained. "Later. Later. You could come to me tonight. Or we could wait, wait, meet elsewhere, as we have done before."

It was Minerva.

"Now, here," came a soft reply. "I miss you, I miss you, Minerva."

"You were with me all day. We can wait," she protested...weakly, Severus thought.

Severus moved so that he could see them in the moonlight filtering through the windows, but he remained hidden in the deep shadows of the towering library stacks. Minerva and her pet were standing close to each other, and the wizard had her backed against the edge of a table. Severus winced as he saw Crouch reach out and caress Minerva. If he had stopped with her cheek, the gesture wouldn't have been so painful to watch, but he hadn't. His hand trailed down from her cheek to her throat, then on lower, to her chest. Severus thought that Minerva flinched as Crouch pushed aside her loose teaching robe and caressed her breast through her under-robe. She certainly closed her eyes and turned her head away.

"Minerva, Minerva . . . I missed touching you. Sitting beside you . . . watching you . . . it is wonderful, but it is insufficient." Now both hands were at her breasts, and he was slowly opening her robes, caressing her as he did so. "You must miss me, too."

Minerva's eyes remained closed, but she didn't move away or stop him, though her hands clutched the edge of the table behind her. Severus was torn. It seemed to him that Minerva was merely tolerating this impertinent wizard's touch, but she was not doing anything to stop him, either. She could step away to either side. Unless she were afraid. If she weren't afraid, if she could stop him but didn't really wish to . . . they would all be embarrassed if he revealed his presence there, stepping out to stop the impertinent stranger, and Minerva would have even greater cause to hate him than she already did. Perhaps this was an escape from her troubles. She had known Crouch longer than Severus himself had been alive, after all.

A pain shot through Severus. She would never accept such comfort from him, though he never would offer unless she sought it from him. Yet why would she seek it from Crouch? In this manner? He had always believed that Minerva had been utterly devoted to Albus. Could she discard his memory so quickly, after less than a year? But it did not seem she was seeking it from Crouch, either, as her eyes remained closed and her face turned away from the tall, gangly wizard.

Minerva took in a sharp breath as Crouch completely opened her bodice and began to fondle her breasts. Severus ached, but he could not tear his gaze away.

"I do . . . miss my Albus . . . I miss my Albus," Minerva said, her voice a soft, crying sigh. "Albus's touch . . ."

"I know you do, I know you do," the foreign wizard crooned. "But I am here, I am here with you now." He bent his head and kissed her neck. "Take pleasure in my touch, Minerva."

Minerva reached up as if to push him away. "I cannot do this. I . . . you . . . it doesn't feel right. And especially not here."

"Shh, shh, Minerva. It is right. It is fine." Despite Minerva's apparent gesture of rejection, the wizard hadn't removed his hands from her breasts, where he continued to fondle them. "And we are alone. Most are away from the castle for the holiday. We couldn't be more safe anywhere. I placed a ward on the door when we entered. If anyone comes in, we shall know. I will hide you and keep you safe."

Minerva shook her head, and Severus suppressed a sigh. Even if he managed to make it past them without them being aware of him, he couldn't leave because the shadow had cast a ward. But if the other wizard tried to take Minerva by force, he could step out and stop him. In the meantime, he would watch, painful as it was.

"I don't know," Minerva said, turning her face away again.

"I do know, and I know what you need...and what I want. I want you. Now. Not later." the older wizard responded in his soft voice. "Here, turn around. It will be all right. I promise."

Minerva turned away from him as he directed, and he embraced her from behind. In the stillness, Severus could hear his whisper as plainly as if he were speaking in his own ear.

"Here, this is better. Is this better? Feel this, feel this and think of your Albus." The wizard pulled her back against him. He kissed her neck. "And feel this." Severus saw him reach lower with one hand and begin to rub Minerva's crux through her robes. "Feel, Minerva. Feel me, Minerva, feel me."

Severus grimaced as the other wizard raised Minerva's skirts, apparently using a spell to do so, but then using his hands to push down the witch's knickers, coming to his knees behind her as he lowered them around her ankles. How could Minerva stand for this? She had barely tolerated his touch when he had been afflicted by the curse the

previous year...she had been good to him and had kindly consented to let him try to bring her pleasure with his touch, but Severus knew she never would have allowed him to touch her so intimately if it hadn't been for the *Adfectus* spell.

Now it appeared that the wizard was biting her buttocks, once on each side, and still Minerva simply stood there, allowing it, leaning with her fists against the tabletop, her eyes closed. The wizard stood and placed one arm around her, beginning to finger her from the front. With his other hand, he opened his greenish-grey robes, only a few buttons, those few necessary for his cock to spring free. Severus gritted his teeth as Crouch placed a palm on her shoulder and gently pushed her from the back; Minerva obediently bent over the table, resting her head on its surface, her face no longer visible to Severus, and allowed the insistent wizard to begin rubbing the head of his penis against her.

"Still not quite ready . . . don't you like this, Minerva? It is so very good to touch you this way. I like it. I like it very much," he whispered, still rubbing himself against her. "Think of your Albus, and remember, remember how you would feel, and I will do the same now; I promise you, Minerva, you will forget that it's another cock that fucks you. I will take you and fuck you, Minerva, and it will be good." As he spoke, his voice still soft and gentle but his language growing cruder, Crouch continued to rub her with both the head of his penis and his fingers. "Feel me, Minerva, feel me. Feel my desire and my need. I will fuck you here, now, and it will be good, I promise, my love. I will make you forget everything but our pleasure here and now. I will make you forget."

Severus felt an almost physical pain in his heart and bile rose in his throat, but Minerva did not protest, and her breathing was growing louder.

"I can fuck you well, Minerva, just as well. I want to, I need to. I need to fuck you. Should I do it now? Should I?" Crouch asked, his voice a low growl, emphasising his words with a sudden jerk of Minerva's body towards him, eliciting a slight cry from her. "It is good, fucking you here in the dark. Fucking the Hogwarts Headmistress over a table in the dark. I need it. You need it. You want it. Tell me, Minerva! Should I do it now?"

Minerva's voice sounded strange to Severus's ears. "Yes, yes, now, now . . ."

If Severus had any suspicion that the foreign wizard had used an *Imperio* on Minerva to obtain her compliance, he would have stepped in even then, but whatever it was that persuaded Minerva to bend over and let that peculiar, sycophantic wizard touch her that way, it was no *Imperio*, nor any other spell that Severus could determine. He continued to watch as his nemesis entered Minerva and began to thrust, panting and gasping as Minerva moaned beneath him. Severus could not tear his eyes away as Minerva's face turned toward him for the first time since she had bent over for the rapacious wizard. Her mouth was open and her eyes were tightly shut; the one hand he could see was a white-knuckled fist against the table. Tears glittered on her cheeks. Then her moaning became louder, she was crying out, and Severus believed she was coming for that bastard wizard, and he was ejaculating in her.

"Yes, yes," she moaned, but then she shouted, "Oh, gods, yes, Albus!"

Severus felt vindicated. She had not called Albus's name when she had been with him. Of course . . . she had not wanted to be with him, either . . . and she had not shouted anything at all.

"I'm sorry . . . I'm sorry . . . I know I said..."

"It's all right, Minerva, my love. A natural reaction." The wizard pulled out of her and turned her around. "But . . . you cry . . ." He touched her face.

"I can't help it. Everything . . . everything is so difficult, and you . . . I just wish things were as they had been, and I know that can't be. It never will be the same again. Nothing. Not even with Severus. I am just so tired, so tired, every day is harder than the last, and everything seems impossible . . . And even with you . . . it isn't the same . . . it just isn't the same . . ."

Crouch pulled the witch's knickers up and her skirts down, then he held her as she wept against his shoulder, rubbing her back and crooning softly in her ear. Finally, to Severus's great relief, the Dutch apothecary said, "I think it is time I get what I came for and we leave. It is late."

Minerva nodded and wiped her face with her handkerchief. "Shall I wait for you?"

The tall wizard looked down into her eyes. "In your suite," he directed softly, kissing her cheeks and smoothing away the last of her tears. "Wait there. I will come to you. And I will stay. I will stay this time. And you will be glad of it, I promise, my sweet Minerva, I promise."

Minerva nodded again, acquiescing, then turned to leave. As she turned, Severus saw her face clearly. She seemed relaxed. Despite her tears a few minutes before, she looked more peaceful and younger than he had seen her in more than a year. Perhaps that bastard wizard had been able to give her what she needed, after all. Severus winced at the thought.

Severus pressed himself flat against the bookshelves, even Occluding, as the other wizard moved past him, like a silent shadow again. But Severus would never see Minerva's shadow in quite the same way as he had. The wizard might give the appearance of being just a sycophantic follower, a puppy dog following his mistress about, but Severus now knew that there was a measure of control there, as well, control and veiled power over the Headmistress. Severus had tried to trust the apothecary because both Albus and Minerva had wished it and out of guilt for what had happened to his mother...what *he* had *done* to her...but now he would be more wary than he had been before, on the alert for any sign that Minerva was being manipulated by dark forces, or that she was an unwitting victim of this wizard's subtle machinations, taken advantage of in her grief. Crouch's mother had been a Slytherin; he could very well be just as sneaky as any Slytherin. And he had attended Durmstrang, not noted for turning out broad-minded Muggle-lovers.

Yes, Severus would keep an even sharper eye on this one, and if the Headmistress seemed in danger, he would simply . . . deal with it. He was, after all, a Death Eater.

Chapter Seven: When their bones are picked clean and the clean bones gone

Chapter 8 of 34

Severus seeks the Headmistress after he leaves the library, and he has the most frank, personal conversation with Minerva that he has had in more than a year, and she sets him straight on certain facts, trying to rid him of certain misconceptions he has.



Chapter Seven: *When their bones are picked clean and the clean bones gone*

Early January 1998

Severus left as soon after Minerva as he could, following her out quietly. He was on his way back to the dungeons when he turned and instead headed toward the Headmistress's Office. She may have looked fine when she left the library, but perhaps she needed his assistance. She would never come to him of her own accord. But he would let her know that he would do whatever she asked of him, no matter what that was.

He reached the gargoyle and uttered the password; this time, it was "grasshopper," which he felt marginally less foolish saying than her last one, which had been "ass." Apparently, she was reading Aesop's fables, and she took the name of whatever creature appeared in the one she had read the night before she changed it. Dumbledore's practice of using the names of sweets seemed positively rational in comparison.

As the stairs spiralled upwards, he began to walk up them, reaching the top level in half the time it usually took. He raised his hand to the knocker, but before he could touch it, the door swung open to him. He still didn't know how Albus, and now Minerva, knew when there was someone coming up to see them, though he was certain there was some charm involved. He was always careful of anything he said or did in the stair, as a result, not being certain that they couldn't hear everything that went on in it.

Minerva was standing behind her desk. Her eyebrows rose when she saw him, but it seemed to Severus that she may have been surprised, but not displeased, and he thought he even detected a shadow of a smile on her face.

"Severus! I had not expected to see you tonight. Hogwarts business or Order?"

"Neither, or both, perhaps," he replied.

"Come in, sit down. I was just finishing up some work before . . . before retiring, but it can wait," she said, sitting down herself. "Would you care for some tea?"

"No, thank you," Severus said, declining the pro forma offer and looking over to his left at the portrait of Headmaster Dumbledore, who still slept in his rocking chair. As far as he knew, the portrait always slept. Perhaps he woke for Minerva, giving her advice. He wondered what the portrait...or the real Dumbledore...would say about what he had witnessed earlier in the library. "I have come to see . . . if you require my assistance at all."

"When we require it, I let you know," Minerva answered, looking puzzled.

"I don't mean you...I mean *you*. You, Minerva," Severus clarified. "I don't think we have had one conversation in the last twenty when there wasn't someone else present. I wished to speak with you alone and be sure that there is nothing that you need from me."

Minerva shook her head. "Nothing. You did me your last personal favour a year ago, and we both know how that turned out, don't we." Her voice was not as cold as usual, although her words still stung.

"Still . . . I told the Headmaster that I would look after you. And even if I hadn't, I am your Deputy Headmaster, despite the fact that you scarcely seem to make use of me in that role," Severus said, aware that he was sounding somewhat petulant, but not particularly caring. "Do you know that some of the younger students forget that I am the Deputy...they think it is Crouch. Why did you not simply name him Deputy and be done with it?"

"He is not Head of House; you are," Minerva replied.

"That has not always been strictly adhered to in the past," Snape pointed out, trying not to remember the fact that the previous such person had been Crouch's mother.

Minerva shrugged. "I also wished to put you in a position that might enhance your status with the Dark Lord, and I do value your assistance, as paltry as you may think it. It also gives us a greater excuse to meet regularly as we do."

"Always in the presence of . . . Professor Crouch," Severus said. Minerva was being more relaxed with him than she had been in months. He could try to be civil.

"I rely upon him a great deal. It is better that he be present. If he weren't, I would simply have to repeat everything we said, and I might miss something crucial. And his participation in our meetings has always been fruitful, I have thought."

Severus nodded, hesitating. "You know, Minerva . . . I realise you have known Professor Crouch for many years, but have you known him well? To be frank, I worry that he has too great an influence on you, and I don't know him at all. I know that the Headmaster expressed his complete trust in him, but . . . if he were to betray that trust, would you recognise it? You seem very close to him." Severus wanted to come right out and tell Minerva that he feared the foreign wizard was manipulating her for his own ends, but he did not wish to alienate what little affection she might still possess for him.

Minerva actually laughed softly. "You do not know what you say, Severus. I value him. I value his advice and his friendship. And he could no more betray the Headmaster than I could. So many remind me daily that the Headmaster is dead. I am alive and the Headmistress of Hogwarts, and it is to me that he is loyal now. And Arthur leads the Order, but I know that even there, Robbie's loyalty lies first with me...as does your own, I believe."

Severus lowered his eyes. "You know that it does, you know what I would sacrifice for you. You know that I wish I had done things differently, though how, I do not know. But now . . . I feel not only that you do not trust me as your Deputy, but that you do not trust me within the Order. I know less now than I did before the Headmaster . . . before, with him. There is something going on, I can tell, but I do not know what it is, and this . . . this friend of yours is involved."

"You know all that you need to know, Severus," Minerva replied. "And you are doing an admirable job with Miss Granger. I noticed she had one of the texts we had removed from the library shelves last spring. I presume that you left it for her to find?"

Severus nodded. "It seemed the appropriate time." He knew that she had said that she would direct him with regard to what clues to leave and where, but there seemed no point in pretending that he had not veered from her instructions.

"And yet . . ." Minerva paused, thinking. "You offer your services to me, Severus, and ask for my trust. But you gave the book to Miss Granger without discussing it with me."

"As I say, it seemed the appropriate time."

Minerva looked at him appraisingly. "Proceed as you see fit, then. And you might wish to . . . collaborate with Miss Granger, if you believe it prudent, and if you can find a method of communication that would not raise suspicions. She will be unhappy, I believe, that she was used as a tool in our plan, but telling her now and enlisting her assistance might soothe some of her displeasure." Minerva pursed her lips as she gazed across the desk at him. "You have been following her when she goes to Grimmauld Place."

Severus's expression did not change. "I believe it wise to ensure her safety."

Minerva nodded. "In the future, Severus, I would appreciate it if you would impart such information to me. Even if you have no intention of doing anything other than what you plan to do, regardless of whether I approve or not, I would prefer to be aware of your plans in advance. You say that you are loyal to me, Severus, and I believe that you believe that, but I would appreciate your trust, as well."

"Trust," Severus said, suddenly feeling very tired and discouraged. "Trust others when no one trusts me? I should trust no one, as well. How can I trust anyone when I am shunned so? Arthur is kind to me, as is Molly, and Remus . . . lycanthropy must have softened his brain, as he is also *kind*. Most of the others tolerate me. But none of them trusts me. They do not say it, but I see it. Moody is perhaps the most honest of the lot. Even you do not trust me. You have had me watched."

Minerva shook her head. "We noticed. Only after we noticed, did we watch."

"We. You and . . . your shadow."

Minerva ignored Severus's statement. "I trust you, Severus, but I would trust you more if you would tell me what you are doing. If there are things that I do not tell you because I cannot, it is for this reason that I would prefer to be aware of what you are doing so that the Order does nothing that interferes with your activities. And if Alastor happens to notice you following Miss Granger one day, I would like to be able to tell him that I approved of it and that it was the truth I told him. I do not like lying, Severus, and I have found I have had to do far too much of it recently to far too many people, including to those whom I consider friends. The lies I told Alastor today were unnecessary ones, had you only trusted me."

"He noticed? How?" Severus sat up straighter. "No one followed us from the school. I am sure of that." Had Moody also seen the boys enter and leave Grimmauld Place? They only had the one cloak between them, and it never covered all three. On this occasion, it had been Weasley who was the odd one out, and Potter and Lovegood under the Invisibility Cloak. But anyone who saw Weasley would easily deduce that Potter was nearby. The dunce hadn't even bothered with a Disillusionment Charm on their way in, he was that careless. He had been Disillusioned when the three left, but if someone in the Order had been aware they were there . . . they would have seen the door open, and they would have detected that there was someone Disillusioned, even if they couldn't tell who the person was. And if there had been a Death Eater following Hermione, trying to track her to Potter, even if he couldn't have seen Grimmauld Place, he would have seen Weasley disappearing when he entered.

"No, but Alastor was outside the house this afternoon at just about the time that you went in," Minerva answered. "He saw that you went in alone and did not come out again. But you gave him the impression that you and Miss Granger had arrived together, and she did not contradict it. He found it peculiar. So I told him that I had you follow Miss Granger, who had insisted on Apparating to Grimmauld Place alone, and make sure that she had arrived safely and watch her until others arrived. He believed me. He thought it quite funny...he was sure that you would find it demeaning and aggravating to be asked to watch a Gryffindor student. I allowed him to retain that impression."

"If I had told you, you would have been aware that I know of her meetings with the others. You never informed me of them, and I assumed you did not trust me with that knowledge," Severus said defensively.

"I already knew that you knew, Severus," Minerva replied gently. "I have always been aware that you told Miss Granger that she should meet the boys and Miss Lovegood there. If it was your idea, it could hardly be a surprise to me that you knew of it. I was slightly surprised that you were aware of the precise timing of Miss Granger's trips, however."

"I am not. But they always take place when she has an excuse to leave Hogwarts...either on a Hogsmeade weekend or when there is an Order meeting. It is easy enough to follow her. And she should not be wandering about Hogsmeade on her own, anyway," Severus replied.

"I agree completely. Which is how we noticed your own . . . trips."

"I wish you had said something earlier," Severus said somewhat petulantly. "No one trusts me and yet everyone wonders why I am a surly bastard."

"No one trusts you? I trust you more than you realise, Severus."

"Hmph. You should have killed me, Minerva, killed me when I was suffering from that curse and I asked you to. You never would have had to endure my touch, Albus would be alive, and I . . . I wouldn't have to wait for the inevitable. Death at your hands would be a mercy compared with what I am sure awaits me. Either way, I am dead. This is just a . . . a brief respite from it. Death still owns me."

"No, Severus," Minerva said, more gently than he had heard her speak to him in more than a year. "No, Severus, you live, you live because, first, it was my wish that you live, and then it was Albus's wish that you live. Untreated, the curse on Albus would have claimed him regardless of your own actions; you know that. And it is my wish now that while you live, you live as well as you can. You can make your life worthwhile. And you do not know when your death will be...you may survive this war, and you need to think about that, too."

Severus shook his head. "No, no, there is no point. I will continue because I must, and perhaps I can still hope for some kind of redemption in the end. Though it will come only with ignominy and disgrace, I am certain of that. It can be no other way, not when there isn't a soul who truly trusts me, none but a child." He looked up at her. "Even you do not trust me, Minerva. And I do not blame you for it, despite wishing it were different."

"What child is that, Severus?" Minerva asked.

"Granger. Bit of a fool Gryffindor," Severus said, trying to put venom into words he did not feel.

"She is no child, Severus. And as I have said, I do trust you; there are simply things I cannot share with you. You have been in your double role long enough to have learned that."

"I understand," Severus said with a sigh, "but you trust this Crouch, and I do not. If you ever need me, Minerva, for anything, for something other than school or Order business, please know that I will do whatever you ask of me. If you are under some . . . stress or pressure."

Minerva chuckled bitterly. "I am always under stress, but Robbie helps with that. I trust him with my life...with my very soul. He is the only person with whom I can be completely open."

"Can you forget Dumbledore so quickly, then?" Severus grimaced. "I am sorry. I know you have not forgotten him."

"No, I have not," Minerva said very softly. "I never could. But Albus would approve of my friendship with Professor Crouch...he did approve. We talked in those last days, you know. That was a gift you gave me, Severus. We could talk. I knew his fate, and we could talk and plan."

"But . . . Crouch seems very . . . attached to you. For a wizard I had never seen nor heard of up until a year ago, that simply appears . . . unusual." Severus had stopped himself from saying, "suspicious," though that was plainly what he meant. "He . . . he has influence over you."

"Your comments are highly impertinent. I have explained more to you than you have any right to know, as it is, Severus," Minerva said coolly, knowing precisely what Severus meant. "You are perfectly aware that he is no stranger to me. And Albus knew him since he was a baby; he was friends with his parents."

"Ah, yes, 'Uncle' Albus." He grimaced. It grated on Severus's last nerve to hear that appellation from the wizard's mouth, particularly after he had learned he was no such thing.

"They were quite close, especially in the years immediately after his father was killed and Albus saved his life," Minerva said, her eyes narrowing. "Albus knew both his parents since before Robbie was born. I was good friends with his mother and taught with her for many years...she was my own Arithmancy teacher, in fact." Minerva paused, staring at him, her eyes harder than they had been. "She was yours, too, wasn't she?"

Severus nodded, blocking out all memories to do with the Arithmancer. Trying to block them, but succeeding only in drawing to mind again the image of the bloodied old witch kneeling on the floor beside her severed arm, looking up at him, her face devastated by a curse cast by Lucius Malfoy just before she had felled him, but her grey eyes still clear as she clasped her wand to her chest and Disapparated. The same grey eyes that looked out at him from her son.

"In fact, she was married to my oldest brother," Minerva said briskly. "Robbie is a part of the family, Severus."

"Like a nephew, then, is he?" Severus asked, a sneer in his voice, distancing himself from the memory of the mother and calling to mind the more recent memory of the son in the library with Minerva.

"Severus, do not take that tone!" Minerva rebuked him. She closed her eyes and shook her head. "Not like a nephew, no. He is a few years older than I, for one, and we met as adults. But we are . . . close. We always were, and this has brought us closer. I rely on him and we take care of each other."

"Isn't he married?" Severus had looked into the background of this Potions master, but had learned little of him other than that he had owned an apothecary in Amsterdam for more than four decades and was married to the daughter of a Dutch Potions master. "Where is his wife?" Severus asked. Surely Minerva's sense of propriety would keep her from a sordid, illicit affair with another witch's husband.

Minerva hesitated perceptibly. "She left. A year or so ago. She . . . she disapproved of his decision to come to Hogwarts and stay."

"I can see why," Severus said. He looked at Minerva, trying to judge how much he could say. "I doubt any witch would approve of her husband spending so much time with such an accomplished witch as you."

Minerva stiffened. "My presence at Hogwarts had nothing to do with it. You do not know what you are talking about."

"Perhaps not for you, but for him? He is very . . . devoted to you." Severus ventured. "He was helping to take care of Albus in those last weeks. Are you sure that he . . . that he wasn't a bit careless in his brewing?"

"Severus Snape! I am utterly appalled with you! Albus was like a second father to that man...Robbie owed him his life! And Murdoch brewed for him, too, and Albus may not have been entirely himself . . . toward the end, but he surely would have noticed if there had been anything wrong with the potions. Not to mention that he soon declined to take anything but standard pain potions...as you are well aware. You know why Albus did as he did. If there is anyone to blame..." Minerva stopped herself. She shook her head, then continued more gently, "I can tell you this as a cold fact, Severus: Albus made decisions on your behalf, for your benefit. He did not regret it. But he asked Robbie to stay on, to help me. That was his wish, as surely as it was his wish for you to survive and not to sacrifice yourself needlessly. And it is my wish, as well."

Severus sat, uncharacteristically slumped in his chair, and nodded disconsolately. His sacrifice would come, but he grew increasingly doubtful that he had anything of meaning left to do before that time came. He hadn't even been able to save Albus. And now it looked as though he not only hadn't saved him, but had brought this skulking character into Minerva's life, and into Hogwarts and the Order, as well.

Minerva stood and came around the desk. She put a hand on his shoulder. "Severus . . . I know this has been difficult for you, and I have not made it any easier. I am sorry," she said softly.

"You're sorry?" Severus asked, looking up at her. "You're not the one who was the dunderhead who took an Unbreakable Vow not even really knowing what it was for. Although . . . what's worse . . . I probably still would have taken it, even if I had known. It was the only choice I seemed to have." He sighed and looked away. "I don't blame you. I knew that you wouldn't be able to forgive that. I never expected it. I understand why you hate me."

"It has been hard, yes, hard for everyone involved. And I don't know when I will be able to fully forgive you, but as you say, you had scarcely any choice in the matter. I understand that better than you might imagine. And I do not hate you, Severus. If I hated you, I would have sent you out five minutes after you arrived this evening. I certainly wouldn't have explained myself to you as much as I have, nor tolerated your impertinent, unfounded, and truly foolish speculations about Robbie." She patted his shoulder. "Have some faith, Severus. Things might work out better than you expect, better than you could hope for. After all, you already have one thing working in your favour, a gift of sorts."

"Gift?"

"You have the trust of a Gryffindor witch. You have the opportunity to . . . to not let this one down, Severus. However you may go about it, you can justify her trust and her faith and her affection." Minerva squeezed his shoulder then suddenly bent and gave him a swift and highly unexpected peck on the forehead. "Go to bed, Severus, sleep. I will see you at the staff meeting tomorrow morning. I will be retiring soon, myself."

Minerva went back behind her desk, put her glasses on, and picked up a parchment. Severus looked behind him as he opened the door.

"Minerva?"

She looked at him over her glasses. "Yes?"

"How do you always know when you have a visitor?" It was a silly question, but if she trusted him . . .

"The gargoyle is charmed," Minerva replied matter-of-factly. "Whenever the gargoyle opens the entrance, there is an indication that it has done so, an alarm of sorts. I can sense it anywhere in the office or in the suite. It is tuned to my magic, so others wouldn't notice it. If I am in my office, I can often hear the person outside the door and am able to open it to them; otherwise, I simply try to time it for approximately how long it usually takes for the stairs to carry a person."

"Oh."

Minerva turned back to her parchments. "Good night, Severus."

Severus opened the door and left, feeling almost worse than he had when he had arrived. She clearly was enamoured of that Crouch . . . and yet, it seemed she might forgive him, finally. And that she still trusted him more than she let on, or more than he had realised. And there was Miss Granger. Whom he would disappoint, as surely as he had disappointed everyone else who had ever been foolish enough to care about him. Not that there had been many of them.

With a barely suppressed sigh, Severus realised he was more comfortable feeling angry, suspicious, and wronged, than he was when told he might be forgiven, when asked to have some hope, when told there was someone who had trust, faith, and even affection for him. He was still one fucked-up bastard. And a nasty one. That thought helped him stand straighter.

The gargoyle opened the exit at the base of the stairs, then it ground shut when Severus stepped out. A figure approached from the side corridor. Of course. The shadow. All that Severus had witnessed in the library earlier that evening returned to him with a rush of jealousy.

Severus stood and waited, a sentry of sorts.

"Professor Crouch," he said, nodding curtly.

"Professor Snape," the older wizard said softly, a slight smile on his face.

"The Headmistress has retired for the evening. It has been a wearying day," Severus said.

"So it has, so it has." The wizard just stood there, looking down at him with a bemused expression on his face.

"I am certain that whatever business you have with the Headmistress can wait until tomorrow," Severus continued, remembering the lanky wizard's words to Minerva, that he would come to her and that he would stay. Minerva hadn't protested, but Severus doubted that Minerva really needed him. He ignored the fleeting thought that Minerva had seemed happier and more relaxed that night than she had in many months, and that she had been more friendly to him, as well.

"As you do not know my business, I am amazed by your certainty, Professor," came the quiet yet friendly reply.

"Nonetheless, I believe that the Headmistress is best left undisturbed. She requires her rest," Severus said coldly.

The grey-eyed wizard nodded. "You care for Minerva," he stated.

"I am her Deputy. It is my job to care for her. And to protect her, if necessary," Severus replied, ignoring the possessiveness and envy that arose in him and not questioning his own motives.

Crouch put his hand on Severus's shoulder, causing the younger wizard to flinch, but as if he had not noticed, Crouch said, "Continue on, continue on. She is fortunate to have such a loyal Deputy."

Severus stared at the man until he dropped his hand from his shoulder, though his smile didn't fade.

"I am going up to see Minerva now. Good night, Professor Snape," Crouch said with a smile and a nod. "I will be sure to tell her that I am impressed by your enthusiasm for your job."

Severus could not tell whether the man was serious or mocking him, but as Crouch turned to give the password to the gargoyle, Severus took hold of his arm.

"Understand something, Crouch," he said slowly, his voice like ice, "if I discover that you have misled or betrayed us, or that you have betrayed or hurt Minerva in anyway, I will kill you, and I will kill you with a clear conscience."

The older wizard chuckled. "Will you, indeed, my friend? Will you indeed?" He turned to the gargoyle and gave the password, then looked back and said softly, "Sleep well, Professor Snape, sleep well and with a clear conscience."

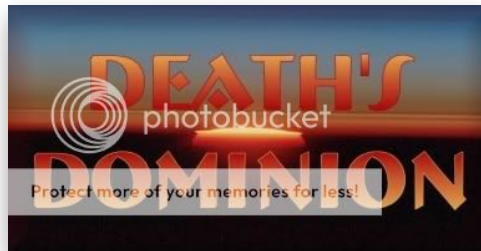
Crouch disappeared, his lanky form swallowed by the shadows as the spiral staircase carried him up to Minerva, and the gargoyle closed behind him, leaving Severus feeling as though he had been the one warned and dismissed. There was something very unnerving about that wizard, very unnerving and very peculiar.

Chapter Eight: No more may gulls cry at their ears

Chapter 9 of 34

Severus begins meeting regularly with Hermione in the Headmistress's library and lending her his assistance with her work for the Order.

Note: AU. Not DH-compliant.



Chapter Eight: No more may gulls cry at their ears

February 1998

At lunch, Hermione had given him the signal that she had to meet him that day, and so immediately after his last class, Severus left the dungeons and made his way to the Headmistress's Office. It had been determined that that was one location where either of them could be seen approaching or leaving without anyone becoming suspicious. Hermione was still a prefect...many had been surprised that she hadn't been made Head Girl, but she had expressed great relief, being unable to imagine how she could have done that in addition to everything else she was doing...and so it was a simple thing for her to say that she had Hogwarts business with the Headmistress, who was also her former Head of House. Severus, as Deputy, came and went from the Headmistress's Tower all of the time.

Minerva had provided Hermione with a special password that allowed her to access the Headmistress's Library, and that was where she and Snape met. There were no portraits in the library, and other than the staff, very few people were even aware of its existence. Once, Hermione had had to stay hidden in the library when the Headmistress had a meeting, but otherwise, the arrangement had worked out well. Dilys had been enlisted to notify Minerva each time that Hermione used the library whenever the Headmistress wasn't present, so that if anyone asked Minerva, she would be ready with confirmation that Hermione had met with her or had done some task for her in her office. So far, no one had noticed and no one had asked.

They always met during the day or in the evening, and never after curfew, which had been Hermione's first thought when Severus told her that Minerva had asked that he

work with her more closely and begin meeting with her regularly.

"No, Miss Granger. It is far more suspicious when people are seen out in the dead of night, as attractive as that may seem to the amateur. Much better to do it openly...or apparently openly...when both of us have good reason to be out and about. The Headmistress has suggested we use her library," Severus explained, trying to ignore Hermione's bright eyes at the mention of a library, "as either of us might have a plausible excuse to visit her in her office, and you may also find some resources in her library that you would not find elsewhere...she does request, however, that you do not touch any of the shelved books unless either she or I, or, um, Professor Crouch, is present. Some might be dangerous. If there are any that she believes will be helpful to you, she will leave them for you on the table by the door, and you may look at those freely."

Since that conversation in January, they had met a half dozen times, approximately once a week, and always at a time prearranged at the previous meeting. This was the first occasion that Hermione had used the signal that they arranged...she deliberately spilled her milk at lunch, breaking her glass, said something about not crying over spilled milk, then banished the entire mess. Given that Hermione usually drank either apple juice or pumpkin juice, Severus had immediately noticed when she had taken the milk instead, and he knew to watch for the signal.

He only waited ten minutes in the library before Hermione joined him there.

As soon as she'd closed the door behind her, Hermione said, "The Gringotts break-in on Friday was them."

Severus ignored her grammar. "Lovely...don't they realise they could have been killed?"

"That's where we determined the Cup was being kept. I didn't know they were going to do it until they did, but when I saw it in the ~~the~~ *Prophet*, I knew it was them. I received a coded and Charmed message from them with the morning owls, confirming it." She sighed. "Now they have two of those things hidden in the attic at Grimmauld Place. No wonder no one from the Order spends any time there. Luna said the closer you are to it, the more depressed and morose you become. Now that there are two of them there, they've taken to sleeping downstairs in the kitchen to be as far from the attic as possible."

"I will inform the Headmistress about the Cup, then."

"That wasn't why I wanted to see you, though. We need to find a way to destroy them. Harry destroyed the diary with the basilisk fang, and Professor Dumbledore told him he used the sword on the ring, because it was impregnated with the basilisk that Harry killed with it. I think that using the sword again is the only way they are going to manage it. There may be other ways, but that has been proven to work before, and I would assume that it would work on the others, as well."

"That is a reasonable assumption," Severus said with a nod.

"The trouble is, the ring was cursed," Hermione continued. "Dumbledore told Harry that he had made a colossal blunder in not checking the ring for other curses, assuming that all of the Dark Magic around it was because it was a Horcrux. Of course, then after Dumbledore died, Harry became convinced that the ring contained one of those Hallows." Hermione shook her head, rolling her eyes. "I still don't know that he is completely convinced by my arguments, but fortunately, he believes that he has one of them, since Professor Crouch fetched his Invisibility Cloak from his trunk for him this summer, and he believes that the other two are safely tucked away in the Headmaster's tomb for now, so he has returned to focussing on the Horcruxes."

"The Gryffindor sword is an easy enough proposition," Severus responded, trying not to think of either the dead Headmaster or of the punishment he received when the Dark Lord learned that Potter had been moved early by the Order and Snape hadn't been told. "I cannot fetch it for you, as I am not a member of your House, but I can bring you the Hat. Minerva tells me the Hat serves as a sort of sheath for the thing. I wouldn't be able to draw it out, but a true Gryffindor can at need."

"The biggest obstacle is the possibility of curses," Hermione explained. "I know that I am not untalented, but my experience with the Dark Arts is limited." She took a deep breath. "You are the only person I know whom I would trust to check them for curses. I considered Professor Crouch, as he is close to the Headmistress and a member of the Order, as well as the Defence Against the Dark Arts teacher, but I would be much more confident of your ability and your trustworthiness...not to say anything negative about Professor Crouch, of course. But," Hermione continued, looking a little uncomfortable, "I think you are also uniquely qualified."

Severus looked at her impassively. "Because I am a Death Eater."

"Because you *were* a Death Eater. And because you have knowledge of the Dark Arts and of, um, *ohim* that someone like Professor Crouch doesn't have."

"How do you know he's not a Death Eater too?" Severus asked impulsively.

Hermione looked shocked at the suggestion, then she said, "First, because he's so close to the Headmistress...though, of course, that isn't definitive...but also, he often wears loose robes and when he demonstrates spells, sometimes his sleeves fall back, both of them. He doesn't have the Mark."

Severus smirked. "So it occurred to you. You looked."

"Actually, until you asked, no, it hadn't occurred to me," Hermione replied. "I just remember, now that you mention it, that I have seen his left forearm, and it's bare."

Severus ignored this, though he felt slightly betrayed. "So you want me to see if there are any dangers associated with the locket and the Hufflepuff Cup other than those posed by the fact that they are Horcruxes." He paused, thinking about it. "I will do it. I will inform the Headmistress. I do not know if she will approve, but I will do it. There is some danger that the fact that I bear the Mark will . . . have some effect on the Horcruxes themselves, or on me, but there is no way of knowing that until we do it. I believe we should begin with the locket, as that seems most likely to have been cursed."

Hermione shook her head. "It's ironic that it was in the house all that time . . . well, except when Mundungus had it for those months during our fifth year."

"That man is a fool and a danger to the Order," Snape said venomously. "He isn't even evil...just a selfish, venal, lukewarm weakling."

"He has been useful, I am sure," Hermione said, although she agreed with Snape's estimation of his character. "I think that a lot of the information that Harry and Ron get comes from him, although they are smart enough not to meet with him at Grimmauld Place. At least Mundungus had the sense to realise there was something wrong with it and eventually return it and not try to pawn it off on someone else."

"Probably too afraid of what the consequences would be for himself," Severus said with a snort. "I am curious, though . . . how did you find out where he had put it?" It had finally been found at the back of a high, dark cupboard in the kitchen, well above anyone's head, so no one ever looked in it and only Summoned things from it.

"That was Harry. You know that he found out about the locket from Kreacher in September just before he and the others left the school, but they couldn't find it in Kreacher's, um . . . den," Hermione explained. "We all immediately thought of Mundungus. We assumed he had already sold it, in fact. At first, he denied ever having it or knowing what they were talking about. Then Harry drew him aside, asked him to remember James and Lily and to know that if we didn't find it, it would go badly for everyone, including for himself. I don't know what else he said, but when they were done talking, Mundungus left, and Luna said it looked as though he was crying. Not that I think that Luna is a particularly reliable observer, but something Harry said persuaded him. Of course, he was in his cups, as they say. Harry and the others moved it to the attic immediately. Other than Lupin or Tonks, who come feed Buckbeak every day...or did until Harry started to...no one else goes into the attic, and Buckbeak serves as a sort of guard."

"All right. So we will arrange for me to test the objects and break any curses on them. This weekend, I think. I will need to have you with me. Someone will need to keep watch in case anyone comes to the house, or if anything goes awry. Not that I anticipate any problems, but if something does happen . . . you should get Professor McGonagall. Or," Severus said reluctantly, "Professor Crouch."

Hermione nodded.

"Have you come any closer to identifying the next one?" Severus asked.

"As I mentioned the last time we met, I think one is the diadem. That leaves only two. I believe we are all agreed that one of them is likely Nagini, as foolish as that seems. But the last Horcrux . . ." Hermione shook her head. "I don't know what that is, although . . . although I do have a fear about it."

"What is that fear?" He wondered whether she had come to the same conclusion that Dumbledore had. When Minerva had talked to him about the Horcruxes in January after he had arranged to begin meeting with Hermione, and informed him of what Dumbledore believed to be the final one, Severus had fought the urge to laugh hysterically at the irony of it, an irony that seemed to encompass his own life and all he had done to try to protect Harry for six miserable years.

"I would rather not say until I am more sure," she replied hesitantly.

"Saying it won't make it so, Hermione," Severus said gently. "What do you fear?"

"That it's Harry," Hermione said in a whisper. "That it happened when Voldemort couldn't kill him as a baby. And I don't know how to destroy that Horcrux without . . . without . . ."

"Without destroying Harry himself?" Snape asked softly, for once using the boy's first name, sensitive to Hermione's feelings. When Hermione nodded, he said, "Minerva told me that Albus believed it likely, too."

"Why didn't you tell me this?" Hermione asked, her voice strained.

"Think about it, Hermione: why might I not want to tell you such a thing...especially as you would eventually come to that conclusion, anyway."

Hermione raised her eyes to meet his and was suddenly struck breathless by the uncommon warmth in them. Severus averted his own gaze.

"There was no point in telling you something like that when you would discover it on your own," Severus said softly. "And Harry will eventually realise it, too, though it's possible he does already, on some level. But it does help explain so much...particularly the failed Occlumency lessons and why the Dark Lord had such an easy time entering his mind. And obviously, that is one Horcrux we will not try to destroy. Dumbledore assured Minerva that the problem would resolve itself, that something the Dark Lord himself had done ensured it. But I don't know what that might be, or I would tell you."

Hermione regained her power of speech. "I see, and I won't tell Harry that he might be the final Horcrux, either . . . at least not unless it becomes necessary. But I do want to think about the consequences for him...I have been telling Harry that we need to research the ritual that Vo the Dark Lord performed in the graveyard. Whether they are connected because Harry is a, um, a Horcrux, or not, they are certainly connected because of that ritual. I think that must be important. There is a physical connection between them as well as a . . . a *spiritual* one, for want of a better word."

"Of course!" Severus suddenly saw what Hermione was saying. "Yes, that would be why Dumbledore said that the Dark Lord had done something himself . . . there must be something there, something about taking some of Potter into himself . . . of course. Once we are done with the locket and the Cup, we can work on that problem together."

"But there is still the problem of the diadem," Hermione reminded him.

"Bring Lovegood back. Sneak her in. The Grey Lady clearly knows more about it. She may speak with Lovegood, since she is a Ravenclaw...well done, by the way, Hermione, in determining what the next object likely is," Severus said.

Hermione smiled happily. Not just an "adequate," but a "well done"; she thought her face would split, she was so happy. "We still aren't certain. We won't be until we actually find it."

"Dumbledore seemed to think that one of the objects would be here at Hogwarts," Severus said. "I am not sure why he came to that conclusion, and the Headmistress didn't say. But if he was correct, it may actually be very nearby."

"Perhaps it's in the Chamber of Secrets," Hermione speculated. "Vo *er,he* opened it, we know that. With some effort, we might be able to get back in and search there. If we could open the entrance. But I don't know any Parseltongues other than Harry, do you?"

Severus twitched a smile. "I know one other, but I doubt you would like me to ask him if he could lend us his assistance."

Hermione smiled at his attempt at humour. "No, that *would* be rather unwise! But perhaps Harry could just teach me enough that I could say the words. If I can convince him that it's important, he might do that."

"We will see. For now, we will take care of the other two objects. I trust you are not sharing with Potter and his friends my participation in your activities."

"No, I will just say that it's an anonymous member of the Order who will do it. That Professor McGonagall wants him...or her...to remain unknown for security purposes."

Severus nodded. "That will do. But I would only inform them after the fact, nonetheless."

"That's a good idea. Can you talk to Professor McGonagall and Mr Weasley to make sure that nothing is scheduled on Saturday? I will go ahead of you and make sure that Harry, Ron, and Luna are all gone from the house. They spend very little time there, as it is, so we will probably have the house to ourselves." Hermione blushed, though she couldn't say why.

"I am meeting with the Headmistress after dinner. I will talk to her then, tell her what we have planned. She will no doubt communicate with Arthur."

Hermione looked at him speculatively. "Can I ask you something, sir? Something . . . personal?"

Severus raised an eyebrow, but said, "One may ask without expecting an answer, Miss Granger. And you may ask."

"It is just . . . what happened between you and Professor McGonagall? I don't mean that September, with the spell, but after," she said with a slight blush. "You seemed to be getting on fine for a while, despite all that, and then after Christmas . . . it just seemed, I don't know, strained."

Severus looked away.

"I'm sorry, Professor," Hermione said with a blush. "I oughtn't have asked. And I'm probably wrong. But she . . . she seemed a friend."

"Yes," Severus said softly. "She did seem a friend. She was a friend, and a good one. And I suppose she still is, in some sense. But friends have fallings out, as I am sure you know."

"I am sorry. That must be difficult for you," Hermione said sympathetically, thinking of how few true friends he must have.

Severus shrugged. "I get on quite well as I am."

"Of course you do." Hermione thought for a moment. "Did it have something to do with Professor Crouch? I know that he arrived at Hogwarts sometime after Christmas, and they seem very good friends."

"That did not help matters," Severus said honestly, "but that was not it. I was the bearer of bad news, one might say, and you know what happens to them. But do not blame the Headmistress, Hermione. It was my doing, all of it." He took a deep breath and let it out. "Dinner will be served soon. You go on ahead. I will come along later."

"What time, though, Professor? What time on Saturday, I mean?"

"Morning. Ten o'clock. You should arrive Disillusioned, and do look around you before you open the door. I understand that Moody has taken to lurking about outside Grimmauld Place. Seems to believe I will lead a band of Death Eaters to ambush members of the Order as they come and go." Severus quirked a smile. "Despite his paranoia, Moody has better strategic thinking than the Dark Lord. He has never once asked me to lead him or anyone else to a place where we might ambush any of the more important Order members as they arrived for or left the meetings. Yet I could easily bring others to the little square across the way without breaking the *Fidelius*. I have had to . . . to arrange other ambushes for him, but only ones that were coincidentally bound to fail, most of them, anyway. The Dark Lord doesn't like that, and he takes his displeasure out on me, but we generally are able to protect the targets without it seeming suspicious."

"You said, 'most of them'...does that mean . . ."

"Yes, it means that I have had to arrange ambushes or attacks that were successful. Only two, and they..." Severus swallowed. "...they were successes despite my efforts." He looked directly at Hermione and said softly, "You see, Hermione, I *am* a Death Eater."

"No," Hermione said with a shake of her head, "that is to be expected of spies in war. I couldn't do it. Most people couldn't. You are very brave. And what you must suffer...it must be like deliberately putting your hand in flame every time that you find yourself having to do something like that. I can't imagine how you do it."

"Has it not occurred to you that perhaps I enjoy the flame, or that I have no sensation left, that I cannot feel the fire?" Severus asked cynically.

"No. No, that has not occurred to me." She looked into his eyes. "I am certain you do feel it, and that you bear it. You may accept it on some level, but I doubt you enjoy it or find any satisfaction in it. The things you must have to see and do . . . it would give me nightmares just to hear of it, I'm sure."

"I have no doubt it would. And I don't bear it." Severus shook his head. He had no idea why he was saying any of this, except that since Albus had died the previous March, he hadn't spoken with anyone about it, not even Minerva, really, wanting to spare her something.

"You *must* bear it," Hermione said, puzzled. "How else could you continue? Continue doing anything at all, even getting up in the morning?"

Severus looked at Hermione. Such sweetness there, and such innocence, though she wasn't naive, and he felt suddenly torn between laughter and tears. "I get up in the morning because I know that there will come a day when I won't have to any longer. It is destroying me only slowly, from within...rather like woodworm. But before I crumble completely into dust, something else will destroy me. I know that. Until then, I get up and do what I can to make amends for . . . for everything." He swallowed hard. "You will miss dinner unless you leave now, Miss Granger."

Hermione stood, then hesitated.

"Go on, Miss Granger. To dinner," Severus said softly.

She nodded and left, closing the door behind her with a quiet click. Severus put his head in his hands and sat there for a long time, finally rising when he judged it time for his meeting with another Gryffindor witch, one who knew too well the sorts of things he had seen and done.

Severus and Hermione's outing to Grimmauld Place was successful and without any significant event. Initially, being in the presence of the Horcruxes affected Snape to such a degree that he vomited, fortunately making it to the loo before he lost his breakfast, but he was able to determine that neither the locket nor the Cup had any additional curses on them with no other untoward effects.

Afterward, sitting in the kitchen with Hermione, where she had not only made him tea but produced several sandwiches that she had brought with her from Hogwarts, Severus felt uncommonly relaxed. He never relaxed at Grimmauld Place...he rarely relaxed at all, but certainly not there...and he put it down to the relief of leaving the attic and the Horcruxes. Looking across the table at Hermione, the thought briefly flitted through his mind that perhaps her presence had something to do with it, as well, but he dismissed the thought.

"I do not know if this is a good idea, Miss Granger," he said, though he reached out and took a sandwich. Roast beef with horseradish. One of his favourites.

"They are gone all weekend. They asked me not to tell Professor McGonagall, but they have all gone off to Albania." Hermione took a bite of her chicken and pesto sandwich.

Severus stopped with the sandwich halfway to his mouth. "Albania? Are they all mad?"

"You know that I took your advice and smuggled Luna into the castle on Thursday night using one of the tunnels. The Grey Lady told her that she'd brought the diadem to Albania," Hermione said. "I tried to tell Luna that it was highly unlikely that it was still in Albania, that it was probably the item that Professor Dumbledore thought had been hidden at Hogwarts, but she wanted to know how I knew that...rather big error on my part, forgetting they didn't know that bit of information, or if Harry does, he hasn't shared it with any of them...and I had to say that Professor McGonagall told me. So after that, the conversation flitted from one tangent to another, and I couldn't get back to my original point with her before she had to leave." Hermione frowned slightly. "She has a tendency to do that. But I received an owl from them yesterday from Luna, and she said they were all off for Albania today."

"How are they getting there? And back?"

Hermione shrugged. "I haven't a clue. Possibly having Fred and George help them, or Mundungus. They seem to be the ones they are in contact with most frequently. Possibly illegal Portkey."

Severus put his sandwich down. "What concerns me is that they may be caught returning to the country. The Ministry has tightened its magical border security. They have all kinds of new detection systems in place. The fools."

"We can't do anything about it now," Hermione said. "I have to assume that they have thought of this." She sighed. "Luna did mention the Hallows again, though, which irritated me. I think she's the only one who is still completely convinced it's not a hoax. Probably because of the thorough job Professor Dumbledore did with the memory charms on her father." Hermione took another bite of her sandwich.

"I suppose there's nothing to be done, then." He picked up his roast beef sandwich again, and he was just about to take a bite when they heard the front door slam, followed by the screeching of the Black portrait. From the sound of the other voices, it appeared that the three hadn't made it to Albania, after all, and none of them sounded happy.

"Stay here...I'll distract them, and you can leave," Hermione said, standing. "Take your sandwich with you and leave the others."

He waited until he heard them go upstairs, Ron clumping up them like a Hippogriff in hobnail boots, and then Severus left to stand across the road, watch the house, and wait for Hermione to leave for Hogwarts. He felt unaccountably disappointed with the day, despite the successful tests on the locket and on the Hufflepuff Cup. Later in his office, as he unwrapped his sandwich from its white linen napkin, he realised that it had seemed much more appetising in Hermione's company. But there was no point in thinking about that at all, and he ate the sandwich that she had brought for him. It would have been nice to have had a quiet lunch with her, but a quiet lunch on his own . . . that was better, he told himself. Much better.

The following Saturday morning, Severus had the first opportunity for a private talk with Hermione since leaving Grimmauld Place. Apparently the Weasley twins hadn't been able to procure "the transport," as they called it, and the trip to Albania was off indefinitely. She thought it was likely off permanently, though they hadn't admitted it. They were glad of the sandwiches, which Hermione said she'd brought hoping to catch them before they left, and they hadn't questioned her about it.

"I have the Sorting Hat for you," Severus said, gesturing at a canvas bag. "I do assume you will be meeting them today, as it's a Hogsmeade weekend. If you aren't, it will have to wait. I don't want to have the Hat missing for long, and it wouldn't do to have someone discover you with it, either, as unlikely as that may seem."

"Yes, I'm going this morning at ten o'clock. I'll be Disapparating from the edge of the village." She smiled at him. "I assume my guardian angel will be watching over me."

Severus nodded. "I will follow on." He hesitated. "I wish I could be there when they use the sword on those things. There could be danger, despite the lack of any other curses on the objects. Dumbledore said the bit of . . . *him* seemed to evaporate once it escaped, but he said that the curse activated at the same moment, so his observation might not be accurate. And for all we know, the ring wasn't cursed as the Headmaster believed, and the mere act of destroying a Horcrux caused the devastation to his hand. I would recommend, therefore, that whoever wields the sword does not use their wand-hand. I also recommend against it being Potter, but I doubt that he will miss the opportunity to be a hero. We need him alive and whole. I do hope, however, that you stay well away from it, Miss Granger. Someone with a clear head should remain safe in case there is an untoward event. You are the most clear-thinking individual among them."

"We will exercise care, I promise, Professor." Hermione smiled, pleased with his compliment and his scarcely veiled concern for her welfare.

"Meet me here this evening after dinner," Severus instructed. "You can return the Sorting Hat to me and tell me how the operation went."

"You did tell the Headmistress, didn't you...that we were taking the Hat?"

"You are questioning me, Miss Granger?" Severus asked with a raised eyebrow.

"No, of course not," Hermione said hastily. "But if somehow it is discovered in my possession, or if she notices it's missing . . ."

"She is aware, yes. Unhappy about it, I believe, but in agreement that it is necessary," Severus replied.

Hermione nodded. "I'm not particularly happy walking around with something as old and important as the Sorting Hat, myself. Speaking of ancient artifacts and such, I talked to Harry about learning how to say 'open up' in Parseltongue so that I can look for the diadem in the Chamber of Secrets. He wasn't enthusiastic about it, but he is going to try to teach me today. But even if he does, getting to the Chamber might be more difficult than it was. There was quite a large collapse in the tunnels. The only reason they were able to get out easily was that Fawkes was there." Hermione took a deep breath. "Would you come with me, sir? I know there's a danger of our being caught, and being together would be suspicious, but we might be able to . . . to create some kind of diversion so that there won't be anyone there to see. Myrtle, of course, is a bit of a problem, too, but if I insult her badly enough, she'll get upset and leave."

"I do not relish the prospect of your entering the Chamber on your own, even with the basilisk no longer there. It is possible that Slytherin set other traps." Severus thought for a moment. "I would normally recommend that you choose someone else to accompany you, someone from your little 'Army,'" he said, twitching a smile, "but it is better for you to have a Slytherin with you, and someone with more experience. Yes, I will go with you. But this is one occasion when I think that my usual caveats about meeting during the day do not apply. I think this expedition would be better undertaken at night, very late. We will go together. We can discuss it when you return."

"He's asked that I fetch the basilisk fangs, as well, if I can get in. He believes they may be useful to destroy the other Horcruxes when we find them."

"What will he think when you bring him the Sorting Hat today?" Severus asked.

"I will tell him that I asked Professor McGonagall directly, of course," Hermione responded. "I certainly could have; she used to be the one I went to. Harry never liked it, of course, but he'll be happy about the Hat. And Ron will be glad to see me again, for once."

At Snape's questioning look, she explained, "He had a minor Splinching accident when trying to get away from Gringotts. Well, not particularly minor, actually. Luna has tried to treat it, but her notions are peculiar at the best of times, and he seems to be in a great deal of discomfort. The others aren't very sympathetic...which surprises me, particularly coming from Luna, as I had the impression that she . . . doted on him." Hermione made a face, thinking of the way Luna normally hung off of Ron. "I'm bringing him some potion I brewed last night that should help. I wanted to ask you about it, actually, but I didn't want to bother you with an extra meeting for something like that."

"I would not have minded," Severus heard himself say, somewhat to his own surprise. "It is Potions-related, after all. And Order business, as well."

Hermione graced him with one of her brilliant smiles that brought him a peculiar sense of well-being. It was a short-lived and curious sensation, but he found himself not questioning it. They *were* co-conspirators, after all, the two of them, and Severus twitched a slight smile at the memory of her first cheeky wink. He hadn't been himself at the time, of course, and had been fairly miserable, as well, but her wink had cheered him as much as her Cheering Charm had, perhaps more. As Hermione had said at the time, she was better at nonverbal jinxes than nonverbal Cheering Charms.

Severus was struck again by the fact that Minerva had made him Hermione's new primary contact. Minerva did trust him, he supposed, though he still had the sense that there was something going on that she hadn't shared with him, and that it involved Crouch. The wizard was still annoyingly friendly to him and, equally annoyingly, almost always with the Headmistress, usually standing just behind her; even when they were walking together, he always seemed just a step or two behind, as though he truly were her shadow. It was bizarre, to Snape's mind.

It didn't help his feelings about it that he had come into the staff room late one afternoon to see the two standing together, looking out the window, and Minerva leaned back against Crouch and took his arms and pulled them around her, holding them to her. When they heard him come in and close the door behind him, Crouch had begun to step back, but Minerva, seeing that it was Severus who had entered, had held onto one of Crouch's hands, not letting him go far, though he remained behind her. It seemed to Severus that Crouch had actually appeared more uncomfortable in that moment than did Minerva, who seemed wholly unbothered by having her Deputy find her in an embrace with one of her staff members. Not that they had been doing anything improper; they had only been standing there, but Severus could not imagine anyone else embracing the Headmistress in that manner. When Filius and Pomona had entered the room, Minerva had let go of Crouch's hand, but he had stayed behind her, standing in her shadow, as always.

Severus nodded to Hermione, letting her leave the library and office first, as usual. He would, also as usual, follow her to Grimmauld place, wait outside for her, then follow her back to Hogwarts. They would meet again in the Headmistress's Library that evening, and, again as usual, he would ask her about the Horcruxes and about the welfare of the threesome...not that he particularly cared, as long as they didn't get themselves killed, particularly Potter, but Minerva always asked...and then they would make arrangements to meet again. It was all routine and somewhat dull, in a strange way, but Severus was looking forward to it. Perhaps he would not disappoint this Gryffindor witch, after all, even if he didn't live to see the end of the war; perhaps there would be one person who would remember more than just his misdeeds once he was dead.

Severus rose and left the library, ready to follow a Gryffindor witch and ensure her safety.

Chapter Nine: Though they be mad and dead as nails

Chapter 10 of 34

Severus and Hermione continue to work well together, and he finds himself warming to her company. After Hermione expresses her concern for him after a difficult meeting with the Dark Lord, Severus visits Poppy, where he learns more than he wished to when fishing for information about Robert. Minerva tries to hearten Severus.

Note: AU. Not DH-compliant.



Chapter Nine: *Though they be mad and dead as nails*

Late February late March 1998

Severus once again sat across from Minerva in the Headmistress's gloomy sitting room, Crouch sitting off in the corner. He didn't remember it being so dark and dreary when the Headmaster was alive, and although Minerva's mood seemed somewhat lighter recently, she still kept the draperies closed and only a few lamps lit in that room. Perhaps it was only for their meetings, though he didn't think so.

"She wants to go into the Chamber of Secrets?" Minerva asked with a frown. "As Headmistress, I can hardly approve, and yet . . . I suppose I must. You do think it necessary?"

"I do. We will not know whether it will be a fruitful trip until afterward, but I do think that it is important. And I told Miss Granger that I would accompany her." Severus waited for a cautionary word from Minerva, or for her to question the wisdom of his decision to go with Hermione.

Minerva did not react to that pronouncement, focussing on the purpose of the expedition. "Do you believe that you will find the diadem there, then?"

Severus shrugged. "I do not know, but it seems as likely as anywhere, and more likely than most places, if it is, indeed, here at Hogwarts. He could not very well have left it somewhere it would have been easily found."

Crouch's voice came from the far corner of the room. "I do not believe the diadem to be in the Chamber of Secrets, but it is a worthwhile undertaking, nonetheless. Retrieving the basilisk fangs will provide another method of destroying a Horcrux, presumably."

Severus and Minerva each turned slightly in their chairs.

"And what would you know of it?" Severus asked.

Crouch just shrugged slightly.

"Very well, if you believe it is safe for you to do so, accompany Miss Granger," Minerva said. "I would feel more comfortable about it if you were with her. Provided, of course, that she is able to open the entrance. If not, I suppose it is moot. Please tell me before you go, Severus, and report to me when you get back. I will wait in my office for you."

Severus nodded.

"Thank you, Severus."

Seeing this as a dismissal, he rose and left the room. Pausing outside the door, he heard Crouch speak.

"They will do well together, Minerva. Do not fret about Hermione. And Severus will be fine, too. She will be in safe hands with him, and he with her."

"I know. I just question the overall wisdom . . ." Minerva sighed. "We do not know what the end will bring."

"We never know what the end will bring, but perhaps for him, finally, some happiness."

"I wonder if he is right, though. Perhaps it is not his lot in life."

"You need some rest; you are never one to believe such a thing. Come here."

Severus heard Minerva get up, and he quietly left, slipping down the stairs to Minerva's office, then hurrying down her moving staircase to the gargoyle. It wouldn't do for Minerva to know that he had been eavesdropping. Still, it was interesting...unless they had known that he was still outside the door and had spoken for his benefit.

He would see Hermione that evening in the Headmistress's Library and find out whether she had learned to say "open up" in Parseltongue, and he would tell her then that he would accompany her with the Headmistress's blessing. Hermione would appreciate having McGonagall's approval. His thoughts returned to Crouch's words, that she would be safe with him and he with her. The feelings those words evoked in him puzzled Severus. He resented Crouch and his role, and he even resented his approval, and yet, Crouch's words gave him a peculiar satisfaction, as well. Hermione's smiling face flitted through his mind, and his sense of satisfaction grew. He dismissed the feeling and the image, and proceeded to the Great Hall for dinner.

When Hermione reached the Headmistress's Office after dinner, Professor McGonagall was at her desk and Professor Crouch was coming down the brass stairs at the back of the office, stairs that Hermione believed led to the Headmistress's suite.

"Good evening, Professor McGonagall, Professor Crouch," Hermione greeted them.

McGonagall nodded. "Good evening, Miss Granger. Here for a meeting?"

"Yes, ma'am." Hermione looked reflexively behind her at the door. "I think Professor Snape should be here soon."

"He is working well with you, I presume," McGonagall said.

"Yes, very," Hermione replied. She felt some heat rise in her face, though she couldn't say why.

"I am glad. And I do believe that it is helpful to him to work with you. Much of his work is highly unpleasant, as you must be aware," Minerva said, looking carefully at Hermione. "It is a relief, no doubt, to be able to do something more . . . positive in service to the Order, and with such a pleasant young lady."

Hermione felt her blush grow. "I hope that our work is useful in defeating Voldemort."

"Miss Granger . . ." McGonagall hesitated. "Miss Granger, it is not my place to say this, neither as Headmistress, nor in my role within the Order, but . . . you have the ability, I believe, to be a friend to Professor Snape. An unusual friend, perhaps, and it would be an unconventional friendship...particularly when considering that this is Professor Snape of whom we speak...but as you may also surmise, he has few whom he can consider a friend. If you were to become a friend to him, it would be a difficult friendship, more so for you than for him, but I believe that he would benefit from it, and I do not think that you would find it entirely without satisfaction. Just something for you to consider, Miss Granger." Minerva looked back at where Crouch was standing. "I have a meeting with Professor Crouch now. You may await Professor Snape in the library."

Hermione crossed the office to the library door, then she turned. "Professor McGonagall? Are you going to say the same thing to Professor Snape?"

"No, Hermione. I have no intention to speak with him on this topic at all...nor with you about it in the future. Oh, but if you have the Sorting Hat, you may leave it with me."

Hermione hesitated. "If it's all right with you, I would prefer to return it to Professor Snape. He gave it to me, and . . . I think he would appreciate having it returned to him."

McGonagall quirked a brief smile. "Very well. Good night, Miss Granger."

"No, Hermione, I cannot allow that," Severus said insistently.

They had made it to the Chamber of Secrets and back after spending over an hour in fruitless search for the diadem. As they returned to the main part of the castle, they discussed where to keep the basilisk fangs until they could be removed from Hogwarts. Hermione immediately suggested the Room of Requirement.

"That's where students leave things that they don't want found. I think they usually must forget about them, since the room that the Room of Requirement provides is filled with all sorts of things," Hermione explained, omitting the fact that Harry had put his Potions textbook in there at the end of the last year, the book that had belonged to the Half-Blood Prince.

Harry hadn't wanted to destroy the textbook, but Hermione had convinced him that it was dangerous to have it at the school, and when she had shown him proof that the book had belonged to Snape, that his mother had been a witch named "Prince," making Snape the "Half-Blood Prince," Harry had been glad to be rid of it and had left it in the Room of Requirement.

Hermione had played on Harry's dislike for the Potions master, and she still believed that the boy who had originally owned the book had not been particularly nice, but young Snape had clearly been friends with Harry's mother, so he couldn't have been all bad. And now, he was working for the Order, he was close to McGonagall, and the Headmaster had clearly been fond of him. From the way that Dumbledore had spoken to him when they were in the relative privacy of McGonagall's rooms, Hermione had the impression that the older wizard had a fatherly affection for him.

Snape agreed that the Room of Requirement seemed a sensible place to hide the basilisk teeth for the time-being, and then, simultaneously, both of them stopped and looked at each other.

"The diadem..." Hermione began.

"...is in the Room of Requirement," Severus finished.

"It must be," Hermione said. She looked up at Snape, her eyes shining. "It makes perfect sense. If he spent all of that time looking for the Chamber of Secrets, he must have found many other hidden rooms and passages while he was looking, and the Room of Requirement must be one of them."

"Of course. Of course. And he created that Horcrux as an adult, not when he was a student. He must have hidden it during a brief visit sometime...if it actually is at the school. We do not know that it is. But the Chamber of Secrets would have taken him time to reach." He realised now why Crouch said that he doubted the diadem was in the Chamber.

"But if it is in the castle, that must be where we will find it, I am sure of it," Hermione said.

They agreed that they would look in the Room of Requirement for the diadem without delay. Severus Levitated Hermione up out of the tunnel into the bathroom...doing so without turning her upside down, much to her relief, despite her essential trust in him...and then he followed, shooting up quickly, startling Hermione completely. She had been prepared to Levitate him up once she was safely on her feet, but she barely had time to draw her wand and he was beside her.

Severus looked down at Hermione, who gaped at him. He smiled briefly, then he said, "There are things which are best kept secret, don't you agree, Miss Granger?"

"Um, yes, sir," Hermione replied with a nod, pleased with his trust in her. "How..."

"A rare skill in this part of the world, recently taught me by one who would not wish me to be wandering about with basilisk fangs seeking what we seek," he said. "I am glad to practise it for something useful. And I do rely upon your discretion."

"Of course, but it is getting late...almost three o'clock. We had better hurry."

And now, he was standing in the Room of Requirement, surrounded by generations of objects left hidden and long forgotten, telling Hermione that he would not leave her alone to destroy the Horcrux.

"I simply cannot allow that," he repeated.

"I can do it alone, Professor. I appreciate your concern, but I am concerned about *you*. The Horcrux has a negative effect on any who are near it, but it seems to have a more powerful effect on you. It may have absolutely nothing to do with your Dark Mark, but whether it does or not, the bit of *him* could very well be drawn to the Mark when it is released from the Horcrux. I . . . I cannot bear the thought of the Horcrux doing something to you when it is destroyed." Hermione put her hand on his left arm. "You are a very brave man, Professor, and I know that, but please, don't take unnecessary risks." She gave a small grin. "You aren't a Gryffindor like Harry, after all, diving in without thought."

Severus tried to keep himself from twitching away from Hermione's warm hand on his arm, and he tried to keep himself from looking at it. He had had occasion to take that hand to help her step over some fallen rock, and it had been just as warm as he had held it, however briefly.

"I do not wish to be compared with Potter, nor to take him as a role model," Severus said grudgingly, "but I am unhappy to leave you to do this alone."

Hermione, sensing impending victory, gave his arm a light squeeze and let go. "I know that, but I think it best done now. There is no point in waiting. I will ask the Room to provide a place suitable for destroying a Horcrux. I am certain I will be fine. You can test it for curses first, then wait outside, and if I don't emerge in a reasonable amount of time, you can come in after me."

Severus looked down at the diadem, which lay at Hermione's feet. It did make him nauseous to be near the Horcrux, though it wasn't as bad as being in the presence of two of them. What Hermione said had some sense. They didn't know what effect it would have on him or on his Mark, or what effect his Mark might have on the bit of the Dark Wizard's soul that would be released when the Horcrux was destroyed. There could be no effect at all, but this was not a time for experimentation. But the thought of sweet Hermione . . . yes, she was sweet. The thought of her and her innocence alone with the Horcrux, destroying it, and then having that evilness escape . . . it made him quite ill, more so than the presence of the Horcrux did.

Taking a deep breath and letting it out, Severus nodded. "Yes, all right, Hermione." He raised his eyes from the diadem and met her gaze. "I am not comfortable with the idea, though. Take care...and use your left hand, just in case, and keep your wand at the ready."

"I will." Hermione hefted the bag containing two basilisk fangs. "Good job we have these, isn't it?" she asked with a grin.

At four o'clock, Severus rode the spiral stairs up to the Headmistress's Office. He had promised that he would report to her directly when they were finished in the Chamber, and it was later than he had anticipated. He really did not expect to see Minerva that night...or early morning...but he had promised. He would leave a note.

The door opened to him as soon as he reached the top of the stairs. He stepped through it to see Minerva sitting in one of the small armchairs near the fireplace, a book on her lap. Just as he was about to greet Minerva, Crouch appeared on the stairs. Severus ignored him.

"I did not expect to see you still awake," Severus said bluntly. He laid his grey cloth bag on the low table in front of her. "For you."

Severus waited, watching Minerva's expression as she opened the bag and pulled out the now-ruined diadem.

"It was there? In the Chamber of Secrets?" She sounded surprised.

"No. It wasn't." Severus resisted the urge to look over at Crouch, who had come to stand behind Minerva's chair and was now reaching out to take the diadem from her. "It was in the come-and-go room, the Room of Requirement." He wished Crouch weren't there. He wished he could speak to Minerva as he once had been able to.

"I will take this and put it safely away," the older wizard said softly. He looked at Severus and smiled. "Very good work, Professor."

Snape nodded curtly.

Robbie patted Minerva's shoulder. "I will see you shortly."

Minerva looked up at him and smiled. "Yes. Thank you, Robbie."

As Crouch left, Minerva gestured to the chair beside her. "Have a seat, Severus. Tell me about your outing with Miss Granger."

Severus snorted. It had hardly been an outing. "We made it to the Chamber essentially without incident. The tunnel required some work to get through, as much of it had collapsed, but it was more tedious than difficult. We searched the Chamber for the diadem, using both spells and a simple visual search, but did not find it. We removed two of the basilisk fangs and returned. Her Miss Granger suggested that we keep the fangs in the Room of Requirement. When she made that suggestion, we both realised that the diadem was likely there, if it was anywhere in the castle. Miss Granger used a simple *Accio* and it flew out of some cupboard and landed at our feet. We did not handle it until I checked it for curses."

"Very wise," Minerva said as Severus paused. "And you decided to take the opportunity and the availability of the basilisk fangs to destroy it immediately. Also wise."

"Not precisely." Severus sighed. "Miss Granger destroyed it. She insisted. I should have forbidden it, but it seemed wise, as you say. She was concerned, with reason, that destroying it in the presence of my Mark might have some undesirable effect."

Minerva nodded. "Very good. Also wise."

"I felt the coward, Minerva. Waiting outside the room while she took the risk, while she destroyed it. I felt I was abandoning her to evil," Severus confessed, his shoulders hunched with exhaustion and shame.

"No, you did not. It was the prudent thing to do. It may not have had any untoward effects at all if you had been present, but it was wise not to test it. Miss Granger is not headstrong, and she is quite a capable witch, as I am sure you have seen for yourself."

"She . . . yes," Severus said, not finishing his thought.

"I am sure she felt relieved when you agreed to allow her to do it on her own. She would have been distressed if you had insisted on staying and anything had happened to you or to the object as a result," Minerva said. "You do not need to prove your bravery to her. You did the right thing, Severus. And it was good, too, that she had the opportunity to see your trust in her. Your trust of each other may be important in the future."

Severus nodded wearily.

"I think it's time for us to retire for what's left of the night, Severus. If there is anything else that you wish to tell me about this, we can meet again in the afternoon." Minerva stood.

Severus looked up at her. "I can think of nothing, but if I do, I will tell you."

"Good night, Severus."

He stood. "Good night, Minerva." He paused. "Thank you."

Minerva merely smiled and saw him out the door.

Another two weeks passed after the three Horcruxes were destroyed, and Severus was called before his false master, asked about his progress with the wards, and when Severus told him yet again that McGonagall had not yet entrusted him with their care and that he had become no closer to her, the Dark Lord had punished him more than he had even after Draco Malfoy disappeared from Hogwarts and Narcissa from the mansion. Afterward, he sat on the sofa in Minerva's sitting room, still trembling despite the potion he had taken before coming up to see her.

"I have nothing of value to report, except that he becomes more angry more easily and he trusts me less. I have tried to intimate that Bella had a hand in her sister's

disappearance, but that was less than successful. I should either have begun to insinuate that much earlier or not at all. On that point . . . Crouch was right. It sounded false to him, an attempt to draw his attention away from me." Severus sighed. "But he is most unhappy with the fact that despite being your Deputy, I have not yet been entrusted with the wards. He wants me to show some significant progress before I see him next. And he thinks that I should be . . . closer to you."

"Precisely what does he mean by that?" Minerva asked succinctly.

Severus looked over at Crouch where he sat in the other armchair, apparently dozing. "He wouldn't care what I did; he has heard from the parents of certain students that Professor Crouch has your . . . your attention." Severus swallowed. "He thinks that if I cannot become closer to you, I should either cultivate Crouch or . . . eliminate him and make it appear an accident. Whatever happens, I am supposed to be working harder to influence you."

Crouch's eyes opened. "You may cultivate me, if you wish, but I would prefer not to be eliminated just yet, Professor," he said with a slight smile. The wizard nodded his tousled auburn head at Severus. "You may also find more excuses to spend time with Minerva, alone, without me present. If you combine that with some . . . other memories, you might be able to convince Riddle that you are achieving your goal."

Severus stiffened. "What memories? What are you suggesting?"

"It is ultimately up to Minerva, of course, but it might be useful if you recall some of your milder encounters from the time you were struck by the *Adfectus*."

Severus blanched and looked at Minerva.

"I hide nothing from Robbie, Severus," Minerva said apologetically, and looking somewhat sharply at Crouch. "But if you would like, if it would save you some . . . some punishment, then by all means, use some of those memories. I would appreciate it if you did not share the more intimate of them, but you may use your discretion."

Angered, Severus stood suddenly, but his legs shook, and he sat back down. "I thought we were not telling anyone."

"Robbie, could you give us some privacy, please," Minerva said.

The older wizard stood, gave a slight bow, and left the room, going into Minerva's personal study. Minerva drew her wand and cast an *Imperturbable* on the door.

"For your comfort," she explained.

"My comfort! You told him?" Severus's voice was pained.

"I did not go into detail, but he needed to know about it and to understand how various things have come into being."

"That is why he is always here. He does not trust me with you."

"No, Severus, no. He is here because I ask him to be, because I value his counsel and because I need him. I am sorry. He ought not have mentioned it to you."

Severus shook his head. "I do not trust him completely. He..."

"You need only to trust me, Severus," Minerva said, interrupting, "and to trust my faith in him. And as far as the Dark Lord is concerned, proceed as you believe best, as always. But please, if you can avoid punishment and draw things out by having him believe that your influence over me is growing, do that. And if that includes showing me kissing you, then do that, too. And in public . . . we must be seen together more frequently. I will make an effort to appear to rely upon you more...I do rely on you, but we must be seen to be in greater contact." Minerva nodded. "Do what you believe best. And do not blame Robbie. He has your best interests at heart. He did not mean to cause you any greater pain today. How are you feeling?"

"I have a meeting with Miss Granger in fifteen minutes, but I do not know how I can see her like this," he said, holding up a trembling hand. "It will be fine by morning, when I must teach, but . . . can you see her for me?"

"No, you need to see her. It is our agreement, and she expects you."

"I may have a spasm..."

"And she will be most understanding, I am sure. Lie down here on the sofa until you need to meet her," Minerva said, standing. "I am going to go speak with Robbie now. I will see you at breakfast tomorrow."

Hermione had expressed concern for him the evening before, and although Severus felt fine that morning when he got up...as fine as he usually did, anyway...he headed to the Hospital Wing before breakfast. Perhaps Poppy would not be there, and he could later tell Hermione truthfully that he had followed her advice and gone to the infirmary, but without the necessity of actually seeing the matron. He rarely ever sought any outside assistance after one of his more difficult audiences with the Dark Lord, preferring for a number of reasons to treat himself. The few times that he had needed assistance, Poppy had given it discreetly, never recording it in his official health records, although Severus suspected that she kept some record of her own.

Unfortunately, Poppy was in when Severus arrived, and she greeted him with no indication that she was in any hurry to depart for the Great Hall.

"How can I help you, Severus?"

"I brought you some of the burn potion that a few of my more adequate students brewed last week," Severus replied, handing her a small box containing several squat brown jars.

"Thank you. You could have sent a student with them, though." Poppy looked him up and down. "Out of the castle yesterday?"

Severus grunted crossly, nodding once.

"You look pale, more pale than usual. I think I should give you a quick once over while you are here." Poppy turned and sealed the doors to the infirmary. "If anyone needs me, they can knock," she said firmly.

After she had cast a few diagnostic spells, her expression not changing once, Poppy said, "You should eat more. You also have a slight calcium and potassium imbalance, which is easily corrected."

Poppy took hold of one of Severus's hands, and he instinctively pulled away from her, but her grip was firm. Taking his wrist, she raised his hand to her eye level. He still had a slight tremor.

"Just relax your hand, please." She shook her head and seemed to wince. "Must have been quite a day." Poppy lowered his hand but still held it between hers. "You should do more than just take that potion of yours."

"I took that and an analgesic potion before I went to bed," Severus said grudgingly. "It is a perfectly good potion, and designed precisely for this . . . this condition."

"There are others that would help, and you know that as well as I. You could also do with a general restorative and a daily vitamin and mineral potion." Poppy looked him straight in the eye. "There are people who are counting on you, Severus, and, more importantly, there are people who care about you. You cannot let yourself go like this. I know that it is not all your doing; I am too well aware of how you came to have this 'condition,' as you put it, but you can do more to take care of yourself. You look like a

wizard twice your age, and that's not just externally. The life you have led, particularly these last few years, has taken its toll on your body. Unfortunately, it's not as though your problem is a simple one...if you were an alcoholic, we could just work on abstinence from alcohol. Not easy for an alcoholic, but a damn sight more straightforward than what is destroying your health. Even a Muggle your age should be healthier than you are. As I say, I know that the damage is not entirely of your doing, but you need to take better care of yourself. You need to eat properly, you need to sleep, you need to find something to divert yourself occasionally. You will be in an early grave if you don't."

Severus couldn't help his dry chuckle. "I will be in an early grave, regardless, Poppy."

"You might at least feel a little better between now and then, though. And you will be of greater good to others if you take better care of yourself," Poppy said, undeterred.

"Has Minerva been talking to you?"

"No. I am doing my job. Beyond that . . . I took care of you as a student, and now as a member of the staff. You may find this difficult to believe, Severus...indeed, I do myself, occasionally...but I have become somewhat fond of you. I would like to see you feeling better, even if you can't be any happier than you are and even if you are destined for an early grave, as you seem to believe."

"I don't have the time to brew vitamin potions and any of the others..."

"Then I can provide you with some very nice ones, very high-quality. But mainly, I would like to see you eating and sleeping better. You will withstand your outings more if you do."

"Mm. And today?"

"Today . . . I would prescribe a healing massage, but I know you would reject that even if it weren't a Monday. But here is a potion that will correct your imbalance," she said, reaching into the cupboard beside her and pulling out a vial with a clear liquid, "and here is another that will help the residual tremors a little and help relax your larger muscles." She handed him a second small bottle containing a deep green potion. "Just a half teaspoon of the green one this morning, but keep the bottle for the future. Never take more than one teaspoon at a time, and no more than four teaspoons in a day."

Severus nodded and pocketed them both.

"I suggest you take them now," Poppy said, handing him a small spoon.

With a show of reluctance, Severus swallowed the clear potion, handing Poppy the empty vial, then he measured out a half teaspoon of the green potion and took that, as well.

"Hmm, that one is rather . . . good," he said grudgingly. "Doesn't taste bad, either."

"It may make you slightly drowsy, but an extra cup of coffee should remedy that, and it passes quickly."

"Where did you get it?" Severus asked curiously.

Poppy hesitated. "It's left from some that Albus used to make. Minerva gave me most of his stores after he died last year."

"I see."

"He brewed it a few years ago, but it retains its potency for a very long time when properly stored," Poppy said awkwardly. "I think that Albus would be happy to know that it was helping you."

Severus nodded.

"It's almost a year now. Minerva does not wish to participate in planning his memorial. She says that Albus would want people to focus on . . . to focus on other concerns. Sometimes, I do not understand her. We have been friends for almost sixty years, and she still sometimes confuses me." Poppy sighed. "But I suppose that she has many worries and many responsibilities. She has enough to be getting on with without having to deal with reminders of her loss."

Severus looked appraisingly at Poppy. "Do you know Professor Crouch well?"

"Not very. I met him occasionally over the years. He was the son of a good friend, a wonderful witch...Gertrude was one of your teachers, I believe...but I honestly rarely saw Robert, since Gertrude usually visited him in Amsterdam, although I understand that up until her husband's death, Robert and his family visited the Gamp estate every summer." Poppy sighed sadly. "You are too young to remember, but she was married to Minerva's oldest brother, and there never was a finer wizard. A bit odd, in some ways, but Malcolm was a very good man and a powerful wizard."

"No, I did not know him. I only learned recently of his existence," Severus said, trying to avoid thinking about Gertrude Gamp, vanished into exile. "Still, I wonder about Crouch, if I may be frank with you. I am aware that you are friends with Minerva. I have expressed my doubts to her, but she will not hear them. I worry that perhaps he has some unsavoury hold over her, though I cannot imagine what it would be."

Poppy laughed shortly. "No, I do not believe he has any 'unsavoury hold' over Minerva...can you actually believe that of her? Truthfully? Minerva is a strong witch, stronger than you know. Not the most powerful, magically, though she is certainly far from weak. But she is strong in ways that matter even more. No, what I know of Robert and have seen of him this last year, I cannot imagine that he would do anything to harm her, and Minerva herself would not allow it." Poppy looked at Severus with some warmth in her eyes. "I understand that you are concerned about the closeness of their relationship, and I admit, I find it a bit peculiar, myself. But I think that Minerva needs a particular sort of friend right now, and it seems that Robert fills the bill. Albus asked Robert to stay on and told Minerva to lean on him for whatever she might need, and apparently, she is doing just that. It does not hurt that there is some superficial resemblance between Albus and Robert, although...not to speak ill of Robert...Albus was far better looking and the more attractive of the two wizards."

A sudden thought occurred to Severus. "He always calls Albus 'Uncle'; do you suppose that Albus was really his father? Albus knew his parents before he was born..."

This time, Poppy's laughter was quite mirthful. "No, I am certain that they are not related in that way. If you had known Gertrude Gamp in some capacity other than as your teacher, you would know why I laugh. Besides, I have seen family photographs, and he takes after his father as well as his mother. His father had hair about that colour, and he was quite tall. He does have his mother's eyes, though," Poppy said more softly.

"And you are certain that he isn't an imposter? You say yourself that you didn't know him well. Could he be someone other than who he claims to be?" Severus asked.

"Highly doubtful. For one thing, Minerva knew him better than I, and she would have noticed, and Albus knew him very well, and he helped care for him during those last few months." Poppy shrugged. "And, of course, there's Alroy."

"Alroy MacAirt?" Severus asked. He had often seen the three together, or sometimes just MacAirt and Crouch, but he assumed that the younger wizard was discussing Transfiguration with them.

"Yes, he is Robert's cousin...actually, his mother was Robert's cousin...and he has known Robert since he was a child, and Robert has tried to help with the care of Quin, Alroy's father." Poppy looked sadder than she had even when speaking of Gertrude.

"Quin?"

Poppy nodded, looking as though she was about to cry. "He was the most handsome wizard you could ever meet, talented, funny, brilliant in business and rich as Croesus, but you'd never know it except by his generosity. He was a terrific father. Utterly devoted to Minerva and Albus. He even taught here one year. But then . . . he was one of the most Muggle-loving of all Muggle-loving wizards. More than half of his business was in the Muggle world, and he saw it as a service to the wizarding world to inject his profits from the Muggle world into wizarding businesses." Poppy cleared her throat and tried to appear as though she hadn't begun to cry. "For all that, he was a powerful wizard with unusual talents, and despite the fact that he hadn't attended any school, he was highly skilled, but always willing to admit when he didn't know something and always ready to learn a new spell. As you might imagine, this did not set well with certain people." Poppy ceased trying to pretend she wasn't crying, and she pulled out a handkerchief and blew her nose. "He was attacked on a beautiful summer's day; I remember it particularly because it seemed so incongruous. This was before there were many attacks, real attacks, as opposed to just mischief and vandalism."

"What happened to him?" Severus asked, selfishly quite glad that it had been an early attack, not one that he could have been involved with.

"He was at St. Mungo's for days, and he kept screaming whenever he woke up. They had to keep him sedated in order to treat him. If he saw a wand or a potion, he would begin to have . . . fits. Shouting, yelling, struggling. He once tried to jump out a window when someone came to do some tests on him. Fortunately, the window was charmed, not real, though he gave himself a concussion diving into it," Poppy said. "Finally, he was physically well enough to be moved. They wanted to keep him at Mungo's, but his son and daughter decided to bring him home. Being in his London home distressed him, though...probably because that was where he had been attacked...so they moved him to Aine's home in Ireland, where Quin himself had grown up. He improved physically, and gradually, he regained more of his mental faculties, but he still couldn't bear the sight of a wand, a potion, or any evidence of magic at all. They have to live like Muggles, visitors have to dress like Muggles and keep their wands hidden, and Quin, despite still having a wealth of magic at his disposal, hasn't performed a single spell since the attack, and that was more than twenty years ago. Alroy is his wizarding legal guardian and had to divest his father of all of his wizarding business holdings, although Quin did begin to take an interest in his Muggle businesses again and has a hand in running them. Still, he does very little . . . and for a wizard who was bright, vibrant, and so powerful..." Poppy broke off, unable to continue. "You would understand if you had known him before," she said, choking back a sob.

"I . . . am sorry," Severus said, at a loss for words. He had wanted to learn something about Robert, and what he had learned only that confirmed the man had no reason to take a liking for Dark Wizards.

"It would be good if he and Gertrude could see each other. She used to visit him frequently. They were very close, particularly after Quin's wife was killed," Poppy said.

Oh, gods, not another victim of the Dark Lord. "How . . ." Severus didn't really want to know, but felt compelled to ask.

"Muggle terrorists, we would call them these days. A bomb, I believe it was, in the late forties," Poppy responded.

"Oh." Severus felt a peculiar sense of relief. "Why can't they see each other?" he asked, not wanting to name the witch he had maimed.

"She lives in a place that is difficult to get to; it would take magical means, which would disturb him. Gertrude also has a house-elf, who would have to hide if Quin were there. I miss her," Poppy said with a soft sigh.

"Don't you see her? Where is she?" Severus asked impulsively.

"No, I don't see her. She has been in hiding for more than fifteen years. In that time, I have visited her perhaps a half dozen times. We tried to get her to move back when You Know Who first disappeared, but she wouldn't. I don't believe she was frightened. I think she was . . . tired. Weary and . . ." Poppy blinked back a tear. "I believe she is simply waiting to join those whom she loves who have died before her. She said once that she was really dead, but she'd been too stubborn to go when it was her time. She said she should have just left her wand where it lay." Poppy shook her head and blinked again. "She was attacked, you see, and her wand arm cut off."

Severus nodded and began to back away toward the door. "Professor Crouch mentioned it. I must go now," he said awkwardly. "Thank you for the potions and the advice."

"I hope you take both, Severus! Do not live as though you were already dead. Do not make that mistake," Poppy called out after him. "Eat breakfast!"

A few weeks later, Hermione, unusually, came to his office during his office hours. No one came to his office hours, except the occasional sycophantic Slytherin.

"I'm sorry, Professor," she said as he cast a *Colloportus* on the door. "I needed to tell you that I will be a little late tonight, probably by fifteen minutes. I am meeting with Professor MacAirt first."

Severus raised an eyebrow. "As I cannot imagine that you have detention, I can only presume that you are having some trouble with Transfiguration, and that is almost as difficult to believe."

"No, we are going to discuss a special project."

Severus frowned. "You do not have the time to spend on any additional projects, Hermione. You will spread yourself too thin."

Hermione smiled. "It wouldn't be for now. Later. After everything's over."

"And I presume you will be no longer in school once that time comes." Severus looked no more pleased than he had. "What is the point of a special project, then?"

"He is an Animagus, and he said that he will teach me. He is going to give me a reading list tonight."

"Wouldn't you prefer Professor McGonagall to teach you? She was your Head of House for six years. And a witch...a more experienced witch."

"She is very busy. She probably would help me if I asked, but Professor MacAirt offered. I think it would be rude to tell him I'd rather have Professor McGonagall teach me. Besides, it wouldn't be true."

"I thought she was your favourite teacher," Severus said, obviously disgruntled.

"She is. But I like Professor MacAirt, too."

"Mm. As long as you do not become distracted during this time," Severus said, mild disapproval still in his voice.

"No, I won't be. We will only be discussing my reading once a week, not doing any magical exercises or anything that would take too much of my time," Hermione said.

"It must not interfere with our meetings."

"It won't usually. I promise." Hermione looked at him as though she was suddenly amused. "And he's very charming and quite good-looking, but I won't let that distract me, either."

"It is best not to. He is your teacher, and it would be highly inappropriate to develop an attachment to him, and it would make it difficult for you to concentrate on your studies with him," Severus said coolly.

Hermione laughed at that. "Oh, dear, I shall certainly have to guard against that in Potions, then! It wouldn't do to lose my concentration and start melting my cauldrons!"

Severus felt the colour rise in his cheeks. "Our relationship is quite different. We must work together in the Order. That is different. It is not an . . . an attachment."

"Oh." Hermione's face fell. "I thought, well, never mind."

"What did you think?"

Hermione shrugged. "I thought that, well, I know we aren't friends exactly, but I thought we might be after this is all over."

"Why? We have nothing in common. I am not in the market for a friend, Miss Granger. And I will not be here, in any case."

Hermione flushed. "Sorry. I have to go. I will see you this evening, sir. I won't be too late."

Hermione bent and picked up the bag that she had set by her chair, then she stood and turned toward the door.

"Hermione, we can meet tomorrow, instead. That would be better, and you can take your time with Professor MacAirt," Severus said, suddenly feeling uncomfortable that he had said what he had.

"Tomorrow is the first day of spring and the memorial for Professor Dumbledore," Hermione reminded him.

"That is in the afternoon. We can meet after dinner as usual."

Hermione nodded, still slightly turned away from him. "All right."

"Hermione," Severus said softly, "if I were in the market for a friend, I cannot think of anyone I would prefer to you. But do not become attached to me. I am nasty and unpleasant, and I will be dead before . . . before you begin your Animagus training."

Hermione turned toward him. "But if you're not . . . I know you are unpleasant and nasty. But I told you once that you aren't only a nasty bastard, sir, and that's still true. And maybe it could change if you had reason to be happy." She shrugged. "But once this is all over, that will be your decision, I suppose."

"Decision?"

"Whether you want to find reason to be happy," she replied softly. "But it is rather too late for me not to become attached to you, and I do hope that you live to find that reason. See you tomorrow, Professor."

Hermione removed the *Colloportus* and left the office and an unhappy Severus Snape.

Severus and Hermione's meeting the next evening was awkward, with none of the ease that had developed between them over the previous few months of working together. Since the three Horcruxes had been destroyed, the "intrepid trio," as Snape had begun calling them...usually just to see Hermione roll her eyes and smile despite herself...had begun looking for the next Horcrux, but had also begun their research into the Deathly Hallows again, spurred on by Luna. Harry was convinced that one of them was the ring that Dumbledore had worn to his grave. He wasn't certain about the other...he thought it was either the wand that Ollivander had had on display in his window, hiding in plain site, or Dumbledore's wand. Harry believed that if it was the Headmaster's wand, he had been buried with it.

Severus finally told Hermione what he had always known: Dumbledore had possessed two wands, it was by no means certain which wand had been buried with him, and even if they did know, they would have no way of determining whether either wand had been this so-called Wand of Destiny, particularly as there was no such thing. Hermione wanted him to ask Minerva about the wands, where they had been procured and when, and which one had been buried with him...she even suggested that if the Headmistress still possessed one of the wands, that she might give it to them to be "tested." Severus categorically refused to speak with Minerva about the wands.

"Especially not today, Hermione. It is the anniversary of his death. I will not ask her about that, especially since we both know that the Deathly Hallows are a fiction invented by the Headmaster himself."

"Are we sure he did?"

"Where is the sceptic?" Severus asked impatiently. "Of course we are sure he did. He was the master of deception in many ways...of necessity, Hermione. He did always prefer the truth, but he recognised the utility of deception. That is all that has kept me alive these last years. Deception. Potter and his little friends should continue to look for the Deathly Hallows if for no other reason than they can be seen to be doing so, but you should not be taken in by the story. Not now. You are too bright for that."

"And they aren't? You always talk like that about my friends, but they aren't stupid, you know. You said yourself that the Headmaster was a master of deception. Why shouldn't they be convinced?" Hermione asked.

"But you know better. You knew better even before I told you." Severus shook his head. "And what of the next Horcrux?"

Hermione sighed. "You know that I suspect...well, *believe*...that it's Harry, but they're still looking for something else. I don't know as Harry's heart is in it. I think he is beginning to believe it's him, too."

"Then that one will take care of itself, if Dumbledore was correct," Severus said.

"I've been thinking about that. I believe that Harry and Vol er, You Know Who, are like their wands, though you tell me he has got another wand now. I think that they are like brother wands, or the inverse of brother wands, if that makes sense. Brother wands have the same magical core but different woods; their magical cores come from the same source. If what we suspect is true, then Harry has a bit of Vol er, You Know Who's soul in him and You Know Who has a bit of Harry's body. It could be that there will be some kind of an effect because of that, something similar to the effect that brother wands have when they come into conflict with one another. But I don't know what that means. I think that from the little I have been able to learn about Horcruxes...and I do wish that Professor McGonagall would let me read more about them," she said, making a face, "I think that the bit of soul is encased in some of the creator's magic when it is placed in the physical object. I think that must be the key, somehow, but what it means . . ."

"I will request that she leave you more books on Horcruxes to read here in the library. If she does, please concentrate on those only. Some of these books that contain information about such Dark Magic also contain things that you really . . . you would wish you could forget it once you learned it. And you couldn't."

"Of course," she agreed. "Thank you, Professor. I will see you next week, then, at our usual time?"

Severus nodded and watched her leave without a single backward glance or friendly smile. He waited a few minutes, then left himself, planning on going directly to the dungeons, but Minerva was at her desk. She was reading a parchment and taking notes. When he entered her office, she looked up and smiled at him.

"Miss Granger just left; I thought you would be along shortly," she said.

Severus nodded. "How are you?" He hadn't had an opportunity to speak with her since the memorial.

"Fine, thank you."

"At the memorial . . . you . . ."

"Was I supposed to wear sackcloth and ashes, Severus? It was uncomfortable enough as it was. You know I did not approve of that assembly. Everyone tells me that life is for the living and I should get on with things, but then when I do, they disapprove, and when I do not wish to dwell on . . . on sadness, they find that difficult to understand.

Those same people who urge me to remember that Albus is dead feel it necessary to invoke his memory." Minerva sighed and removed her glasses. "I do understand it. I do. And it was probably good for the students who knew him . . . but it will be a while before I mark Albus's passing, and when I do so, I will wish to do so in private and not at a public spectacle."

"Is that why Crouch left early?" Severus asked, trying to keep the censure from his tone.

"He and Albus were close. It was very difficult for him. He was uncomfortable," Minerva answered quietly. "As Headmistress, I couldn't very well follow him out, though I wanted to. But how are you, Severus? This cannot have been an easy day for you."

Severus finally took a seat across from her. "It has been difficult. I feel . . . selfish, speaking with you about it. Even though you do not show it, I do not doubt that you grieve him."

"Albus was always my one great love, my greatest love. The loss of that person . . . you might be able to imagine it. I do not know," Minerva replied. "But you . . . I know that you felt guilty, and I did not make it easier on you, but I was angry with you. And it was easier to be angry with you than to be angry with Albus."

"I understood that."

"Understanding it did not make it easier for you, but I also thought it best at the time . . . best if it appeared there was a strain between us, and a strain that could be mended. So I allowed myself to feel that anger toward you, to act on it, and to remember . . ." Minerva swallowed. "To remember what I had already forgiven you. I did not enjoy it, but it was necessary, I believed. And now, your other master can see how you are breaking down my barriers and becoming closer to me. Perhaps it gave us more time."

"Please do not call him that," Severus said in a pained voice.

"I am sorry." Minerva quirked a smile. "What if I were to call him what I used to when we were students?"

Severus raised an eyebrow. "What was that?"

"That little toe-rag," Minerva said. "That was my favourite, but I also called him a bully and a pathetic child." She grinned at Severus's expression. "I think we'll just stick with 'that little toe-rag' for now, hmm?"

"You called him that to his face?" Severus asked, baffled, trying unsuccessfully to imagine the Dark Lord as a student scoffed at by Minerva.

"I did. I half wished he would hex me after I first called him a pathetic child, then people might have seen him for what he was, but he held his temper. It was later, when I called him a cowardly bully with the heart of a chicken, that he finally drew his wand on me...I think because I did it in front of his little friends." Minerva's eyes shone at the memory. "I was faster than he was, though, and got off a nice little jinx. Unfortunately, Professor Dumbledore came along before anything more could happen. He warned me for about the tenth time not to get on Riddle's wrong side. I didn't understand it at the time, but even then, he recognised that Riddle was a budding psychopath."

"You *jinxed* the Dark Lord?"

"Oh, he wasn't anything more than a snot-nosed boy at the time...dangerous and disturbed, no doubt, but not what he later became."

"What jinx?" Severus asked curiously.

"He sprouted chicken feathers all over his body. Yellow ones." Minerva laughed.

Severus smiled, but he couldn't bring himself to laugh. "It is good, then, that none of his kidnap attempts have succeeded. He does believe that I will eventually wheedle Potter's whereabouts from you, so perhaps he will ignore you for a while."

"I will look forward to being able to leave the grounds again." She smiled at him. "Thank you, Severus. I know that he was not at all happy when your carefully planned ambush went so badly wrong and he lost several of his Death Eaters."

Severus shrugged. "It was nice to be able to blame it on Bella, as it was at her insistence that I was not present."

"Such a coincidence that I suddenly decided to bring so many friends out to lunch with me that day!"

Severus nodded. "How can you smile about it, though? It could have gone so badly wrong."

"But it did not, thanks to you," Minerva said.

"I still do not see what you have to smile about," Severus said moodily. "Albus is dead, it is likely that many more of your friends will be before the end, not to mention those you have already lost. I most certainly will be dead."

"I smile because I have hope for the future, a future after that little toe-rag," Minerva said. "I even have hope for you, Severus, that you will live, that you will find the redemption that you seek, that you will enjoy your life."

"There is no hope for me. I feel it. I know it. There will come a moment . . . I have no hope, not for me, not for anyone. I do not know why I continue," Severus said, Hermione's face flitting through his mind as he said that.

"There is always hope, Severus, even if it is not for ourselves," Minerva said. "No matter the setbacks or the defeats, there is always hope. We will not surrender to despair, we will not capitulate to Darkness. Even should we die, we will die with hope for tomorrow. Even in our final breath, we will know that our triumph will come. We will die with that hope in our hearts, if we must, but today, we shall live in it. Even should he win the day, that pathetic little toe-rag who fancies himself a lord of wizards, even then, we will know that it will not last. Hope will shine before us always, an eternal star that urges us forward even as we pass through the valley of despair. So proceed with hope, Severus, not only with regret and recriminations, no matter where it leads you, even if it leads you into darkness and death. Hope will be there. Remember it and look to its light even if you breathe your last, and that hope will carry you beyond the darkness. Hope, love, faith: they together shall vanquish the Dark, and it is in us that they live."

"And when we are dead?" Severus asked, morose and cynical. "Where, then, is that hope? Where, then, love?"

"Do not despair," Minerva replied gently. "They continue in the human heart, always. And they will triumph over dark deeds, cold indifference, and selfish desires. Love and compassion may sometimes seem very far away, but the good is there in the human heart, and if we must make sacrifices to ensure the good, that is just more proof of it. The proof of it is in you, Severus. In what you do and in what you give, in the choices you now make."

"You sound like Albus," Severus said glumly.

"Thank you." Minerva smiled. "He taught me well."

"It won't be the same."

"No, but it never is the same; one day to the next, each dawn different, yet each morning, the sun rises." Minerva took a breath and let it out. "The greatest pain comes from holding on to what is past, and that Albus taught me, too. And what change we can make through our own choices . . . such change and such choices are not always without pain, but they can engender less suffering in ourselves if we choose wisely and know that we have done what is right, as far as we are able."

"How can you say that today of all days?" Severus said, shaking his head. "Albus died a year ago today, and you speak of hope and love and choice."

"Severus, you made a choice out of your love for Albus and your love for me. You could not kill him. So Albus made a decision because of his love for you and his desire to save another young Slytherin. And then, in the end . . . in the end, I, who loved him most, I made my own choice, as well."

"What choice was that?" He wondered whether it was a decision to carry on with Robert Crouch less than a year after Albus had died.

"You loved him too much to kill him . . . I loved him more." Minerva's eyes filled with tears. "But it is best not to speak of that. It is growing late, and I believe you are on duty tonight. Go catch someone snogging in the trophy room, Severus. I will see you tomorrow."

Severus left, feeling puzzled and discontent, and wondering where he might find any hope of his own. If he was fated to die, what was the point of finding hope?

Chapter Ten: Dead men naked they shall be one

Chapter 11 of 34

Dumbledore succumbs on the first day of spring, and Severus tries to cope. Minerva begins in her role as Acting Headmistress, immediately taking decisive action.

Note: AU. Not DH-compliant.



Chapter Ten: *Dead men naked they shall be one*

21 March 1997

Severus sat in the sitting room of the Headmaster's suite. The first day of spring, but he felt as though it was anything but a new beginning. It felt like the end. He glanced over at the matron.

"Stop pacing, Poppy," he said irritably. "They will call for you if they need you."

Poppy sat, an anguished expression on her face. "He's worse, Severus. And I think his pain is increasing. He looks very bad this morning."

"O'Donald is a Healer. I am sure she is doing all she can for him," Severus replied, trying to rein in his own impatience. Robert...who had arrived at the castle in January, and whom Minerva had described to him as being the closest thing to a son that Albus had, causing a stab of jealousy in him...had come to get him at four o'clock in the morning, saying that Albus was asking for him.

Albus had reminded him of their plans for Harry and for the Dark Lord, and Severus had asked him to rest, not to talk, saying that he remembered all their plans, but Albus had reached out with a feeble hand. With a hard swallow, Severus had taken the old wizard's left hand in his right.

"Stay on, Severus. Stay on at Hogwarts. Take care of Minerva for me, take care of the school. I believe..." Dumbledore took a shallow, gasping breath. "...I believe she will be named Headmistress. I have worked to ensure that. But if she is not . . . perhaps it will be you. If Tom somehow gets his way in it, it may be you, I think. But . . . but you must help her . . . help her, Severus, after. Whatever happens."

"You will be better. Take your potions. You will be better. Please, Albus," Severus said in a low, urgent voice.

When the Headmaster had come to him in December and told him tearfully that he would seek a different solution to their mutual problem, Severus had no notion that Albus could still be planning his own death, but in a way that would not involve him. Until early February, he had been entirely unaware that Dumbledore had decided to allow the curse to take his life, and it was only after the old wizard had passed out during dinner in the Great Hall that Severus understood that the Headmaster thought to avert the effect of the Vow by dying early, before Draco could be presented with his task. And now, it appeared he was carrying out this new, mad plan.

"Please, Albus, take the potions...any of them," Severus begged.

Albus shook his head slightly. "I am dying, Severus. I will be dead within the next three or four days." He tried to chuckle. "Melina tells me I am too robust. I should be dead already."

Severus looked at the Headmaster and saw his sunken cheeks, translucent, greyish skin, blue lips, and jaundiced eyes shadowed by dark purple-black circles. A lesser wizard would have succumbed where Albus lingered.

"Take your potions," Severus whispered once more. "Take them, please." He had begged him before, to no avail, and when Dumbledore's health was better.

"No, Severus. It would merely prolong the end now." He looked into Severus's eyes. "Is that what you really want for me, Severus?"

Severus shook his head, unable to speak.

"I may not . . . I may not be coherent much longer, my dear boy. So I wanted to see you, say good-bye, and tell you that you will find your salvation. You will. You are doing very well, and I know that it is hard for you. I am very proud of you. Thank you, Severus, for all you have done for me over the years."

Tears rose in Severus's eyes, but he did not fight them. "Do not leave us, Albus."

"I won't really be gone, you know . . . And you will do just fine, I am sure. I have faith in you. Just . . . remember me, take care of Minerva, and look after Harry. You . . . you will be fine, my dear, dear boy."

Severus held Albus's hand to his face and let his tears wash over it.

Since that conversation, he had been sitting in the Headmaster's sitting room, joined by Poppy after she had been allowed to visit Albus for just a few minutes. Now, only Minerva, her niece, Healer Melina O'Donald, Murdoch, Minerva's Potions master brother, and Robert Crouch were in with the Headmaster. Both men looking grim, Robert and Murdoch had occasionally stepped out of the room to allow the witches and Albus some privacy as they cared for him, but they had little to say about the Headmaster's condition except that the pain potions seemed to have become ineffective.

"I don't think he has more than a few days," Poppy said, her voice cracking. "I wish they would let me help. I have taken care of him for more than forty years." Tears welled in her eyes. "I suppose there's not much to be done now, though."

Severus looked up at the school matron. Lost in his own bleak thoughts, he had forgotten for a moment that others were also suffering, that Poppy had known the Headmaster since she had been a student. Probably fifty years, at least.

"I am certain that Minerva and Melina are doing all they can for him, and doing their best to make him . . . comfortable," Severus said, attempting to offer comfort, but finding that in his voice, the words sounded almost like a reproach. "I mean to say, do not distress yourself." That sounded worse. Finally, he sighed. "I am sure that it must be difficult for you. I am sorry."

Poppy nodded. "You will miss him."

Severus averted his eyes. Afraid of the tears that might come if he said more, he simply replied, "Yes."

The bedroom door opened, and through it, Poppy and Severus could just see Albus propped up on pillows, his eyes closed, his mouth open, his breathing clearly laboured. Minerva was sitting at the left side of the bed, holding his hand, and Robert was just behind her. They heard Melina, unseen on the other side of the Headmaster, saying something about trying one more dose. Murdoch stepped through the door and closed it gently behind him.

"Poppy, Severus." Murdoch nodded to the two, then lowered himself wearily into a chair. "If this drags on, I think it will kill Minerva, too," he said with a sigh, rubbing his eyes.

"Isn't there anything I can do?" Poppy asked.

Murdoch shook his head. "I think it is hard enough on Albus to have Minerva there, seeing him as he is, and Robert, too, of course . . . Melina is doing all she can for him. If only he had consulted her sooner . . ."

Poppy's eyes welled with tears again. "I should have insisted. He wouldn't even allow me to examine him after about mid-August. I should have known, I should have known."

Murdoch came over and sat beside her on the couch, putting an arm around her and drawing her against him. "Shh, shh, you know how stubborn Albus is. Minerva wasn't even aware, and after she was, she did ask him to see Melina or some other Healer, but he wouldn't, not until it was too late. And he had become more stubborn in these last weeks. There is nothing you could have done, Poppy. You can help Minerva after. She will need her friends." Murdoch looked over at Severus and appeared about to say something, but he shook his head and embraced Poppy, rubbing her back.

After a while, Poppy sat back and wiped her face with her handkerchief, and Murdoch stood and stretched, saying, "I think we might need some breakfast soon. Perhaps we can convince Minerva to eat something."

At just that moment, though, the door opened, and Robert stepped out.

"He is gone. There is no Headmaster at Hogwarts," he said softly, but each word distinct.

Behind Robert, they could see Minerva kneeling beside the bed, her head resting against Albus's limp left arm, Melina behind her, and the Headmaster, unmoving, no longer gasping for breath, his pallid face now completely relaxed. Severus stood and approached the door, but Robert closed it and stepped out into the room.

"I believe that Minerva needs privacy at the moment, Professor Snape," Robert said, not moving from his position in front of the door. "You, or someone, should tell the other Heads of House and the Board of Governors. It would fall to Minerva to inform them . . . but it would be a service to her if someone else did it for her."

Severus nodded and spun on his heel, leaving the room without another word. Sprout first, then Flitwick. He would keep his mind on his task, not on what he might feel. He could not feel anything yet. Later, perhaps, he would allow himself to feel something. He also had to tell the Dark Lord. That would come next. A message sent to Pettigrew and one to the Malfoy manor. And make it clear that he would be tied up at Hogwarts for some days, unable to leave if he wanted to position himself properly with McGonagall, who would be the Acting Headmistress. The Dark Lord would take that as a valid excuse.

Severus was surprised to be recalled to the Headmaster's..*Headmistress's*...Office, summoned by Minerva, less than an hour after he had left to do what had to be done.

"Professor Snape," she said with a nod, looking pale but composed behind the large desk. "Thank you for your assistance this morning. Robert and Filius tell me that you have been most helpful. I appreciate that. I assume you have informed your other . . ." Minerva paused. "That you got word to him, somehow."

Severus nodded. "I sent word to the Malfoy mansion and to Pettigrew. He likely knows by now and is celebrating," he said with a grimace.

"I need you to bring me Malfoy immediately. Do not allow him to go to breakfast in the Great Hall. Make haste. Do not allow him out of your sight and do not tell him that the Headmaster has expired. Filius will be making the announcement at breakfast. I will join you all in the Great Hall if I am able, and I will need to speak with you later this morning. But bring Malfoy straight here to me. Tell him nothing."

Severus rose. "If I may Floo to the Slytherin common room, and then return the same way with him, that would be most expeditious."

Minerva nodded and waved her wand at the fireplace. "Feel free. I will expect you presently. Also, please leave as soon as you have delivered him to me. Not a word about anything to either of us."

"You want him off his guard, then."

"Precisely...and I want to minimise your own involvement, yet make it sufficient to ensure that your . . . your promises are kept. I will keep him safe for you, Severus," she said softly. "Know that he will be safe."

She seemed suddenly fragile to him. "Are you..."

"You need to hurry, Professor," Minerva said more briskly.

Severus Flooed through to the Slytherin common room. Less than five minutes later, he was back, Draco in tow, the younger Slytherin in pyjamas and slippers, his dressing gown hanging off of him, looking ruffled and blinking. Good, he'd still been asleep.

Without another word, Severus walked to the door and left the office.

"What am I doing here? This isn't right," Draco protested.

Minerva simply raised her wand and sealed the door, using more than one variant on the *Colloportus*, one of which was the invention of a friend and would be unknown to the boy. She turned to the windows, and she drew the draperies closed, one by one, with rapid flicks of her wand.

"Come with me, Malfoy." She put her hand on Draco's shoulder and steered him from behind.

"Where are you taking me? I haven't done anything! Where's Professor Dumbledore? And Professor Snape! If you're going to punish me for something, I insist my Head of House be here!"

Minerva appeared not to hear his protests as she prodded him toward a door at the back of the office. She flicked her wand again and the door opened to them. She pushed him in ahead of her, closed the door behind them, and they were in utter darkness for a moment before Minerva lit the lamps.

Draco's mouth fell open. "A library . . ." He couldn't tell how large the library was, but he could see that it held some very ancient books, indeed.

"A library. Very good, Mr Malfoy," Minerva said drily. "One point to Slytherin. But this is not our destination."

She steered him around a table, stopped, then waved her wand. A trapdoor appeared in front of him.

"Open it, Mr Malfoy...no, not with your wand. Put that away."

Draco put his wand back in the pocket of his dressing gown, then bent and heaved at the large iron ring on the right side of the door. It took him two tries to pull it open, and when he did, he fell backward as Minerva lightly stepped out of the way.

"Get up, Malfoy. Go on down. Now."

Draco looked up at McGonagall. He licked his lips and swallowed. "What's down there?"

"You will see when you get there."

He stood and looked down. "It's dark."

"Don't you like the Dark, Malfoy? There are twenty-one stairs down, then a landing, then there are another nine stairs down to your right, then three more to the right of that. You needn't run down them headlong. You may proceed cautiously. When you get to the bottom, stop," Minerva directed.

Draco took one step, then a second. He looked down into the blackness below. He looked up at Minerva and the lights of the library. He shook his head. "I'll tell . . . I'll tell . . ."

"Whom will you tell, Mr Malfoy?" Minerva asked softly. "Your father? Rather . . . incommoded at the moment, from what I understand. Perhaps your mother then? Or your aunt? Or one of your . . . new *friends*? Go down the stairs, Malfoy. You've taken two. Nineteen more, then right and nine more down, then three."

He stepped down again, then he reached into his pocket for his wand.

"No, Malfoy, no wand. Just count."

Draco placed one hand against the wall and stepped down, then again, counting as he went. He thought that McGonagall might be behind him, but he didn't look back again. He had reached the twentieth stair when he heard a booming crash. The trapdoor had closed behind him. He stopped and began to turn.

"Continue on, Mr Malfoy," came Minerva's soft voice in the dark. "Continue on."

At the landing he paused, then turned to his right and shuffled forward, feeling for the next step with his right foot. He found it, swallowed, and counted nine more steps down, he turned right again, found the next step with his toe, and went down the final three steps.

"Very good, Mr Malfoy. Now take three steps forward."

It was pitch dark. They could be a mile beneath the earth for all that he could see. There could be a gaping chasm in front of him, and he would never know it. His hand went for his wand again.

"No wand, Mr Malfoy. Three steps forward."

He swallowed again, then he took three steps forward and stopped, relieved he hadn't fallen into a pit.

"Very good, Mr Malfoy." He felt her hand on his shoulder. She patted it, then rested her hand there. "Very good. Do you know where we are?"

"No, ma'am."

"We are in the Heart of Hogwarts. Its magical heart, not the physical centre. It was once located in the dungeons, long, long ago, but it hasn't changed in form or function. It was moved with very great care by a previous headmistress."

They were still in the dark, not a sliver of light to be seen, and Draco still had no idea why he had been hauled out of bed by his Head of House with nary a word, dragged to the Headmaster's Office in his pyjamas and slippers, then brought here by an apparently deranged Head of Gryffindor.

"What have I done? Why am I here?" His voice was now plaintive.

"Oh, Draco, you know what you have done," Minerva said with a slight sigh. "As to why you are here . . . I wish to show you something."

The suddenness of the light hurt his eyes, and without thinking, Draco raised his right arm to shield them. After blinking a few times, he saw that they were in a round stone room, apparently a part of the tower. The ceiling was too far above them for him to see it in the gloom, and other than several torches along the wall, the only thing in the room was a large, carved table.

"This is what I wish to show you." Minerva waved her wand and a translucent replica of the castle rose from the centre of the table. "You may look at it more closely, if you like, Mr Malfoy."

He took a few steps forward and he smiled despite himself. "You can see everything!"

"Yes, and we can see more if I do this." Minerva waved her wand and part of the miniature castle cut away to reveal the Great Hall. "We are seeing a reflection of the castle just as it is at this moment, but, as is obvious, none of the occupants. This is used to . . . to track changes that are made to the physical structure of the castle. If the Headmaster wishes to move a room or a staircase, he may watch it here and see the result. It is generally done only once a year, although occasionally, Hogwarts herself moves a room, and if we lose it, we can come up here and look for it more easily than if we were to do a search of the entire castle." She waved her wand again. "And here, Mr Malfoy, is the Slytherin dormitory, your common room here . . ."

She let him look at the castle for a while, and as he moved around the table, she removed and replaced different sections so that he could see different parts of the castle, until he was back looking at the Slytherin common room again.

"Quite beautiful, isn't it, Mr Malfoy? And your common room . . . it has been your home for the past five and a half years."

He nodded in agreement.

"And here, here is everything that the model does not show us." Minerva waved her wand in a large arc, and suddenly the walls seemed transparent, and Draco could see everything on the Hogwarts grounds. "This is a real view, not a model, although the Heart does have the capacity to record thirteen moons of activity on them and replay them on her walls, but at a speed which does not allow us to see individual events, though we can see large changes...the changing seasons, for example."

Draco walked forward and reached out his hand. It still felt like a stone wall, not like glass.

"There is the Quidditch stadium where you have spent much of your time. The Forest . . . the gates . . . the lake under which Slytherin House resides. It is all here. It has been your home, too," Minerva said. "Would you like to see the last thirteen moons?" Without waiting for a reply, she waved her wand, and the view changed, and Draco watched as the seasons rushed past, the year passing by in less than five minutes. Minerva waved her wand again, and again it replayed, winter, spring, summer, autumn, winter again. "Beautiful, is it not, Draco?" she asked softly.

Then the grounds were gone, and there was only a blank stone wall before him. Minerva waved her wand, and Draco watched the model of the castle vanish as well.

Minerva looked at him for a long moment, then she said, "Do you wish to destroy all of this, Draco? Truly? Your home? Your home, whatever its faults?"

"No, no, of course not! Who would say such a thing?"

"That is what some people wish, you know. To destroy Hogwarts, to destroy more than Hogwarts. To change wizarding society into something it has never been . . . and presenting a false picture even of that. Do you believe you would be happy then? Happier?"

"My father..."

"Your father, regrettably, made certain choices, and he now lives with the results of those choices. We all make choices in our lives, Draco, and they are our own. Even allowing someone else to make a choice for us is a choice in itself. You need to choose, Draco. You are a bright young man, a wizard with potential. You can make your own future, if you choose to have a future."

"You don't know what you're talking about."

"No? Let me see your left arm, Draco. Now. Let me see it."

Draco scowled but complied, pushing up his left sleeve, and Minerva let out an audible sigh of relief. "Good, very good. I still would have helped you, if you wish it, but it would have been much more difficult."

"I don't need your help," Draco replied, his voice low and sullen, but lacking conviction.

"We all need each other, Draco. We may make our own choices, but we all need others."

"I don't."

"No? And where do you get your food? Grow it yourself, do you? And cook it? And your clothes...make them all on your own as well?"

"That's not the same..."

"Why? Because it is all . . . anonymous? Or because you pay for some of it, at least? Or does your mother pay for it? That is all completely irrelevant. We do not live in isolation, Draco. We depend on one another, and we are interconnected," Minerva said softly. "Your choices affect you and they affect others, as do mine. And now I am choosing to offer you my help. We can take you somewhere safe, and your mother too, where you cannot be found. You do know what will happen to you otherwise...perhaps not specifically, but I am sure you have seen what fates have befallen others. Your father at the moment is in a relatively safe place, and yet not one where I would want to spend one minute. But he is nonetheless safer there than he would be in the company of his master, wouldn't you say?"

Draco stared at her stonily.

"I have some news for you, Draco. But before I give it to you . . . I would like to see your wand." She held out her hand. "Give it to me, please."

Unsure why he was complying, except that she was his teacher and he had already complied with everything else she had requested, Draco drew out his wand and handed it to her, releasing his hold on it reluctantly.

Minerva's eyes filled with tears. "Oh, Draco! Do you not see? You *must* accept our help. What one of your new friends would have handed me his wand? Please, Draco, let us help you."

"I can't . . . my mother..."

"There are some others on their way to her as we speak. We will do all we can to save her, too."

Draco shook his head, his eyes fixed on his wand in McGonagall's left hand.

"I have news for you, as I said..."

"Is it my father? Is he dead?" Draco asked.

"No, as far as I know, your father is as well as can be expected. But another died this morning. Albus Dumbledore died today."

Draco went completely white and he backed up away from her until he hit the table.

"You know that he has been ill," Minerva said, maintaining her composure. "This morning at five-fifty, he died. I am Acting Headmistress. Dumbledore wished me to save you. He died so that I could save you, Draco."

"What?" Draco asked, astounded.

"We knew what was asked of you. Dumbledore could have . . . he could have done things differently, and your choice would have been different, and it would have come later. But now you have this choice: go back to Voldemort and suffer the consequences, be given another dreadful task to fulfil, or trust us, come with us, let us keep you and your mother safe." Minerva handed Draco his wand. "If you wish us to help you, stay here while we finish making certain arrangements. If you wish to return to Voldemort, leave now. But remember, it is not only your own fate that you have in your hands."

"Professor Snape..."

"Has absolutely no idea what we are talking about," Minerva said, interrupting. "I told him to fetch you immediately, impressed the urgency of it upon him, and told him to leave. I cannot allow him to know of this, for reasons you may guess."

Draco swallowed. "But Professor Snape . . ."

"Do not worry about him, or at least wait until after you have made a decision for yourself and your mother. You know that your mother will not go unless you also agree. If you love your mother, you have only one option that I can see."

"All right." Draco nodded, suddenly resolute and standing straighter. "All right. I don't want to go back. And I don't want Mother to suffer any more than she has. I will go with you."

"Good. We must time this properly, however. We need to ensure that . . . to ensure that Voldemort cancels your task completely...we do know what you've been trying to do in the come-and-go room, Draco. Fiddling about with the wards, trying to get that thing to work through them so that you can let Death Eaters into Hogwarts. For reasons I will not discuss with you, Voldemort must have time to dismiss that task from his mind and to plan for you to do something else instead. Once he has done that, we will move you."

"But how will you know?"

"There are various ways. It is not your concern. Until that time, you will stay here. I will need to collect some of your hair so that we can have someone impersonate you temporarily...in order to limit your friends' contact with your impersonator, we will say that you have come down with a contagious illness that confines you to the Hospital Wing," Minerva explained. "In the meantime, we will make you as comfortable as possible, but you are not to leave on any account, not even to open the trapdoor, no matter what you may see or hear. It is for your own safety that you remain here. When the time is right, we will move you. It shouldn't be more than a few days. Likely after the Headmaster's funeral, which will be here on the grounds...probably the interment, as well." She looked around her at the barren stone room. "I will send a house-elf with some things to make you more comfortable, including a Charmed toilet and washstand. And breakfast," she added, looking at his pyjamas again. "We'll eventually sort out some clothes for you, as well."

"My mother..."

"It would not be safe to bring her here. We will have you meet her later. If anything goes wrong, I will tell you, Mr Malfoy." She started up the stairs, then stopped on the landing. "Would you like to see the grounds? I will make them visible to you if you promise that nothing you see will lure you from this place."

"Yes, please, ma'am."

Minerva waved her wand, making the grounds visible through the walls once more. She looked at him, a peculiar expression crossing her face, then said, "I can do it during his funeral, as well, if you like. If you are still here and you want to see it."

Draco nodded, and Minerva left him alone to consider his future.

Minerva stood at the window, looking out over the grounds, watching her brother Murdoch exit the gates cautiously, his wand drawn, then Disapparating immediately. Soon, no doubt, people would converge on Hogwarts, school governors, Ministry officials, members of the Order . . . she wished she could at least tell the latter to stay away at least until the funeral, but they would come and she could not deter them.

Hearing a step behind her on the stairs to the Headmaster's suite, Minerva turned her head and said, "Robert?"

Robert nodded and came down the last few steps to join her at the window.

"Tomorrow morning, then," Minerva said, continuing to look out the windows. "You are ready?"

Robert nodded again. "You know that I will do all that you need of me. It is as Mother would wish it, too."

Minerva sighed. "I wish that I could see her. It will be difficult for her, I know."

"She will understand," Robert said softly. "Write her a note."

Minerva nodded. "Melina is still with him?"

"She is. She is almost . . . it will not be much longer."

"I would go up, but I have to continue with the day. I need to go to the Great Hall. The students will need me." Minerva looked up at the tall, clean-shaven wizard beside her, his greying auburn hair mussed. "Thank you, Robert. We both appreciate it, you know. All that you have done."

Robert smiled slightly. "I owe Uncle Albus far more than I can repay him. My freedom for the next several months . . . it will be no hardship, Minerva."

"It may be longer, Robert."

The wizard shrugged. "As long as you need me. However long that may be."

Minerva squeezed his arm. "Thank you. I am going to breakfast now. Filius has no doubt made the announcement. If you are hungry, you may call Wilspy, unless you would prefer to come to breakfast with me."

"I will eat upstairs, thank you, Minerva," Robert said with a nod.

"Good. I will return as soon as possible, but there are certain practicalities that I must deal with. I cannot give any appearance of weakness, particularly once the school governors and Ministry officials begin arriving. I may not be back until this evening."

"Do as you must. I will await your return."

"Tell Melina that I wish her to stay."

Robert gave a slight bow. "As you wish. We will see you later."

Minerva nodded to him, then left the Headmaster's Office...no, the Headmaster died that morning. It was her office now, the Acting Headmistress's Office, unless the Board of Governors came to some other decision, and she had to ensure that they did not, or all she had done over the past months would be for naught. And she had to give Severus instruction that she did not wish to give him. She would tell him that he must return to Voldemort as soon as possible and give the Dark Wizard a new focus: Severus's role at Hogwarts now that Dumbledore was not Headmaster. She would tell him her plan to make him her Deputy and of what he must insinuate to his other master about access to her and to the wards. It would set into motion a great deal of pain for Severus, but perhaps at the end of that pain, he would emerge whole. Perhaps not. Perhaps he would only die at the end of it all. Minerva thought of Albus and of his faith. She set her teeth, raised her chin, stood straight, squared her shoulders, and rode the spiral staircase down to play her role as if the fate of the wizarding world depended upon it, for it very likely did.

Chapter Eleven: Break in the sun

Chapter 12 of 34

On Boxing Day, after Severus tells her of his Unbreakable Vow and of Albus's illness, Minerva confronts Albus, and she learns much.

Note: AU. Not DH-compliant.



Chapter Eleven: *Break in the sun*

26 December 1996

Minerva heard the door click quietly behind Severus as he left her alone in his rooms, the potions sitting beside her on the table, a bizarre Boxing Day gift. Tears still streamed down her face, and her grief and her fury were a physical anguish. How could it be that Albus had not told her any of this? Repeatedly reassured her, in fact, that the curse was no worse, that he was fine and well, and only somewhat uncomfortable at times? And the Vow . . . that was worse. Not only worse that Severus had taken it, but that Albus knew of it and approved. Even if she could understand that on some level, it baffled her that Albus would not work to find a way around it and that he would not share it with her.

There was no doubt in her mind that Severus had told her the truth, but perhaps, she reasoned to herself, there was more to it that Albus had not told him. This notion calmed her some, but another voice told her that if that were so, why was he not interested in the improved potions? And why had he not told her of the devastating effects of the curse?

Minerva sniffed and found her handkerchief. She must look a sight, and even though there were very few people left in the castle on the day after Christmas, she did not want to try to walk from Severus's dungeon rooms to her own in Gryffindor Tower appearing as she no doubt did. She got up and went into Severus's Spartan bathroom. She grimaced looking at her reflection in the mirror. Red, swollen, blotchy . . . and suddenly quite old. She cast a Glamour to hide the effects of her crying jag, returned to the sitting room to retrieve the potions and their formulas, then she left.

Instead of returning to her own rooms, however, she went to the Headmaster's Office. He wasn't there, and she continued up to his private suite to seek him there. He had been going to see Aberforth that afternoon, as they hadn't seen each other the day before, on Christmas. If he hadn't returned yet, she would wait for him.

Minerva set the potions on the table in their wire carrier before poking her head into Albus's study and then his bedroom. Not back yet. She took a seat on the sofa in the sitting room and waited, trying not to think about what she had just learned. Trying to keep herself calm. She succeeded in the latter, but not in the former.

The more that Minerva turned over in her mind all that Severus had told her, the more she was certain that Albus had never intended to tell her. Severus took the Vow over the summer. Albus sustained his injury at approximately the same time. More than once in the intervening months, she had heard them arguing about something, the argument always ending upon her arrival. Even when afflicted by the curse, Severus had argued with Albus about something...the very night that she had told him that she would save his life by allowing him to make love to her...at the time, Minerva had thought it regarded the *Adfectus* and its cure. Now Severus's reaction to her news that night made more sense to her, as did his words, his desire for her to reconsider her decision and to think of what such a thing would mean to her.

At the time, it had meant that she would be saving the life of a friend, a fellow member of the Order of the Phoenix, and a valuable weapon in the fight against Voldemort. But even if it had only been to save his life, with no consideration of his value to the Order, she would have done it. Minerva had long since genuinely forgiven Severus for all that she was aware he had done when in the service of Voldemort, and for all that she could only guess he might have participated in. She had grown fond of the younger wizard, even loved him in a way, though not at all as he apparently loved her...even though he had been unaware of it himself until he had been hit by the spell that September. Minerva quirked a slight smile despite herself. He seemed to have a particular fondness for Gryffindor witches; it had been the peril to a Gryffindor witch that had turned Severus toward Albus and away from Voldemort. She had once known a Slytherin witch with a very strong fondness for a certain type of Gryffindor wizard. That Slytherin's first husband, Reginald, had been such a Gryffindor wizard, as was Albus . . . and her brother Malcolm. Minerva's smile faded as she thought of Malcolm.

Was Albus to die, just as Reginald and Malcolm had? As had so many others? Murdered, killed resisting a Dark Wizard? But it seemed to Minerva that Albus was not resisting. What good he thought would come of his walking to his own death, Minerva could not begin to imagine. What would Gertrude say to her if she could? Minerva fought back tears. There had to be more to Albus's plan than just death, even more than simply saving the Order's spy...what good, after all, was a spy who had killed the Order's leader? None whatsoever.

Minerva began to pace. Perhaps she should have gone to Gryffindor Tower to wait. He might have returned there first. But even if he had, he would look for her in his suite when she wasn't in her own rooms. She hoped he would, and that he wasn't down in her rooms waiting for her to return. It was better to speak with him here, where there was far less chance that they could be overheard than even in her rooms.

Minerva went down to the Headmaster's Office. Dilys was in her portrait, doing embroidery. Of all the portraits there, Minerva liked her the best, and she seemed most willing to comply with requests other than those that came from the Headmaster. Eliphelet would, as well, Minerva knew, but she still found him annoying and preferred not to have to rely on the smarmy portrait.

"Dilys, please pop down to my rooms and if Albus is there, tell him I'm here. If he's not, leave word with the Knight so that we aren't waiting at opposite ends of the castle for each other."

Minerva returned to the sitting room. It was likely Albus would go to her rooms first upon returning to the castle, since it was a holiday. His visits with Aberforth were never very long, either. It couldn't be too much later before he returned. In the meantime, Minerva tried to sit quietly, but then she paced again, and it seemed that every time she turned around, the potions bottles that Severus had given her leapt to her attention.

Finally, as the afternoon grew late and the sky darkened, she heard Albus's slow step on the stairs to his suite. She turned to face the door.

"Good afternoon, my dear!" Albus greeted her with a smile. "Did you have a nice time with Severus this afternoon?"

Minerva swallowed, incapable of reconciling Albus's warm, cheerful greeting with what she had learned from Severus less than two hours before. She simply looked at him. Albus's brow furrowed.

"What is it, Minerva?" The large bottles on the table caught his eye. He paused. "What are these?"

"You know what they are, Albus," Minerva replied. "They are the potions that Severus informs me you will not take."

"The potion I have him brewing me is perfectly adequate to its purpose," Albus said, shaking his head. "I told him not to waste his time on experiments. He has enough to be getting on with as it is."

"Adequate to its purpose? And precisely what purpose would that be, Albus?" Minerva asked.

Albus looked at her. "What did Severus tell you when he gave you these?" he asked quietly.

"The truth. What you have not told me. That the potion you are taking is a kind of palliative, that you will be dead inside a year, probably sooner, but that you..." Minerva's voice broke. She took a breath and continued, "...that you refuse to try anything new, and that these potions may be as good as a cure." Minerva waited for Albus to tell her that she was wrong, that Severus was mistaken. She waited in vain.

Albus turned, looking away, and said nothing.

"Tell me, Albus, is he wrong? You will not see a Healer. Is this why?"

"Minerva . . . he ought not have told you," Albus said with a sigh. He shook his head. "Please believe me, Minerva. The potion I have been taking is fine. And no potion he could brew me..." He shook his head again.

"What? No potion he could brew you would do what? Save your life? How do you know? Is it true, then? What he said about the curse? Is it killing you?"

"We all must die someday, Minerva. It is foolish to believe that such a thing can be delayed indefinitely."

"That is not what I am asking, Albus. Answer me. If you love me, tell me: is the curse killing you?"

"If not the curse, then something will, in the end. I did not wish you to know . . . to cause you more sorrow, drawn out over months . . ." Tears filled his eyes. "I thought I could protect you at least from that."

"And when were you going to tell me?"

Albus shook his head. "I had hoped . . . I hoped it would be unnecessary," he whispered.

"Unnecessary. Unnecessary?" Minerva fought back tears. "And why would that be? You weren't going to tell me about it at all, trying to 'spare me,' were you? And what of the Unbreakable Vow? Were you going to tell me of that, or were you going to 'spare me'?"

"He told you of that? How? Why? Oh, gods . . ." Albus seemed to sway, and he grabbed the back of a chair with his left hand. "No, no . . ."

"Yes, he did. Severus told me about the curse and about the Vow. He said he thinks you aren't willing to take the improved potions because you are trying to make it easier on him."

Albus collapsed into a chair, bowed over, holding his head in his one good hand. Minerva could hear the tears in his voice as he answered her.

"I wanted to make it easier on you both . . . why would he do this? Why would he cause us all more pain?"

"Albus, please, tell me you have some other plan, a plan of which Severus has no clue. Please, tell me that you don't plan to have him fulfill the Vow. Please, Albus, please," Minerva begged.

Albus simply shook his head, unable to respond or even to look at Minerva, his eyes covered by his hand.

"How could you?" Minerva asked. "How *could* you?"

Albus gasped, Minerva could see his shoulders shaking as silent sobs racked his body, and all he could do was shake his head. She had seen Albus weep before, but never like this.

"Do you have a death wish?" Minerva asked, unrelenting. "Why would you do this to us all? You blame Severus, but you are the one who hid it all from me, *whied* to me. And he has tried to urge you to find another plan, and you cannot say that you have one."

"I...I...I have...I have...I have thought, but there's..." Albus choked, "...there's nothing to be done. It is best this way." He took a deep breath and let it out in a shuddering sigh. "Things might still change . . . but I do not believe they will. There is nothing . . . nothing to change this course, and I think it is . . . it is best this way."

"That cannot be so," Minerva replied. She Summoned a clean handkerchief from Albus's room. Her own was already too well used. She handed it to Albus. "Here. Here, Albus, take this."

Albus took the handkerchief and wiped his face and blew his nose. His sobs had subsided, but his tears had not. Minerva sat and looked at him, the man she loved, the one who held her heart, the one for whom she would do anything. She could see that Albus had thought he was doing it for her, sparing her, that keeping it from her hadn't been a decision he had taken lightly. But he was wrong.

"Please, Albus, explain it to me," she said more gently, setting her anger aside. "You know that I have always been aware that you would die before I, and that in times of trouble such as these, your life . . . your life would always be in danger. I understand that. But this seems very different to me. You are complicit in your own death, in your own murder. And allowing Severus to do this, to carry this out . . . what would that do to him, let alone to me?"

Albus shook his head again. "It is not different. We would be saving many. And I am old, Minerva. Severus is right, too, about the curse . . . I feel its effects more greatly as the days wear on. But I will be well enough to see this through. To guide Harry as far as I am able, and to save another young soul, as well. That is why Severus took the Vow. Do not blame him for that. It is as I would have wished it. He did the right thing." His voice was low and still choked with unshed tears.

"How could it be right for him to have agreed to kill you? No, *Vowed* to kill you. And if he Vowed to do it, why has he not done so yet? There is so much I do not understand. I need to know it all now, Albus, my love. Now that I know this, I must know all that you do."

Albus nodded. "I will tell you." He still hadn't been able to raise his eyes to her.

"Albus, look at me. Will you tell me? Will you tell me all?" Minerva hated asking him that, as though she did not trust him, but in this, if he thought it was for her protection,

he might be tempted to withhold something, and it might be just that which would hold the key out of this situation.

Albus looked at her and, his eyes filling with tears again, he whispered, "I will tell you everything, Minerva, everything that I know, and answer any questions you have. I only wanted to save you from more pain."

"It is too late for that now, Albus. I need to understand."

Albus nodded. He told her of the Unbreakable Vow, of Draco's task, of what he believed would happen to Draco if he failed to fulfil the task, as Albus believed he would be unable to do. "And yet, Minerva, if he does not kill me, someone will do it. And if Severus does not fulfil the terms of the Vow when Draco is unable to kill me, Severus will die. And I have little doubt that with both of us dead and Severus a clear traitor to Tom, though a dead one, there will be little hope for the rest of you. I believe that circumstances will come together so that either Severus kills me and escapes with Draco, or Severus does not kill me, Severus dies, I am killed by another or taken captive and killed by Tom, and the wizarding world falls into darkness without Severus to protect Harry and to continue to lead the Dark Lord astray and to slow his progress.

"If Severus lives, he can continue to protect Harry, as he has done since Harry reentered the wizarding world. He can continue to do what he is able to stymie Tom's plans and to give Harry the time he needs to complete certain tasks...and I will tell you of that, as well, my dear...and then to prepare to defeat Tom, as I have faith he will do, but only if the conditions are right. And with Severus and me both dead, I do not believe that Harry would survive long enough to do what he must."

Minerva thought about what Albus had told her. "All right, putting aside for the moment the problem of . . . keeping you from being killed at all, why must Severus do it? If Draco cannot, we could put him into hiding. Severus would die, of course, but . . . if it's you or him, I don't know as I can say that he is more important than you are, and that's not even taking my own personal feelings into account."

Albus sighed. "There is another part of Draco's task of which Severus is unaware, and he does not know that I know of it. Draco has been fiddling with the wards, trying to find a weak point. The other part of his task is to let the Death Eaters into Hogwarts and for me to be killed at that time. Do not think that if Draco fails to kill me, there will not stand others ready to kill or to kidnap me. An attack on Hogwarts and the death of her Headmaster in that attack...possibly Harry's death as well, and even others...that would be another blow to the wizarding world. Tom would exploit it to exert greater control, using his minions in the Ministry, with an eye to eventually taking over the Ministry altogether. And Hogwarts, too, of course."

Minerva's brow furrowed. "But . . . if you allow this to happen, even with Severus killing you, wouldn't the dangers be the same?"

"Not as grave. Severus would still be in position with the Death Eaters, an even better position after having apparently proven his loyalty by killing me, and Harry . . . we would do what we could to ensure Harry's safety. Severus has promised that. No Unbreakable Vow, but a promise made on debts, regrets, and a love he once unwittingly betrayed. He will save Lily's son if it is in his power."

"He can't do that if he's dead," Minerva pointed out.

"Another reason that he must carry out the Unbreakable Vow," Albus said with a sigh, closing his eyes.

"You mean, another reason that Severus must kill you, in your opinion," Minerva replied.

"Mmm." Albus looked exhausted.

"It is past dinner time," Minerva said. "We should have something to eat. But we will continue to discuss this."

"I'm not hungry. At all. I couldn't eat," Albus said wearily.

"Later, then," Minerva responded, perfectly willing to forego a meal herself. "What if Draco does manage it? Will you defend yourself?"

Albus shook his head. "I believe this is fated to be. And although I doubt that Draco can do it, if it appears he might . . . I do not want this sin on his soul, Minerva. I would try to talk him out of it if I could."

"You wouldn't defend yourself . . ." Minerva sighed. She hadn't really expected him to say that he would curse Draco into oblivion, but he might at least do something to hold him at bay. "Apart from believing this is the best course of the few available, you seem so convinced that this is fated. Why? Is it your old debts? Surely, the defeat of Grindelwald and all you have done since has made up for any of your youthful misjudgments or errors."

"Ah, Minerva, but there have been so many since. So many errors. So many things I should have done differently, mistakes I should have avoided. They are debts to be paid, as well. You do not judge them so, but I do. And even were they not . . . dying to save others, that is never a bad way to die. The only true sacrifice I will make is leaving you, but as you have pointed out, that will happen someday, anyway. It is the fate of all men, to die."

"And if I'm not prepared to make this sacrifice, Albus? It would be my sacrifice, as well, which you seem not to realise. And Severus's. What would it do to him? He has come so far. And you, there is so much good you have left to do. We must think of another way. This cannot be what Fate has in store for us."

Albus sighed. "It is." He closed his eyes for a moment, then opened them and looked at Minerva. "You remember that I told you of a prophecy that was made before I married Dervilia? There was another prophecy, not at that time, but many years later. I never told you of it because of its nature...and because of your disinclination to believe in such things, anyway. It was shortly after the war had ended, after we defeated Grindelwald, but before the Muggle war had come to a complete close. Early April nineteen forty-five...I believe it was the same day that the photograph was taken that you keep by the bed. I was at the Ministry, just leaving it, when Cassandra Vablatsky arrived with her small entourage. She saw me and her face grew pale. She appeared about to pass out, but she did not." Albus paused.

"Yes?" Minerva urged him to finish.

"She drew me aside. She said that I was fated to die at the hand of one who loved me, and that if I did not, I would die a most terrible death, one filled with pain and agony. Escape from a death in agony lay at the end of the wand of one whom I loved." Albus let out a deep breath. "You see why I would prefer Severus to kill me than to suffer at the hands of other Death Eaters. You can imagine what they might wish to do to me if they had me in their grasp, if I were unable to defend myself. At the end of Severus's wand, I might meet a death with at least a little dignity . . . and less . . . less pain." He averted his eyes, as if ashamed.

"And I am certain that although Severus loves you," Minerva replied, "that love would be sorely tested if you were to force him to carry out the Vow."

Albus let out another sigh. "He has become more intransigent since he was struck by the *Adfectus* in September." He gave a slight, rueful grin. "I believe he discovered he loves you more than he does me, my dear."

"Don't joke, Albus! That is a terrible way to test his love for you, and a terrible thing to ask him to do in order to atone for Lily's death...kill another whom he loves," Minerva said. "Would you ask such a thing of me? I love you, I love you more than anyone." She drew her wand and looked at it then looked back at Albus. "Would you ask me to take this wand and kill you?"

"No! No, of course not! I can scarcely bear the thought that you know of the Vow and of what must happen. I could never ask such a thing of you. I would rather be tortured to death than that; you must know it."

"Then why ask it of Severus? I know you care for him. You have said that you love him. You must, or you would not believe that death at his hands is fated to be."

"For one, if he doesn't, he will die. He also has killed before. More than once. And he has done other things even more hideous than murder. You know that."

"In his old life," Minerva said. "He has repented that, truly. I think that if he had seen a way out of Voldemort's ranks earlier, he would have left sooner. It was only when he

realised what danger he had placed Lily in that he felt that Azkaban...or his likely death at the hands of his fellow Death Eaters...was a better option than continuing to do what he had already come to hate."

"He may have regretted joining him, but he did not regret it enough to do anything about it until it was too late, and much evil done and more set in motion. I do not say this as an indictment of Severus, Minerva. He would tell you the same thing. And his repentance has grown over the years. But nonetheless, he will be able to kill me, and it is at least a killing that is a mercy and not a mere murder."

Minerva hesitated. He had told her everything. She would do the same. "Severus will not be able to kill you, Albus," she said quietly.

Albus blanched, then stared at her a long moment, trying to comprehend what she had just told him. "Did you ask him not to?"

"No. Severus told me. He said that was why he was telling me everything. Because he will not kill you. He said that if you are unprepared for that, it will go very badly for everyone, just as you fear. You need to be prepared for the fact that he has no intention of fulfilling the Vow, regardless of the circumstances. He hopes that I will be able to persuade you to find another option."

Albus sat silently, looking down and swallowing. "You know the other option now, Minerva. A slow, painful death filled with agony." He nodded. "But we will find another way . . . Lupin . . . Lupin has been trying to sway werewolves to our side. He will give up. He will join Voldemort. Severus can make it easier for him . . . before we are both dead. And Lupin can report to you after I am gone. We will work something out." He nodded again. "I will . . . I will come to terms with it. I have seen and borne pain before. And it will pass. As all things do."

"Lupin? Becoming the next spy, with all that would be expected of a werewolf in Voldemort's ranks? And you, dying an anguished death at the hands of Voldemort or his Death Eaters? How is that a solution for anything? That is utter madness," Minerva cried. "You are ensuring the prophecy, creating it, Albus. If you had never heard it, you would not think this was at all a rational course of action."

Albus shook his head slowly. "It is too late to speculate about that now. But perhaps . . . perhaps I can still choose . . . choose the time and place of my death," he said thoughtfully. He looked at Minerva. "It would be better to die of the curse that eats at my hand and creeps its way through me, as dreadful as that may sound to you, than it would be for me to fall into the hands of Death Eaters. Surely you must see that. What Tom would do to me if I were helpless in his hands . . . it would make what happened to Reginald seem quick and merciful."

"There must be a third option," Minerva cried, remembering all too clearly her horror on hearing how Gertrude Gamp's first husband had died a lengthy, tortured death. "There simply must be!"

Albus laughed drily. "Unless you truly wish to kill me to spare me such a death, I see none."

Minerva began to weep again. "No, no, there is another option. We will find it. We will."

Albus shook his head. "I have tried to look at this from every angle, my dearest Minerva, ever since Severus told me of the Vow. I have no desire to die now...though death must come eventually...but I will do what I must to keep Draco from staining his soul with murder and to help Harry set his foot on the path he must take if he is to defeat Tom. It seemed that the Vow, once taken, could be used to the advantage of the Light and that my death might have some meaning, some use. And I believed that once I was dead, Hogwarts would be spared for a time. Yet now that Severus refuses to do his part . . . that makes it worse, not better, as I am sure you can see now. But if I die soon enough, if I die of this curse, we might be able to save Draco and avert the effects of the Vow altogether. If Draco's task becomes moot, and we . . . we bring him into hiding, perhaps with Narcissa, the Unbreakable Vow will be satisfied with respect to the boy's safety, and Tom's task for him will have no bearing on it, as long as you act swiftly enough upon my death that he doesn't give him another equally dreadful assignment. If we can do that, Minerva, Severus at least will live, Draco will survive unharmed, Lupin can continue as he has done, and Harry will have the time he needs to defeat Riddle. We can help to ensure the future of the wizarding world. I know that if we are willing to make this sacrifice now, Harry will be able to do what must be done to save everyone from the Darkness Riddle would bring. And I believe that you, too, will live to see that day."

Albus moved over to sit beside her on the couch. "Do not cry, my love, my dearest one," he said, his voice breaking as he put an arm around her. "This is what I wished to avoid. Better that only I suffer knowing that our time together was limited, very strictly and clearly defined, than to have you suffer knowing it, as well. My death is inevitable. It is merely a matter of how I shall die."

Minerva turned her face into Albus's shoulder and wept, clutching his robes, and he wept into her hair, and neither moved for a very long time.

Albus sat on the sofa in Minerva's sitting room, awaiting her return as she had requested. He disliked it when she left the Hogwarts grounds by herself for any reason. Leaving alone, going anywhere on her own, made Minerva vulnerable, but she had insisted that she must go to Edinburgh and that she had some other visits to make, as well, assuring him that she would be Apparating to carefully selected destinations, and, no, he could not accompany her. She had left him with strict instructions to begin taking the new potions that Severus had given her.

Albus looked at the bottles, one containing a rusty orange potion, and the other, one of claret red. He still hadn't taken a dose of either of them. He had not said he would. He could not. It would not help anything. If he allowed the curse to spread, if he ceased taking any potions at all, except those to relieve pain, he could be dead within two or three months. That should be early enough to change the requirements of Draco's task and to avert the consequences of the Unbreakable Vow.

Since their tearful conversation two days before, Albus had been doing all he could to reassure Minerva, and trying, too, to do all that she asked of him. All but take the potions. She had been adamant when she left him that morning, though. She said that if he didn't begin to take them on his own, she would enlist help and force him to. Albus couldn't imagine that, but he also couldn't imagine truly defending himself against her, so if she actually did raise her wand against him...to Stun him, or to use an *Imperio*, or whatever else she might have in mind...she wouldn't even need help from anyone else. But Minerva couldn't have been serious.

He looked at the potions again. They were not a temptation, Albus told himself. He couldn't take them. If he did . . .

The door opened and Minerva stepped into the room. Albus thought she looked better than she had since Christmas, at least. Possibly better than she had in weeks. Relaxed and rejuvenated. And it wasn't a Glamour.

"Good afternoon, Albus." She looked at the potions bottles and narrowed her eyes. "You did not take any of either potion."

"I am sorry, my dear, but you must see that this is for the best."

Minerva crossed the room and stood before him, looking down at him, her face showing her disapproval . . . and something else.

"You will be happy to know that I have come to a decision, Albus. One that will be for the best. For the best for everyone." Minerva looked at him hard, then down at his hand.

Albus's eyebrows rose. "You came to a decision?" He hadn't even been aware she had any decision to make. There was nothing for her to do. Nothing except harangue him about taking the potions until she realised that it was for the best that he didn't. He hated to deny her anything, but she would eventually come to see it was for the best. Unless she could prevail upon Severus to change his mind, Minerva could only watch him die. Watch him sicken and die. A lump rose in his throat. He had not wanted that for her. Albus cleared his throat. "What decision is that?"

"You may be Headmaster and the leader of the Order of the Phoenix, but in this, Albus, my beloved, you will do as I say. My requests of you shall become your will and your deed. And then in the end, regardless of how any other part of my plan might work out, though I have confidence in it, in the end . . ." Minerva winced slightly and took a breath. "In the end, Albus, the prophecy will be realised." She caressed his face gently, her eyes soft, and nodded. "The prophecy will be realised."

Note: For those of you who are interested in learning more of Dumbledore's back-story in "Death's Dominion" (which is not DH-compliant), or if you would like to refresh your memories, it is available in Resolving a Misunderstanding; much of it is retold in chapters 101-103, "The Tale of a Young Wizard," "The Sorrows of a Young Wizard," and "Defeating Darkness." (I don't normally recommend reading only part of a story from the middle of one, no less, and especially not a complex one like RaM but I think that someone unfamiliar with Resolving a Misunderstanding could begin reading halfway through chapter 101, then read the next two chapters, and enjoy them without having read the rest of the story.)

Chapter Twelve: Till the sun breaks down

Chapter 13 of 34

Minerva tries to set her plan in motion and must take an extreme measure when Albus, facing his fate, does not cooperate.

Note: AU. Not DH-compliant.



Chapter Twelve: *Till the sun breaks down*

Late December 1996 early January 1997

December began to draw to a close, and over the next several days, Minerva had frequent visitors. New Year's Eve day was spent sequestered away in her study with her brother and her niece. She emerged a few minutes before midnight to find Albus and wish him a happy New Year. When he kissed her, Minerva embraced him and leaned into him with a sigh.

"I love you, Albus," she whispered.

"I know, my dearest, and I love you." He kissed her hair, breathing in her scent. "When are you going to tell me what you, Murdoch, and Melina are doing?"

"When it is necessary. When you need to know." Minerva leaned back and looked up at him with a raised eyebrow. "You understand that, Albus, 'need-to-know,' don't you?"

"I do not hold your secrecy against you," Albus responded. "After the secrets I kept from you, which in hindsight was perhaps unwise, I can understand that. But . . . these potions and whatever it is you have planned, you cannot expect me to continue without consulting me when I am apparently at the centre of your plans."

"You know about that, too, Albus...someone being the centre of your plans, and that person being wholly unaware of it. Or only dimly aware. And I am only being secretive; I am telling you no lies," she said, naming what had angered and hurt her most. "You will know when it is time for you to know. I will tell you the truth. And you will do as I say." Minerva stepped back out of his embrace, looking up at him seriously. "You will, Albus Dumbledore. It may be hard on you, but I assure you that it will be harder on me...and I am not simply speaking of what I will be asking of you, but what I will be demanding of myself. At the moment, I am asking very little of you. I will ask more, but I will proceed with or without your cooperation, and then . . . and then you will have to cooperate because you will have no other choice. I would rather you choose to cooperate now and do as I ask. I don't want to force you, but I will."

Albus shook his head. "I don't know what you are thinking of forcing me to do, Minerva. If Severus will not kill me, there are only two options left. Whichever one I choose, I will need to make plans for what will happen afterward. I have cooperated with you to this point because I know that I hurt you and you were...you *are*...upset, both with me and with the circumstances. But it is futile to fight the inevitable and it will only cause more pain for us both in the end," Albus said, trying not to allow his irritation to enter his voice. "I love you, Minerva, I do. And if there were anything I could do to spare you pain, I would do it. I tried to do just that. It was, perhaps, poorly calculated, but that was my intent."

"Then you will cooperate with me," Minerva said with a nod. "Good."

Albus closed his eyes and suppressed a sigh. He opened them and looked at her. "I did not say that, Minerva, my love. I do not want our last weeks marred by such dissension, but . . ." He shook his head again. "I do not see how you can force me to cooperate, in any case. I know that you love me, and I cannot believe that you would attempt to use an *Imperio* to gain my cooperation."

"If you will not choose to cooperate, I will simply make it impossible for you to refuse," Minerva said softly. "But I hope that once you see my plan, you will choose to cooperate. It would pain me to force you. And you say that it is futile to fight the inevitable, but it is not a fight I am proposing. It is . . . it is using the inevitable to our advantage, or at least what you believe to be inevitable."

Albus raised his eyebrows. "That sounds . . . interesting. I assume it does not involve me surrendering to Tom's many tender mercies," he said, remembering what Minerva had said about the prophecy being fulfilled.

"Don't be absurd...don't even think such a thing. It makes me positively ill." Minerva grimaced. "Truth be told, it all makes me ill. But we are dealt a hand, and we will play it."

"So what is your plan, this using the inevitable to our advantage?" Albus asked, even more curious.

"You will learn of it when the details are worked out, and then you may even help, if you can enter into it with the appropriate attitude, but until that time, you won't get a word from me...and don't try working on Murdoch or Melina, either. They won't tell you. Mother is coming by tomorrow with Calum," she informed him, naming Melina's oldest son who, though a talented wizard, had chosen to follow in his Muggle father's footsteps and became a chemist for a large pharmaceutical company, rarely having any contact with the wizarding world any longer, save that with his family.

"They won't know of the entire plan, nor even of the entire problem," Minerva continued, "so I ask that you not discuss anything with them other than the weather and whether your most recent sherbet lemons have enough fizz to them." She reached out and put her hands on Albus's upper arms, smiling up at him. "Now, give me another kiss. I will be up a while longer, but I would like you to go to bed now and get your sleep. I recommend your bedroom tonight, but I hope you will join us in the morning for breakfast. Don't forget your potion!"

Minerva was determined to the point of obstinance, Albus found, as over the next few days, he attempted to get her or one of her co-conspirators to tell him what they were discussing. He had even resorted to casting an eavesdropping spell, which had set off a dreadful cacophony of screeching and wailing. Minerva had opened the door to her study, cancelled the alarm with a slash of her wand, and shaken her head in disapproval.

"I suppose I would have been disappointed if you hadn't tried it," she said. "And whatever you try, I assure you that I have layers upon layers of spells and layers of alarms on the spells. No doubt you could make your way through all of them if you were determined, but I can guarantee you that it would take you a while and I would know you are doing it. I will tell you everything in a day or two." Minerva began to return to her study, then she turned and said brightly, "Oh, and Robert is arriving this afternoon. I thought you might make him comfortable and welcome. He will be staying in the Ravenclaw guest rooms...I am sure you will be happy to show him to the rooms and make certain that he gets settled in. We will expect you both back here for tea at four."

And so it went, and when one afternoon Albus saw Alroy MacAirt, the January sun glinting off his bright golden-red hair, leaving the grounds with Gareth McGonagall, neither having stopped by to see him, he knew that the younger wizards had certainly been there at Minerva's behest. He went to Gryffindor Tower and found Minerva in her sitting room with Robert and Murdoch, parchments spread everywhere. Murdoch flicked his wand, gathering them all together and sending them flying into the study; Robert closed the door behind them with a wave of his own wand.

"I just saw Alroy and Gareth leaving the grounds," Albus said.

"Yes, they were here visiting us," Minerva said. "Alroy was . . . consulted. His participation is not yet required, but we needed to speak with him so that he could make certain preparations. And Robert and I wished to see Gareth, send a message to Gertrude with him."

"They didn't come to see me."

"They thought that best. You can't charm them into revealing anything if you don't see them. Melina will be here in a while. As long as you promise not to try Legilimency on her," Minerva said, only half-joking, "you are welcome to stay until dinner, since we are done for the time being. They will all be taking dinner here in my rooms while you and I eat with the students, few though they are. I believe they are tiring of Slughorn's story of how things were when he was a boy, and I think we should encourage other topics of conversation. I thought we could discuss wizarding careers this evening."

"May I speak with you alone a moment, Minerva?" Albus asked, ignoring her own change of topic.

"Excuse us," Minerva said with a smile. "If Melina gets here, be sure that she knows that Albus is with me."

Minerva took Albus's left hand and brought him into the bedroom and closed the door behind them.

"You told me that you would inform me of what this is all about before the students return for classes. They return Sunday evening; classes begin on Monday. Today is Friday," Albus said.

"I am aware of that," Minerva said impatiently. "You really can be irritating sometimes, Albus, much as I love you. I will tell you this now: after dinner, Melina will be giving you a thorough examination. Very thorough. I know you will not like it, but you will allow it. I will stay with you or leave the two of you alone, whichever you prefer. You may have it here in the bedroom or in my study...or up in your suite, if you prefer that. But that is the only choice you have in the matter."

"Minerva, I have never known you to be this way." Albus frowned. "I do not need to submit to an examination. Even if I didn't know the state of my own health, it is moot. I will soon cease taking the potions, and we know what will ensue from that. I have been taking the potions to please you over the holiday, and I have humoured you with this plan of yours...and I am sorry if you have dragged your family into it and had Robert come all this way for nothing, but time is flying, and I cannot continue to humour you."

Minerva's jaw was tight. "Humour me? Humour me! Your life is at stake, Albus! Your life, Severus's life, Draco's, Harry's...even the future of the wizarding world! You speak of humoured me as though I were planning a surprise party that you are pretending to know nothing about. I think I am more angry with you in this moment than I have been in our entire relationship. I told you that you would do as I asked...or as I direct, if I must do that...and you will. If you do not cooperate at this stage, then I will begin to set my plans in motion without your knowledge and tell you about them only after the point at which you can do nothing *but* cooperate. I do not wish to do that," Minerva said, trying to carefully control her displeasure with him. "You may think about it over dinner. Choose to cooperate with Melina this evening or force my hand, Albus. But in the end, whatever you do this evening, Melina will be giving you that examination before the students return. And after she gives you the examination, I will consult with her and then I will share my plan with you." Minerva stepped toward the door, then she turned back to him. "I take no pleasure in giving you this ultimatum, Albus, but I had hoped that you would trust me."

"I do," Albus said quietly, "but I am aware of the situation. I know what must happen. Anything that you and your cohorts are planning is superfluous. And if by some peculiar chance, it is not, you would have benefited from having me participate...particularly as your plans pertain to me."

"No, we would not. And *precisely* because the plans pertain to you. You have tunnel vision at the moment, Albus. I don't blame you for that. I understand it. And I know that it makes it easier for you to resign yourself to what you believe must happen, but it would only interfere with our ability to entertain ideas and work on solutions to the various problems that will arise over the next months." Minerva opened the door. "You have a couple hours to think about it. I hope you do not make this harder for me than it already is."

After dinner, Albus reluctantly entered Minerva's study with Melina. Less than ten minutes after that, the three waiting in the sitting room could hear clear sounds of dissension coming from the study. Minerva didn't even knock; she simply opened the door and walked in to find Albus backed against the edge of the desk and clutching the front of his robe to him with his one good hand.

Melina turned to her. "Min, he just will not cooperate. He let me cast a few diagnostic spells on him and his hand, but I asked him to disrobe and he refuses."

Minerva closed the door. "Albus. Get undressed, man."

"She can determine all she needs to from the spells she just cast. Or others, if she wishes. I do not need to undress," Albus insisted.

"Melina, give us a minute, please." When they were alone, Minerva said, "I know that you dislike physical examinations, but unless you want my mother to do it...which I would not prefer because it would require her to have greater knowledge and involvement than I believe to be wise...you will allow Melina to proceed."

"A Healer can perform a perfectly adequate examination without having the patient disrobe," Albus replied.

"Normally, yes. But this is not a normal situation and Melina is doing more than assessing your magical and physical health. You need to cooperate with her unless you want to strip down for my mother," Minerva said.

"You gave me a choice. I have tried to cooperate. But she can cast her diagnostics and that is that," Albus replied, just as stubborn as Minerva at that moment.

"My mother..."

"Egeria can stay at home. I know the curse that afflicts me. I know that these new potions are helping more than the old one. I can feel it. If I persisted in taking them, they would likely extend my life another decade. But I will not continue taking them. The longer that I take them, the more difficult it will be for me to stop." Albus looked at Minerva with anguish on his face. "Do you think that I enjoy the way the curse creeps its way through my body? Do you think that I relish the prospect of allowing it to invade my internal organs until they can no longer function? Or that having my magic weaken appeals to me? Within a month, I doubt I will be able to do the simplest wandless magic, and from there, it will be a rapid downhill race to see whether my magic or my body fails me first, but I know that within two months, possibly less, I won't be able to manage a simple *Accio* without feeling exhausted. And during all that time, I will have to watch you watching me die, taking my leave of you slowly. Can you imagine that I wish to do this? Do not make it harder. I will take these potions two more days for you, Minerva, and that is all. I had hoped that we could spend these days, these last days before my health begins to fail, together. That we could enjoy being together before every bit of me begins to fall apart."

"Please let Melina examine you thoroughly," Minerva said softly. "Please. Do not force me to set my plans in motion without that examination. If you cannot do this, this one very small thing, how can I know that you will listen to my plan, hear it out fairly, that you will cooperate with the first step in it? I do not wish to do anything to you against your will. There will come a time when you will stop taking these potions, that is true, but not yet. And there are certain variables that I would rather be assured of first, before I do anything. Please. I would like your cooperation. I do not want to proceed without that. I don't want to force anything on you."

"Then send Melina home. And Murdoch, as well. Robert can leave tomorrow. I will create a Portkey for him."

Minerva shook her head. "No, they are my guests, and they are staying." She sighed. "I will ask them to give us some privacy for the rest of the evening, however, as soon as I've spoken with Melina. We can try to forget our . . . our disagreement for a short time, at least, and have a quiet evening together. Stay with me tonight?"

Albus nodded. He was in no mood to try to forget their disagreement, but he was in no mood to prolong it, either. He waited in the study until Minerva came back.

"They're gone," Minerva said.

"Not to their own homes, I presume," Albus said wearily.

"They said something about hot grog with Hagrid. But they won't be back tonight. Game of chess? Or backgammon?" Minerva asked.

Albus nodded. "Whichever you prefer."

"Chess with Dad's old set, then," Minerva said.

They sat across from each other in her sitting room, moving the Muggle chessmen with flicks of their fingers. Finally, they each had only a King, a Knight, and two pawns remaining. Albus suggested a draw. Minerva shook her head. It took her a while, but she took his last remaining pawn, then manoeuvred one of her pawns all the way to his first row, making it a Queen. Albus let out a quick laugh and tipped over his King.

He smiled at her. "I still think it is a draw, but you managed that, so you deserve to win."

"I could have won," Minerva replied, putting the chessmen back in their case. "Your mind is not on the game."

"I am surprised that yours is," Albus said.

"I am remarkably concentrated these days, Albus," she said. "At the peak of my game."

"You don't want to play another?"

"No, I would prefer just to sit, have a cognac, listen to some music, and cuddle up on the sofa with you." She stood and took Albus's good hand. "How does that sound to you?" she asked softly.

"Good. Very good."

Minerva opened their Charmed musical box and set it to play a selection of Romantic pieces by Liszt, Chopin, Ravel, Debussy, and Saint-Saëns, then she poured Albus a small snifter of brandy and a larger one for herself. Albus raised an eyebrow when he saw the amount in his glass.

"What is this, loser gets less?" he asked.

"No. You really shouldn't drink anything. You have another dose of potion waiting for you. The red one this time, I believe."

"Mmm. The cognac tastes better," Albus said, but he didn't make any other comment.

Minerva sipped her cognac, then set it down on the table and rested her head against Albus. He nuzzled her hair, then sent his glass to join hers. He took her hand in his left and raised it to his lips before pulling her closer.

"I love you, you know, Minerva. I truly do. I hate arguing with you like this," he said.

They rarely argued seriously. They had disagreements, sometimes strong ones, but they were rarely at loggerheads, and it had been years, decades, in fact, since they had had any argument that put them at odds for days on end.

"I am sure you know that I don't enjoy it," Minerva replied. "But I told you before, Albus, I will have my way in this, whatever it takes. I do not impose myself and my will upon you lightly, and you must know that, too. It is not my habit to order you about or to make demands upon you."

"No, no, it is not," he said softly. "And that is one reason why I wish that I could comply with every one of them."

"In the morning, will you submit to an examination by Melina, then?"

Albus took a deep breath and let it out. "Let us leave this until the morning, Minerva."

Minerva nodded. "That is fine. I do so very much enjoy just sitting with you like this. Mmm, you feel so solid and warm."

Albus closed his eyes and rested his head against hers. He tried not to think of what the curse would do to his body, how it would invade his very bones, waste his muscles, fill his lungs with all manner of fluid, drowning him slowly, and shut down his kidneys and liver, poisoning his blood. He would not be warm and solid at the end of it all, and even his cold corpse would be a pathetic sight. And all of this with Minerva beside him to the very end. He would be grateful for her presence, but it pained him to know how she would suffer seeing him so.

"You are my beloved, my sweet one, always my sweet, sweet delight, always. I am so sorry, so very sorry for everything."

"I know, Albus," she replied softly. "I know. And we must each do what we believe best." She turned her head and looked up at him. "But in the end, my darling wizard, I will gain the upper hand and you will capitulate. I know this." She stretched to kiss him, her lips meeting his. She caressed his cheek and drew back to look into his eyes. "But tonight, tonight, make love to me, make love to me, Albus."

Later, lying in bed, drowsy and relaxed from making love, Minerva heard Albus moving about in the bathroom. He apparently had decided to take a quick shower, because

she heard the water come on, then his voice echoing against the tile walls as he sang. Tears rose in Minerva's eyes as she listened. She loved his voice, to hear him speak or to hear him sing. Tonight once again, as so often in the last months, he was singing the Agnus Dei set to Barber's Adagio. Sometimes, if the mood took him, he would cast a charm that would bring other voices to blend with his, but tonight, it was just him, just his voice, and she wept to hear it.

"Agnus Dei, qui tollis peccata mundi, miserere nobis.

"Agnus Dei, qui tollis peccata mundi, miserere nobis.

"Agnus Dei, qui tollis peccata mundi, dona nobis pacem."

Misere nobis, have mercy upon us . . . *dona nobis pacem*, grant us peace. Albus felt burdened by the weight of his errors, by his responsibilities, by his frailties, and by his inability to fix everything and save everyone despite his great power and many talents. His mistakes caused him pain, he suffered when trying to mend them, and now he anticipated much greater pain to come.

Minerva knew that Albus would do whatever he believed right in order to bring an end to Voldemort, including die a horrific, anguished death, but she knew that it was not something he found easy, despite his willingness. Who would want that pain? Who would walk easily toward it, even if they found the strength to do so? She would spare him that. She would not allow him to suffer if she could keep him from it. It might be that they were all fated to die in this fight against Voldemort...Albus, Severus, herself, perhaps even young Harry...but she was sure that even if they did have to die in order to ensure Voldemort's defeat, there were nonetheless better strategies than what Albus had settled on, and Minerva believed she had found one.

Minerva sighed, rolled over, and waited for Albus to rejoin her. In the morning, she would give him one more opportunity to cooperate with Melina's examination. If he would not, she would take the first step in her plan without the examination and without consulting with him about it. And knowing Albus as she did, she knew that he would cooperate with that step. He would feel he had no other choice. Knowing that caused her gut to clench. She was not made for deception or domination, and particularly not where it concerned Albus.

When Albus settled next to her in bed, his comforting weight behind her, Minerva moved back into his waiting embrace, his right arm coming around her, his hand coming to rest on the small pillow she held in front of her.

"Good night, Albus. I love you," she whispered.

"I love you. Sleep well. Sweet dreams." He kissed the back of her head. "Thank you."

"For . . . ?"

"For this evening. It was lovely. Lovely and normal." Or as normal as possible, he thought.

"We will have more evenings like that, I promise, my darling Albus. I promise."

The next morning, Minerva rose early, taking care not to wake Albus. She entered her study and took a large sheaf of parchments from a well-warded drawer. She sighed. She had never guarded anything against Albus before, never seriously. Only birthday gifts and such...although one time, in a fit of pique, she had set booby-traps on his sweets drawer. But that had been very different. And they had been amusing booby-traps, even Albus had agreed on that.

Minerva flipped through the first parchments, which all contained copies of Robert and Murdoch's Potions notes. She was going to leave the Potions end of things completely in their hands, only directing the two in terms of what was needed and when. She knew that they planned on returning to Murdoch's laboratory that morning to continue their practical work and experimentation. That would leave her and Melina to try to persuade Albus to cooperate.

Minerva closed her eyes for a moment, focussing her mind. She could not afford the time to worry about Albus's cooperation at that moment and she could not afford the energy to be upset with him. She redirected her attention to the parchments in front of her and began to scan the time-lines she had mapped out. There were several versions, each slightly different from the previous one. Some of them varied because she was not entirely sure of the best course of action at certain points, and so she had variations based on different choices; others varied based on alternative anticipated results. One couldn't predict with absolute accuracy precisely what would happen at any particular point, and Minerva wanted to account for the different possible outcomes. It was quite obvious once she had begun her branching time-lines why Albus hadn't simply intervened and stopped Draco early on. The consequences of that seemed among the worst of them...and not just for Severus, but for the Order and, by extension, for the wizarding world. It also was clearly unacceptable to allow Severus to die, however one approached it. Nonetheless, despite her well-ordered mind and her systematic creation of the time-lines, it was harder for her to keep track of the variables, their impacts, and the resulting options.

That was part of the message she had sent off with Gareth. She could use Gertrude's Arithmantic expertise. The older witch had done almost nothing over the last fifteen years but eat, sleep, and wander the island, but she was an extremely talented Arithmancer, and Minerva thought it would take more than fifteen years spent in emotional numbness to completely erase her talent and her many decades of experience. She had told Gareth only enough to help him to entice Gertrude to help.

Gareth himself was a talented and canny Arithmancer, but he was still quite young yet, with limited experience, and Minerva believed that if she could enlist the assistance of both mother and son, the accuracy of their calculations would benefit. If Gertrude agreed to help, she would have to visit Eilean Tèarmunn with Gareth and explain the entire situation to them both, sharing all of her notes with them. Gareth could stay on the island to do his work with Gertrude. He could even stay there if he were working on the problems alone; it would probably be wise to have him in a secure location. Minerva also thought it would be good for them both, although Gertrude would no doubt chafe at having someone else on the island with her. But if Gareth stayed in the other cottage, perhaps she would not mind as much. It would be good for her to have something productive to do, Minerva was sure of that, but she had no idea whether Gertrude would even allow Gareth to relay the full message, let alone agree to help.

There were members of the Order who were skilled with Arithmancy, but Minerva felt that for this project, the fewer who knew of it, the better, and beyond that, she preferred to keep it in the family and with people whom she trusted completely and whom she knew better than she did most members of the Order. There were ways she could use the Order later, but without them being aware of all that she had done to set things in motion, particularly her more questionable actions. Minerva thought that Nymphadora might be especially useful at a particular point. In the end, however, other than herself, Robert, Murdoch, and Melina, only the person who worked on the Arithmantic calculations would know the full extent of the plan. And even there, she hoped to be able to keep Murdoch out of the . . . out of the stickiest part of it, though he would have to know of it, of course. And Albus. He would know the entire plan. When she would tell him all of it, though, was up to him and how receptive he was. At the moment, it seemed that today, she would only be able to reveal parts of it to him.

Minerva took out a goose quill and started a new time-line, this one based on Albus's potential refusal to allow anyone to examine him that morning. She wished again that she were an Arithmancer, but even when she was younger, her skills in that had not been particularly strong, and so she could only go by her reason and her gut in creating branching lines, imagining results, successes, failures, and new choices. Minerva considered telling Albus at least a little about her plan in her attempt to persuade him to cooperate with Melina, but she was too worried that if she did tell him and he didn't agree, he would take measures against the first step in her plan, and she couldn't risk that.

An hour later, she heard Albus get up, and she folded the parchments away and was just putting them in their drawer when he appeared in the doorway.

"You are up early," he commented.

"I had work to do, and I was awake, so I decided to do it," Minerva replied, sliding the drawer shut. "Now that you're up, perhaps you could call for some breakfast for us."

Albus nodded, apparently in agreement, but he did not move from the doorway.

"Did you need something, Albus?"

"A good-morning kiss might be nice," he said with a smile.

Minerva stood as he came over to her. As he put an arm around her, his right arm, and bent to kiss her, Minerva said, "Don't even think about trying to remove anything from that drawer, Albus. I can feel you are getting ready to cast a spell, and I don't think it's just your minty-kiss charm."

Albus pulled back slightly, his eyebrows raised. "Remove something from your drawer, my dear? I would not..."

"Just kiss me, you silly wizard. You will know everything in good time...sooner, if you cooperate."

Minerva relaxed as he kissed her, the sensation of his lips on hers still bringing both emotional warmth and pleasurable physical thrills, even after so many years together. She leaned against him and rested her head on his chest, listening to his heart with her eyes closed, its familiar beat still strong and steady.

"Thank you, Albus."

She felt him shrug, then he kissed the top of her head.

"Go call for our breakfast while I finish here," she said, pulling reluctantly out of his arms.

"So that you can re-ward that drawer and then ward the door to the study," Albus said quietly.

"Yes. And I would ward them even if you knew all the contents of the drawer, and if you did know its contents, you would agree that it is wise to do so. Go get us our breakfast, Albus," she directed gently.

Albus left Minerva to ward her drawer and closed the door behind him. Minerva sighed and reset all three passwords on the drawer using words from three different languages and reflecting interests that she did not have, just in case Albus thought he might try to guess them. He could probably break the wards without the passwords if he wanted to, but Minerva didn't think he would try anything more than ordinary methods to sneak a peek at them. Still, it bothered her that she was warding the drawer against Albus as well as against any other prying eyes.

Over breakfast, they discussed mundane school matters, then Albus asked, "How is Gareth? I haven't seen him in at least a year. I didn't even know he had returned to the country."

"I had Calum send him an electric letter thing. They do that all of the time. I asked him to return," Minerva said, taking a sip of tea. "He's fine. I think he's unhappy to be back in the cold weather, but he was looking forward to seeing his mother."

"No romantic interests yet?"

"None that he mentioned. He is a bit like his father, I think. It may take him a while to settle down with one person."

"And one gender," Albus said wryly. "I think he's a confused boy."

"He's hardly a boy any longer, Albus, though he is still young," Minerva replied, spreading lemon curd on her toast. "I don't think he's confused, I think he . . . he just has eclectic taste. He has a lot of life in him."

"Hmmp. He doesn't have to go about sharing it with anyone over the age of consent, though."

"You *are* getting old, Albus. You normally have such a flexible spirit. And I really don't think it's as extreme as you paint it," Minerva said. "I hope you don't intend to lecture him about your own misspent youth again. The circumstances are entirely different, and all it does is make him less willing to talk to you about personal matters."

"No, I have no intention of bringing up the values of moderation, chastity, and constancy," he said. "And you're right. He is a good lad, and he has many admirable qualities. I just wish he were more like his father."

"I think he is a great deal like his father was at his age. You knew Malcolm only superficially when he was a younger man; by the time that you got to know him well, he was middle-aged...fifty, at least, if I remember right...and Gareth's only thirty-two," Minerva reminded him. "At least Gareth's not as adventurous as his father was. In the current climate, that would make it more difficult for him to keep his promise to his mother not to become involved with the Order or the fight against Voldemort."

"Isn't that what you're trying to get him to do, though? Become involved?" Albus asked, fishing for clues.

"I told you, I had a message for Gertrude and I wanted to see Gareth myself, anyway, as did Robert. As you say, he has been away for more than a year this time," Minerva said, not satisfying Albus's curiosity.

"Perhaps we could go see Gertrude tomorrow," Albus suggested. "We haven't been out there since August."

"And have her see your hand again? And have *usboth* lying to her about your health on this visit? I do not think that would be a very kind thing. Robert says she is doing well, and I don't want to upset her unnecessarily."

"As opposed to upsetting her necessarily?" Albus asked.

"Mmm." Minerva finished her cup of tea and ignored his comment. "I may go visit her in a few days, and I can give her your love then. You could write her a letter."

Albus nodded. "Is she doing better, then?"

"Robert says that Gluffy hasn't had to hide her wand from her in months, so I'd say that was good." Minerva sighed, frowning. "She does still say she sees it all of the time, though. At least she isn't talking anymore about trying to Apparate there. I have no confidence that she would do anything but drown herself or Splinch if she tried that."

"Is she still seeing the . . . the other things?"

Minerva shook her head. "Either she isn't or she has decided not to mention it because it upsets everyone. I am hoping that Gareth will agree to stay with her for a while. It would do her good. I thought he could stay in our cottage."

Albus nodded. "If he wishes."

"Now, back to the more pressing matters," Minerva said. "Melina will be here shortly. I need to know what to tell her."

"If you would tell me why she needs to do such an extensive examination, I might agree."

Minerva thought a moment. "She needs to do the examination in order to have more data to work with, as she puts it."

"Toward what end?"

"Once the project is underway, I will reveal all to you. After you have had the examination and I have had an opportunity to discuss the results with Melina, I will tell you much of it, but not all, not until . . . until things have progressed and you are receptive."

"Until we have passed some point that you consider the point-of-no-return, I imagine," Albus said. "I need to know your plans now, Minerva. If this involves some crackpot cure..."

"Albus, I resent your tone," Minerva said, interrupting. "Melina is one of the most highly regarded specialists in curse- and spell-damage in all of Europe. Murdoch, you have said many times yourself, is an inventive and skilled Potions master, as is Robert. Between Robert and Murdoch, the two wizards have over one hundred years combined experience."

"I am sorry, let me rephrase it. If this involves some ill-advised cure or treatment for the curse on my hand, I cannot agree to it. You know what the options are, and you told me yourself that the prophecy would be fulfilled." Albus swallowed. "Allowing the curse to run its course is the way that I would prefer the prophecy to be met, Minerva. I know you don't like it...I don't particularly like it, myself...but it is my life, and I can ensure the safety of others by choosing this course. We both know what must be done."

"I am not going to argue with you about it. You do not have sufficient information to argue with me." Minerva took in a calming breath and let it out slowly. "Now, will I be able to tell Melina that you will cooperate in this one small thing? Or, if you prefer, I will have my mother come. Melina can tell her what needs to be done and why. I know that Mother would be very willing to do it for us if you would be more comfortable with that."

"No." Albus shook his head. "I am sorry, Minerva, to disappoint you. Let us enjoy these two days before the students return and before I stop taking any potion. Let's do that and forget for a little while what lies ahead of us. We could even make it a little holiday, pop over to the island. I wouldn't have to see Gertrude. You could go see her for both of us, warn her that we're there until Sunday evening. Wouldn't that be nice?" Albus reached across the table to take her hand, but Minerva stood, pulling away from him.

"Some other time, it would be nice," Minerva said. She closed her eyes and counted to ten. When she opened them, she said, "Albus, we want to do what is best for you and for Severus, Draco, and Harry. And once more details are worked out, I will share the entire plan with you. I think you will approve of it. Until then, I know that you will simply find argument after argument against it without even completely hearing me out. I can see that clearly now. Wait here a moment, please."

Minerva left the room, and when she returned, she had an old parchment that Albus immediately recognised.

"Do you remember these words that you wrote so many years ago? I believed them, all of them. Have things changed so much over the years that they are no longer true?" Minerva handed the parchment to him.

He scanned the poem he had written for her almost forty years before. "It's still true, Minerva," he said softly. "We just have different interpretations of what they might mean in practice, given what we face now."

"And what of 'strength and will and hope,' Albus? Have I lost those so utterly that you no longer see them in me? Can you not share my hope? Can't you have faith that I am not on a fool's odyssey?"

"I don't know, Minerva," Albus said with a deep sigh, not wanting to hurt her. "This is hard enough . . . to think there might be another way . . . that is temptation only, my love. I have considered this problem from every conceivable angle for the last six months. There is no way out other than this...unless you wish to allow Draco to proceed as he is, let the Death Eaters into the school, and have me killed or captured...possibly bitten. Do you know that Tom finds it very amusing to turn his captives into werewolves and present them with the results of their attacks when they have regained their human form? And then during the remainder of the month, he has other various tortures for them. Severus has told me terrible stories of what he does to wizards and witches who have only opposed him in the most mild way. Can you imagine what he would do to me?"

Minerva tried not to imagine that, instead answering his first declaration. "You lacked my perspective, Albus. You couldn't have considered it from certain angles simply because, regardless of your genius, you were lacking that perspective. What I could offer is something that would never occur to you." Minerva bent and kissed his forehead, taking the old poem from him as she did so. "Can I tell Melina that you will cooperate, despite your discomfort with it?"

Albus shook his head. "I am going for a walk. You can tell her whatever you like, but I cannot entertain any false hopes. I have hope for you, and for Severus, for Harry, for the wizarding world, and I have faith that all will work out so that Tom will be defeated, but the best I can hope for for myself . . . is that my death is of some use and that I am able to enter it with some grace. I am sorry that we are at such an impasse, Minerva. I hope . . . I hope that you will still . . ." Tears welled in his eyes. "Will you still be with me? Stay by my side through it?"

"Albus, I will never leave your side or abandon you. Never. I will do what I must when I must, but I will stay with you." She kissed his cheek. She smiled at him. "You really are still a silly wizard, my darling Albus, if you would think that I would not stay by your side." She stepped back away from him. "You go on your walk, then, Albus. I will be here when you return, I promise, and when you return, I will send Melina away."

Albus smiled and seemed to breathe a sigh of relief. Twenty minutes later, he had donned his favourite burgundy and gold winter robes with their matching cloak and hat, and was leaving for his stroll about the grounds, blowing Minerva a warm and gentle kiss as he stepped through the door.

"I love you, Albus. Enjoy your walk," Minerva called after him with a smile. "And try not to get into any snowball fights!"

Albus chuckled and closed the door behind him. He didn't encounter anyone on his way down to the great front doors, which he opened with a flick of his wand. The air was crisp and cold, the sky, a most perfect blue, and there was a slight breeze ruffling the winter-grey surface of the lake. It would have been good to have had Minerva come with him, but she had to wait for Melina, and he was just as happy to wander about on his own, greeting some of the few students who had remained behind for the holiday and who were also out on that beautiful morning. He found Hagrid, who encouraged him to come in for a hot cuppa, fortunately with nothing more exotic than cinnamon added to it, and when he made his way back up to the castle two hours after having left for his walk, Albus was feeling more at ease than he had since leaving Aberforth on Boxing Day.

A small voice in the back of his head reminded Albus that Minerva was a determined witch, and that she had said something about forcing him, about him being left with no choice but to cooperate, but he ignored it. Minerva loved him. He could not see her using force on him, and certainly not the Unforgivable *Imperio*, which she could probably cast if she were motivated, but which he could also easily shrug off. No, she had said that when he returned, she would send Melina away. She must have seen that further argument would only sour what little time they had left with him still in good health. She was a reasonable witch, after all, quite sensible. Always had been the sensible one, even as a girl, he thought as he climbed the stairs to rejoin her in Gryffindor Tower.

He stepped into Minerva's sitting room and smiled at the two witches. Melina had on her cloak and seemed ready to leave.

"Good morning, Melina, my dear! On your way out?" Albus asked as though it were a mere social pleasantry.

"Yes, we saw you walking back from Hagrid's," Melina said, then added with a laugh, "We were beginning to wonder if you'd become lost in a snow drift!"

"No, no, just some hot tea and friendly conversation with Rubeus," Albus said, taking off his cloak.

Melina crossed the room, stopping on the way to give Albus a kiss on his cold, pink cheek. She looked up at him with her soft dark brown eyes and said gently, "We all love you, you know, Albus."

"And I love you," he replied with a warm smile.

Melina reached the door and looked back at Minerva. Minerva nodded and said, "Thank you, Melina."

Melina turned, then drew and raised her wand. Albus stepped back, slowly reaching for his own wand, unsure what she was doing. But Melina was not aiming at him, instead slashing her wand toward her aunt, as in a firm, strong voice, she incanted, "*Celebrare Adfectus Amor Ultimus!*"

She barely blinked at the arc of colour that surrounded Minerva and was now reaching out toward Albus, but quickly opened the door and left, closing it firmly behind her.

Note: If you would care to read the poem that Minerva shows Albus in this chapter, it has been posted on *The Petulant Poetess* under the title ["Beyond death's frail caul."](#)

Chapter Thirteen: And the west moon

Chapter 14 of 34

Severus has an unpleasant encounter in the Headmistress's Office. Hermione learns something about Severus that she hadn't known, and Severus is surprised by her reaction to it.

Note: AU. Not DH-compliant.



Chapter Thirteen: *And the west moon*

4 April 1998

Severus approached the gargoyle. He had a meeting with Hermione followed by one with the Headmistress and other Heads of House to discuss the next Hogsmeade weekend and whether the precautions they were taking were sufficient. Severus did not believe that any precautions were sufficient and believed that all future Hogsmeade weekends should be cancelled. Minerva, however, was convinced that with sufficient precautions, the weekends could proceed as they had for the previous five months. Since the anniversary of the Headmaster's death two weeks before, however, he had become convinced that Voldemort was moving more of his followers into Hogsmeade. Whenever he had gone into the village recently, he had seen more people whom he recognised as Death Eaters. Of course, even though it was an open secret among the staff that he was a Death Eater and likely a spy for the Order, he could not mention that observation, nor most of his other concerns, but Minerva knew them well. She believed that as long as Voldemort believed that Severus was making progress on weakening the wards without her awareness of it, he would not overplay his hand and make any attacks in Hogsmeade. In principle, Severus agreed with her, but he still hoped that she had reconsidered since they had last spoken.

He entered the Headmistress's Office to find that there was another wizard there, one dressed in a long brown and green cloak and what appeared to be Graphornhide boots. The wizard turned from his contemplation of the view out the window, and Severus saw a broad-shouldered young man with curly chestnut hair, a short beard, and hazel eyes, wearing an embossed tunic that matched his boots and, peculiarly, a tartan kilt rather than robes. The wizard's lip curled in distaste as soon as he saw Snape.

"May I help you?" Severus asked coolly.

The wizard snorted and turned back to his contemplation of the view.

"Excuse me..."

"Never."

"Pardon?" Severus said, taken aback.

The wizard turned. "You don't recognise me, do you?"

Severus looked at him and shook his head, shrugging one shoulder. "Should I?"

"Yes, you should. You did what you could to ruin my life, so you should know me. But since the last time you saw me, I was only a second-year, I don't suppose you would. You probably didn't even give a thought to me."

"I..." The pin at the other wizard's throat caught Severus's eye, and he blinked. He remembered a witch who had worn that pin, a brooch depicting a raven and a snake. He swallowed and retained his composure. "You are Minerva's nephew."

"Not bad for a Slytherin. I find most of them not very bright. Devote too much of their brain to scheming and nastiness. I used to think differently about them, but I have since decided that my mother was what they call the proof of the rule, being an exceptional witch in every way."

"You are waiting for your aunt?" Severus said, trying to avoid confrontation and redirect the conversation away from uncomfortable topics.

"No. My brother. More like a father, in some ways. Because, as you know, my father was killed by Death Eaters. And then my mother was taken from me. And then, as if that weren't already bad enough, I lost all of my friends and everything that meant home."

"What? I thought . . . Crouch said your mother lived."

"You didn't even know until he told you?" Anger was evident in his voice. "You never asked, never were curious? I know you couldn't have *heard*, but that you weren't even *curious*!" The young wizard took a step toward Snape. "They say you've changed, but how could such a . . . *athing* as you *ever* change?"

Severus took a step back, hitting the wall behind him. This wizard was clearly not like his quiet brother at all. He now vaguely remembered a young, long-haired McGonagall wizard, some relative of his Transfiguration teacher, but he had never paid much attention to him, and he hadn't noticed that when he began teaching, there

were no McGonagall students at the school. There had been a few other McGonagalls at Hogwarts when he was a student, including a witch in his own House, but they had been older than he, and he had had nothing to do with any of them. He hadn't had much to do with anyone, really. Perhaps this McGonagall was right. He hadn't changed.

"And you are still here. After *he* disappeared, I thought that I could return to Hogwarts. Surely Uncle Albus wouldn't keep you here where you weren't needed or wanted. You didn't care about Hogwarts. I did. I loved it. I even dreamed that since I'd only been away for a matter of months, I could return to playing Quidditch. I had been the Beater on my team for less than a year when I had to leave to live with Robert. But Uncle Albus kept you on and Mum wouldn't let me return to a school that had hired a Death Eater. As surely as she was in exile, so was I. And I still am, I suppose, always. Because of you." As McGonagall spoke, he stepped closer to Snape, disgust written in his features. "I know," the wizard said softly but harshly, "I know what you did, and I do not forgive easily. I will never excuse you, Snape. Never. If it were up to me, I would kill you where you stand, put you out of your miserable existence."

Snape's wand had barely entered his hand when it was torn from him with a nonverbal *Expelliarmus*, flying across the room and clattering to the floor. McGonagall had a wand in his right hand, something else in his left, and now he was on him, one booted foot crushing Snape's left one, his breath hot in his face.

"I thought you were the big, bad Slytherin, the Death Eater a devil would love," McGonagall said in a low voice. "You were the feckin' Defence instructor last year, for Merlin's sake! You . . . are . . . pathetic, Snape!"

He stepped down harder on Snape's arch, causing Severus to grimace. "Could it be that you *have* changed? Developed a conscience, have we? That slow you down?" He thrust his wand into a loop at the side of his sporran, at the same time bringing his left hand up to Snape's throat. Severus heard a snick. He recognised the sound and swallowed.

"You really don't want..." Severus began.

"Don't you tell me what I want," McGonagall growled. "You couldn't *imagine* what I want."

Snape felt cold metal against his cheek. He kept himself from flinching or closing his eyes. "I don't want..."

"And I don't bloody care what *you* want!" McGonagall's hard hazel eyes drilled into his. "Feel bad now? Developed a conscience somewhere? Aren't going to defend yourself?"

"We are in the Headmistress's Office," Severus said smoothly, as if that explained all.

"Sacrosanct to you, is it? Not to me, Snape, not to me."

"Gareth." Robert's voice came from the stairs at the back of the office. "Gareth, step back, put that away."

"Why? Afraid I might maim your pet Death Eater? Perhaps slice off his wand arm?"

Severus felt the blade move lower and there was a slight whisper as the razor-sharp knife cut through the right arm of his teaching robe.

"This has tasted blood before, Snape. It might like yours." But Gareth stepped back, pressed a hidden button on the handle of the flick knife and then retracted the blade. "But I'm a Ravenclaw, not a headstrong Gryffindor. I won't injure the Order's pet Death Eater. I'm not that much of a fool," Gareth said, staring at Robert, who had come down into the office and now stood beside the other two wizards.

"I am sorry, Gareth," Robert said quietly. "I should have come down sooner."

Gareth shrugged and walked over to one of the armchairs and settled into it, his legs stretched out before him and crossed casually at the ankle.

"Oh, where *are* my manners?" Gareth pulled out his wand, swished it quickly, and Snape's wand flew across the room, Severus catching it neatly.

"Professor Snape, I must apologise. I did not know you would be here this early," Robert said regretfully. "Had I been aware . . . I would have been here to greet you."

"I have another meeting, Professor," Severus replied.

"Ah. I see." Robert hesitated. "I believe she may already have arrived, unless someone was leaving when one of you came through the gargoyles."

Severus shook his head. Robert glanced over at Gareth, who was now looking as relaxed as if he were on holiday.

"Other than Flitwick, whom I met on my way into the castle, this one is the only person I've seen since I got here," the younger wizard said, gesturing toward Snape.

Severus seemed to wince and he looked toward the library door. It was ajar. His brain seemed to buzz. She must have heard everything. Gods . . .

"Would you like me to speak with her, Severus?" Crouch asked gently. "I could explain..."

"No. There is no need." Severus looked over at Gareth, who was twirling his closed flick blade in one hand.

Gareth looked up. "Don't worry, Snape. I won't stab you in the back." He smirked.

Snape nodded slightly. "Professor Crouch, Mr McGonagall." With as much dignity and flair as he could muster, Severus turned and strode toward the library, ignoring the ache in his left foot.

When he entered the library, Hermione was sitting at the far end of the table, apparently engrossed in a book. Severus closed the door behind him and Hermione looked up. She smiled brightly at him.

"You needn't pretend you didn't hear all that, Hermione," Severus said quietly. "You may be a better actress than most Gryffindors, but I know you must have heard."

Hermione flushed and looked down at her book. "I'm sorry, Professor."

Severus came over and pulled out the chair opposite her.

After an awkward silence, Hermione asked, "What did he mean, about his mother and being in exile, the both of them?"

"You know that I joined the Dark Lord when I was very young," Severus said. "It is no excuse, but my reasons . . . were not the usual ones for a Death Eater, if there is such a thing. Nonetheless, I was a Death Eater. I had a great deal of anger in me, and other emotions that I did not understand and did not want. Being a Death Eater allowed me an outlet for that anger. I soon learned that it didn't decrease my anger at all, it only increased my disgust with myself. You know what happened to Potter's parents and to Longbottom's, and you know of many other atrocities committed by Death Eaters then and now." Severus swallowed. "I was a Death Eater, Hermione, with all that it meant." He shook his head slightly, then said, "You must see that you have developed, or believe you have developed, an attachment to someone with a very unsavoury past, to put it mildly."

"I know that, but what did he mean?" Hermione replied, persistent in her course.

"I was involved in an attack on his mother," he said, admitting it aloud for the first time since confessing all to Dumbledore more than fifteen years before. "She . . . she was not a young witch at the time. She must have had her son when she was quite old indeed. That is why I didn't immediately realise who this wizard was." Severus took a breath. "The other three Death Eaters were down. She fought like a demon, but there were Anti-Disapparition wards, and she couldn't escape unless she could flee on foot. I chased her. I caught her. I thought I'd have a bit of . . . a bit of fun with her before I killed her. Hermione, I cut off her wand arm. She was my teacher here at Hogwarts, a fellow Slytherin, and a thoroughly decent witch who had never done me any harm, and I thought it would be funny to cut off her wand arm, so I did."

Hermione blanched and stared at him, trying to comprehend what he had just said. "But she's alive," she whispered finally.

"Yes. She is alive. I was too much a coward to kill her. She picked up her wand, taking it from her own dead right hand, ready to continue, not giving up, and I just . . . I felt sick. I dropped the wards and she Disapparated. As far as I knew until recently, she might have died of her wound. It was at least as likely that she had died, or perhaps more so."

"You weren't a coward!" Hermione exclaimed. "You had regret and you let her go because you knew it was wrong to kill her."

Severus shook his head. "I was disgusted with myself, sickened, but it was no virtue to have let her go."

Hermione was quiet for a moment, then she asked, "She was your teacher?"

"Yes, she was. She was the Arithmancy instructor until she retired and Vector was hired," Severus replied. "All of us were her students. And she never did anyone any harm. She was a friend of Dumbledore and supposedly a Muggle-lover. Those were her crimes. After she was . . . After I maimed her, she apparently went into exile, then she removed her son from Hogwarts when she learned that I would be teaching here." Severus let out a long breath. "I saw a pin that McGonagall was wearing. I'd only seen it once before, on her, that night."

"What was her name?" Hermione asked softly.

"Professor Gertrude Gamp."

"But the Gamps are purebloods, I thought. One of Sirius's relatives was a Gamp, and her name wasn't blasted off the family tree."

Severus shrugged. "I don't think the Dark Lord really cares about blood. That's the nasty little secret. He will kill anyone he doesn't like and mark anyone whom he can use. No Death Eater ever advertises that they are half-blood, of course...nor especially if they are Muggle-born, though there are only a very few of them. Once someone has taken the Mark, it's considered bad form to say anything about their ancestry, so there are a lot of people who believe the pureblood myth. That Professor Gamp was a pureblood meant nothing; that she was a friend of Dumbledore outweighed anything else. Look at how the Weasleys are viewed. Blood-traitors, they call them, and Muggle-lovers."

"I see," Hermione said.

Severus said nothing. Hermione ran her finger over the spine of the book.

"I learned more about Horcruxes and about brother wands. I have a theory about Harry, but I think we should discuss it another day. Tomorrow, perhaps."

Severus nodded. "There will be a meeting in the Headmistress's Office in fifteen minutes. We haven't time now. Tomorrow after dinner."

Hermione stood and picked up her book bag, leaving the other book on the table. "I will see you tomorrow evening, then." She came around the end of the table. She stopped and impulsively reached out and squeezed his arm. "You are very brave, Professor Snape. It must have been terribly hard to have done those things and then to leave, knowing what he would do to you if he found out and knowing what everyone in the Order would think of you. What you did was horrific, but you left. You did change. He couldn't know it, but you have changed. No one will ever know how hard that was for you, and it gives me hope."

An hour and a half later, Severus stood to leave with the other Heads of House, the meeting having gone well, from his perspective, but Minerva said, "Professor Snape, stay a moment, please."

He sat again. When the others had left, Minerva came around the desk and took the chair beside him.

"Robbie told me what happened, and I spoke with Gareth as well. I am very sorry, Severus," she said. "I would like to thank you for your restraint. I understand that Gareth was deliberately provocative."

Severus shrugged slightly. "He is your nephew, your brother's son, and he has good reason for his anger." He paused then looked Minerva in the eye. "I have been thinking about what happened, about what I did to her. I don't know whether it was the worst thing I did then, other than betray Lily, but it was certainly one of the worst things. I drove it out of my mind for years, never even acknowledging it. After meeting Crouch . . . he has been a daily reminder. He has his mother's eyes. And I was constantly forced to remember that, remember what I did. I can honestly say that I don't really understand why I did what I did. The reasons I gave myself at the time were disingenuous, to say the least. And it isn't as simple as saying that I am a nasty bastard. Or that I was an even nastier bastard then. All I do know, what I am certain of, is that I could not do that now, certainly not as I did then. But that doesn't change the fact that I did what I did. I did that and other things that would disgust and horrify any decent human being." He closed his eyes and sighed.

Minerva reached out and placed a gentle hand on his arm. "You did. And they were horrific. When Gertrude told me that it had been you, it made me even more sick, sad, and angry than I had been when I first heard about the attack. I had never believed that you could be capable of such utter, wanton, sadistic evil. It was one of the hardest things to forgive you for. Even more difficult than to forgive your betrayal of the Potters, since that had been unintentional on your part, the end result, anyway."

"I did other things, too, things that were dreadful. Things that were evil," Severus said in a low voice. "I cannot even tell you of them."

Minerva sighed, then she said, "You are the sum of all you have done, Severus. You still can do more good. You have done a lot of good already, and you have suffered in order to do it. It has not been easy for you. And when this is all over, you will need to learn to live with it all, the bad and the good."

Severus snorted. "You persist in believing I will survive."

"I hope you will. We will do all we can to avoid your death. It may not be sufficient, and it would be foolish to be unprepared for that, but I still hope you will live." Minerva smiled slightly. "You may live and I might not. We do not know. We cannot control everything. We can only do our best."

Severus just shook his head.

"Now, take off your left boot. I want to see your foot." When Severus glared at her, Minerva drew her wand. "I could do it for you. Or I could call Poppy."

Severus glared some more, but he crossed his left ankle over his knee and grimaced as he tugged on the boot.

"It's swollen," Minerva said. "Let me charm it off."

Severus put his hands on the arms of the chair and nodded. Minerva waved her wand and Severus's short black boot disappeared from his foot and settled neatly beside his chair, then she did the same with his sock. Minerva pulled a tin of salve from the pocket of her robe.

Leaning forward to look at his bruised foot, she said, "I don't think anything is broken. I think *Detumescens*, a *Solatus*, and some of this salve should fix you up." Minerva

cast the spells to reduce the swelling and soothe the discomfort, then she handed the potion tin to Severus. "I think you should apply this before putting your sock and boot back on."

As Snape returned to the dungeons, he cleared his mind. He could not afford to think about McGonagall, but it seemed he could not stop himself. At least he might be able to create some distance between his thoughts and his feelings about it all. It had been difficult to keep himself from lashing out at the younger wizard, but between his surprise at the man's existence and his awareness that he was McGonagall's nephew, Severus had managed. It also seemed to him that he had already caused the other wizard sufficient pain.

He could never completely repay all he had done. The pardon that Albus had won for him had exonerated him for all of his crimes based upon his service to the Order, but Severus was very well aware that Albus had not completely revealed the extent of those crimes. At the time, he had not wanted to admit to them all, though Albus had forced him to tell him everything before he would hire him to teach. Now, Severus felt that even though he probably would not have been pardoned had the Wizengamot and the Ministry known the grisly details of his misdeeds, it might have been better if he had made a public admission. He did not think that it would have helped him at the time, but perhaps if he had done that, by now he would have learned to live with it better. Or he'd be mad from having been imprisoned on Azkaban for years.

Severus entered his quarters and lowered himself into his favourite wingback chair, the cushions worn to cradle him perfectly. He Summoned an ottoman and put his feet up, then he closed his eyes. The worst part of the entire confrontation was the fact that Hermione had overheard it all. Gareth McGonagall's anger and his taunts were nothing compared with the expression on Hermione's face when he confessed to her that he had thought it would be amusing to cut off Gamp's arm, and so he did. Hermione had a ruthless streak of her own, but she would never do anything cruel merely for the sake of cruelty or amusement, and she certainly wouldn't do anything of that sort to someone who had not brought it upon themselves. Hermione probably wouldn't do something like that...cut off someone's wand arm...even if provoked unless she had no other option. There was a level of cruelty in that which went beyond self-defence. And it hadn't been self-defence in his case; the witch had been defending herself against him.

Severus didn't know what was wrong with Hermione. She seemed willfully blind to his nature. She claimed to know that he was a nasty bastard, yet even now that she knew what he was capable of, or what he had been capable of at one time, she persisted in believing in him, caring about him. She had clearly been appalled by his confession, but she seemed to have forgiven him almost immediately. Severus simply didn't comprehend how she could do that. He disgusted himself.

Gareth McGonagall's reaction was far easier for him to understand. Anger, disgust, hatred . . . he had deserved every word of censure that had crossed the younger wizard's lips, save, perhaps, for his criticism of his defensive abilities. He had not wanted a violent confrontation with McGonagall, and he had had the sense that the younger wizard, despite his words and actions, was looking for a reaction from him and had never intended to do him any physical harm. Still, he was not unhappy that Crouch had entered when he had, though he wished that it had been Minerva. He did not like being grateful to the shadow.

Severus sneered at himself. Grateful to a wizard whose very presence he resented. His life was filled with ironies. Crouch had sounded more than politely apologetic; he seemed genuinely sorry that he had not been there earlier to diffuse the situation before it escalated as it had. He had even expressed concern for Severus and had offered to speak with Hermione for him. The apothecary was an even greater enigma than he had been when he first met him over a year before.

Whereas Crouch was an irritating enigma, Hermione merely puzzled him. She was not stupid or lacking imagination. She must be able to comprehend what he had done. What Severus could not understand was why she continued to have any respect for him, and even affection, and he certainly could not understand how she could find any cause for hope in anything he had done.

There was someone at his door. Severus grimaced and stood. He had always declined to have a portrait at his door, preferring to rely upon his own wards and not wanting any connection at all to the castle's portrait network. He could ignore his caller, but if there was trouble in Slytherin, he needed to know, and if it was a member of staff, they would persist.

He stood back from the door and flicked his wand. When he saw who was outside his door, Severus raised an eyebrow.

"Come to accost me in my own rooms?" he asked. "I may not exercise as much patience."

"I am on my way out."

"The great doors are two levels above this one," Severus said.

"May I enter?"

Severus nodded, but he left the door open behind the wizard.

Gareth wandered about the room. "Ugly little room. Not at all like when Slughorn was Head of House. He used to have these . . . *soirees*. Overstuffed popinjay."

"You don't mince words, do you?"

"Never, Snape." Gareth had managed to position himself in the dead centre of the room, seeming to dominate the space, but Severus didn't allow that to disturb him.

Severus shut the door, then he stood and waited, not inviting the other wizard to tell him the purpose of his visit, but waiting until the silence between them grew and compelled his unwelcome visitor to speak.

Gareth seemed amused. He sauntered over to Severus's favourite chair. He looked at it and the ottoman as though they were the most interesting things he had ever laid eyes upon, then he turned and scanned the titles of the books that Severus kept on the shelves in his sitting room. Their innocuous contents caused the young wizard to smirk. He stepped back into the centre of the room, unbuckled his sporran, and pulled out a short, dark pipe and a small bag of tobacco. Severus twitched. Gareth grinned. He filled the bowl, tamped the tobacco down lightly, then flicked a finger and lit it. As the younger wizard puffed at the pipe, the scent of a rich tobacco filled the room. Severus clenched his jaw. As Gareth smoked, he stood there looking as relaxed as if he were lounging in his own bed.

Finally, Severus said, "You didn't come here to smoke your pipe."

"I didn't? News to me, especially as that is what I am doing." Gareth walked over to the fireplace and knocked out the tobacco then cast a few charms on the pipe before returning it to his sporran. He turned and faced Severus. "I ought not have spoken to you the way I did in Aunt Minerva's office. You were her guest and her Deputy. You should be able to enter her office without being accosted." His cheek twitched. "I ought to have waited."

Severus nodded, acknowledging the statement.

"Nonetheless, what I said was true, but I will not repeat it, especially not here in your own rooms." The young wizard suddenly seemed much older as he drew in a deep breath and let it out. "And I want to let you know . . . I will not forgive you, I simply cannot, but as a member of the Order, you do have my promise of assistance if ever you need it. And not only will I never stab you in the back, but I will stop anyone whom I see trying to." Gareth swallowed. "I can't do any better than that. I am not the man my aunt and my mother wish me to be, but I can still do the best I am capable of, and that much I can manage."

Severus looked away from McGonagall for the first time since the younger man had entered his sitting room. "You have good reason for your feelings and I would not dissuade you from them. You have shamed me twice in one day, and I do not blame you for that, either." He turned his head and his eyes met Gareth's. "If doing so would make your mother whole, I would give up both my arms."

"Yes, well, it wouldn't, so it's an easy enough thing to say," Gareth said softly.

"Your brother once wondered whether it was cruelty or kindness that caused . . . that caused me to drop the wards. It was neither. It was sheer disgust at myself and what I had done. That disgust has only grown with the years. Disgust, regret, shame, guilt . . . I do not forgive myself, so I do not see why you should even think to forgive me."

"Do you care? Do you care whether I forgive you?"

Severus shrugged one shoulder. "Until today, I did not know who you are. I . . . I do not expect or deserve your forgiveness, and the forgiveness of any others always amazes me. I do not understand it."

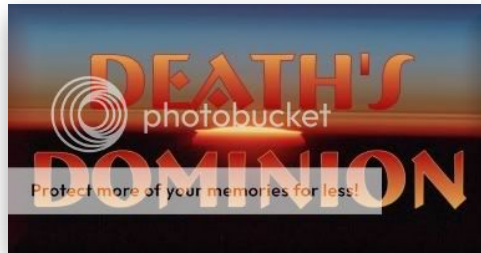
Gareth nodded. "Because you do not forgive. I have learned that much myself. It is hard to understand forgiveness when you can't forgive. I have forgiven much, but there are some things . . . some things that I simply cannot. I hated Uncle Albus for years. When he kept you here at Hogwarts, it was easy to hate him. I knew him, I had loved and trusted him, and it seemed that he had betrayed both my mother and me. My mother didn't feel that way, but I couldn't help myself, particularly once I verified what no one had told me but which I had come to suspect: that you were not just any Death Eater, you were the Death Eater who had done that to her. Eventually, I understood what Uncle Albus did and why, and then later, I forgave him. I loved him, you see. Even when I was burning with rage and hatred, I loved him, and that is why it hurt so much. Yet that is also how I forgave him." Gareth looked closely at Severus. "You have never forgiven a single hurt in your life, I imagine. Every little offense eats at you until it's replaced by another offense. I don't know the cure for you, and personally, if you go through the rest of your life feeling utterly miserable, I won't shed a tear for you. Perhaps if you found someone who would shed that tear for you and your misery, you might be able to claw your way out, maybe even forgive yourself. I doubt it, though. You will probably die with that misery in your heart."

With not another word, not even a good-bye, McGonagall crossed the room, exited the suite, and closed the door quietly. The scent of his tobacco lingered behind.

Chapter Fourteen: May a flower no more

Chapter 15 of 34

Severus brings Minerva news. Uncomfortable thoughts and memories roil within him.



Chapter Fourteen: *May a flower no more*

9 April 1998

Severus hurried up the drive, glancing toward the Headmistress's Tower and pleased to see that there were still lights in its windows. He had been speaking casually with a few of the older Death Eaters, talking with them about their early days with the Dark Lord, feigning admiration and appreciation for their stories, and he had obtained useful information from them. He would write it all down for Minerva later, but he wanted to tell her immediately. He hoped that Crouch wasn't with her. As much as he had grudgingly come to accept the wizard's presence in the castle and by Minerva's side, he still wanted to share this with her alone.

He was glad to have learned what he had just for its own sake and what it might accomplish, but Severus also hoped that it would win him more of Minerva's approval. She seemed to have eased in her attitude toward him, beginning...peculiarly enough...after that night when he had seen her with Crouch in the library, but he wanted to do what he could for her and continue to earn her forgiveness. For all those years, she had known what he had done to one of her friends, her own brother's wife, and yet she had taught beside him, forgiven him, befriended him . . . the more he contemplated it, the more Severus stood in awe of Minerva. He knew that she was no soft, weak, naive woman, and she most surely had a temper, but she had somehow given him a chance to become someone other than the Death Eater he had been. He had never completely shed that identity in his own mind, though he had certainly disavowed the Dark Lord and all his aims, but he had never been able to see himself as an entity apart from his evil deeds as a Death Eater. Minerva did.

He might not have much longer on this earth, but in what time he had, Severus decided, he was going to finally take the opportunity to be something more than a Death Eater or reformed Death Eater. He would try. And not only for Minerva, but for Hermione, as well, whose acceptance of him and of his despicable actions still baffled Severus. He didn't want Gareth McGonagall's words to be true; perhaps he deserved misery, but perhaps he could earn something more. He might be able to earn some small measure of redemption.

He rode the stairs up to the Headmistress's Office. The door did not open to him, so he knocked. When there was no response, he opened the door and entered. There was only one lamp lit in the office, but he had seen that there were lights on in her suite. She would know he was there waiting...and if he waited too long, he would ask Phineas Nigellus to announce him. He had barely entered the office, though, when Crouch appeared on the stairs down from the Headmistress's suite.

"Ah, Professor Snape! You are here to see Minerva, I imagine. She is preparing for bed, but I will send her down to you," Crouch said.

Severus simply nodded and stood, waiting.

"Have a good night, Professor," Crouch said with a nod before heading back up the stairs.

Less than five minutes later, Minerva, wrapped in her cosy tartan dressing gown, was sitting with him, a pot of peppermint tea on the coffee table between them.

"Are you sure you wouldn't like any, Severus?"

"No, thank you." He swallowed. He had been so excited about his news, but now that he came to give it, he realised how very paltry it might seem. Still, he would tell her and let her be the judge of the information's value.

"Well, I will pour you a cup anyway. You needn't drink it if you don't want it," Minerva said. "Did you have a meeting with the toe-rag tonight?"

"No, no, but I have been spending time with some of the older Death Eaters, ones who joined him early. I have pretended over the last several days to be fascinated by their stories and to admire them. I have found out some information that might be useful." Severus reached for his cup for something to do with his hands. "A few weeks

ago, Poppy told me about a friend of yours, Alroy MacAirt's father."

Minerva nodded and set down her own teacup. "Yes, Quin. He was a fine, fine man. He still is."

"I thought . . . there is so much that I can do nothing about, but this . . . it may not be useful, you understand, Minerva, and I do not want you to become overly optimistic, but it is possible that he could be cured."

Minerva sat up straighter. "What? Cured? How?"

"There was a curse that the Dark Lord himself created. He thought it was quite amusing. It was only used a few times, though, as almost no one but he could ever master the spell. Something about forming the intent was difficult for most of the Death Eaters. I have a theory about why that was, but I'll write it all down for you."

"What curse?" Minerva asked impatiently.

"It was to create an extreme phobia of all things magic. He named the curse *Timor magicus* and the incantation was *Timere magia*, and I know for a fact that it was cast on your friend Quin. They were quite . . . descriptive in their retelling of the attack on him. He was very brave, Minerva. That much was clear to me despite the way they boasted. The Dark Lord came himself and cast that final curse."

All the colour drained from Minerva's face and Severus thought she was on the verge of tears.

"I am sorry to bring these painful memories back to you, Minerva. I am probably not telling you this the way that I should, but . . . I haven't much practice at it."

"It was a curse . . . we thought it might be, but he . . . how can we even discover a countercurse if he has such a fear of magic that we can't use any in his presence?" Minerva asked.

"I don't know . . . perhaps I shouldn't have said anything. But I thought . . . I thought there was a chance that if you knew that it most definitely was a curse and not the result of psychological trauma, although after all this time . . ." Severus trailed off uncertainly.

"No, no, it is very good you did." Minerva blinked and gathered herself together. "What else did you learn about it? You said it was difficult to cast."

"Yes. The wizards I spoke to didn't realise the commonality among those few who did master it, but I did: none were purebloods and all of them had had extensive contact with Muggles as they were growing up. If it had been a curse that the Dark Lord was still interested in at the time I was branded, I probably could have learned it. By then, however, he was interested in more obviously destructive curses. In those earlier years, though, he found it quite amusing to use the curse on those whom he considered Muggle-lovers. Let them live like Muggles and have an aversion to all things wizarding if they were such Muggle-lovers and blood-traitors, he thought." Severus took a sip of his aromatic tea. "Your friend is actually quite lucky. Two of the victims of the curse are long-term residents in the Janus Thickey ward and are in a permanent state of catatonia after being forced to live in the hospital constantly surrounded by magic. It is unlikely that at this point, either of them could be cured. Two others whom I learned of killed themselves within days of being released from the hospital. As far as I could determine, MacAirt is the only one still alive, although the wizards I spoke with actually guessed that he must have died, too, since they hadn't heard anything of him."

"There is hope, then," Minerva said softly. "Do you know that Quin can barely even speak of his late wife, whom he adored, because memories of her are so entangled with memories of magic? Only a few wizarding friends are able to visit him. For years, my visits had to be very brief because he always had thought of me as . . ." Minerva swallowed her tears as she remembered a smiling, lively Quin calling her *ma grande dame de la Metamorphosis*. "He always thought of me as a Transfiguration mistress and an Animagus. It took a long time for him to be able to sit with me comfortably. Gertrude used to visit him frequently before she was injured, even after Malcolm was killed. It was a comfort to them both, even though they could not speak of how Malcolm was murdered. Gertrude always just had to tell him that he was killed during a street mugging. I think Quin knows better, but he has to avoid thinking about such things."

"What was he told about Professor Gamp?" Severus asked.

"That she had had a terrible accident and that she had to go away for a while. He eventually stopped asking about her. She still writes him letters. She can't use magic to write them, because he can detect that; it took her a while to learn how to write with her left hand, so for a long time, she would have to dictate them to one of us. Gareth or Robert or I post them at a Muggle post office so that they arrive in the Muggle post for him. Alroy or Aine, his sister, pretend to post Gertrude's letters, but they actually deliver them to one of us, and we give them to her when someone goes for a visit. I don't see her as often as I used to, of course. It is hard enough for me to even leave the Hogwarts grounds." Minerva rubbed her forehead wearily. "If you would write down everything that you know about the curse, every small detail, including the identities of the two patients still at St. Mungo's, I will pass it on to Melina. She might be able to begin working on it without needing to see Quin and upsetting him."

"Of course. I hope that it is useful." Severus made a move to stand, but then hesitated.

"Yes?"

"I wish I could do more," Severus said. "If you think of any other things I can do, or if there is any other way that I can help him or anyone else who has . . . who has suffered the effects of the Dark Lord. I want to. What I have been doing, helping you and the Order, it doesn't feel enough anymore. That was . . . that was for Lily," he said softly. "For my regrets. But now, I don't know why, but I need to do more. I may not have an opportunity later."

Minerva nodded. "I understand. I will think about it and have . . . I will think about it, Severus."

Severus stood. "And I'd rather no one else knew unless necessary."

Minerva smiled at Severus as she rose from her chair. "That's fine, too. Good night, Severus. Albus would be very proud of you. I know it."

The corners of his mouth twitched a slight smile. "Good night, Headmistress. He would be very proud of you, too." Without thinking about it and not stopping himself, he bent his head and quickly kissed her cheek, then turned even more quickly and left.

"And he thinks there might still be a cure for Quin, even after all these years," Minerva finished.

"That's wonderful news, Minerva."

"I wish we had thought to ask Severus about this before," she said, pushing back a little further into his warm embrace as she tugged the covers up under her chin. If she closed her eyes, she could almost believe that nothing had changed, that if she turned and rolled over in bed, she would encounter Albus's smiling face and bright blue eyes. She knew she wouldn't, but this was nice.

"We should have. But it was before Severus became a Death Eater, and there were so many other things..."

"I know," Minerva said quickly, interrupting, "but we won't waste any more time. I will owl Melina in the morning and ask her to come. Severus said he would write down all of the details that he can. She can begin work on it immediately. She was always very fond of Quin. I'm sure she'll be happy to do it."

"Why did he decide to ask about the curse?"

"Poppy had told him about Quin, and I think he is looking for more ways to atone," Minerva said. "He said that his work for the Order didn't seem enough any longer, and he wants to find ways of helping those who were victims of the Dark Lord. I can hardly wait to find out what Melina thinks about Quin's chances."

"That is . . . promising, certainly. But morning will come more quickly if we sleep now," he replied, stifling a yawn and kissing the back of her head. "Good night, my love."

"I am glad you said I should soften my attitude toward him. I think it helped. It was time," Minerva said softly.

"Mm. You were unhappy. You are happier, as is he." He yawned again.

"Good night, sweet dreams."

"Always, with you in my arms. Always."

Severus watched as Hermione spilled her milk. She needed to see him. An unaccustomed nervousness rose in him, causing a tightness in his chest. He had seen her twice since she had overheard Gareth McGonagall's accusations, and she had made no mention of them again, but he had felt awkward. Of course, he had seen her every day in the Great Hall or in class, but that was quite different from having to sit across from her and wonder what she was thinking of him, whether she was remembering what a wretched excuse for a human being he was. It shamed him when he realised he had even considered...very briefly...using Legilimency to discover what she was thinking about.

Perhaps he should consider teaching her Occlumency, but that thought also made him uncomfortable. Someone should teach her Occlumency, but that person shouldn't be he. He would see what he couldn't bear to consider: what she might think of him now that she knew precisely what kind of evil he had committed. It could have been Hermione just as easily as it had been Gamp, and that thought made him even more ill. Unbidden, an image of him raising his wand and slicing off Hermione's wand arm rose in his mind.

Severus pushed away from the table and stalked out of the Great Hall. Regret and atonement were all very well when he could feel better about himself. But he was only fooling himself. He was evil. Nothing could change that. It was pointless to care what Hermione might think of him. It did not change the fact that he was a Death Eater. He wore the Dark Lord's brand. He had killed, maimed, injured, caused indescribable pain . . . he could not change that. Nothing he did could change that.

He swept down to the dungeons and into his quarters, slamming the door behind him. He threw himself into his chair. Hermione wanted to see him. Dinner would be over shortly. He had to go up to the Headmistress's Library and see her. He did not want to go. There was nothing more for them to do. Potter was wasting time, as far as he could tell, and the Dark Lord was readying for some large attack...on Hogwarts, Severus was certain.

He had been telling the Dark Lord for weeks that he would have the castle's wards down. There would come a day when he would expect Severus to actually lower them. Students could be injured, killed. Staff certainly would be. And the Dark Lord was not the only one who expected him to do it. Minerva did, as well. She said that they would be prepared. He wanted to refuse to do it, but he remembered how his previous refusal had resulted in a long, painful death for the only man who cared for him. It had still killed Albus, and it had devastated Minerva, and it had brought Robert Crouch to the castle. No, he could not refuse to drop the wards. Better to do it when they were prepared for the Dark Lord's attack.

Perhaps, though, he could avoid meeting with Hermione. He could simply not go tonight, then tell Minerva . . . what? That it was pointless to meet with the girl? The truth was that he did not want to see Hermione because it reminded him of his own nature. Beyond that, when he looked into her eyes, he remembered her shock when he had told her what he had done to Gamp. She had forgiven him immediately, but she must have thought of it again and again. How could she not? He did not like what he was; how could she?

It didn't matter, Severus told himself. It was Order business. Everyone in the Order knew what he was and despised him. It was just as well that way. At least Lupin wasn't hanging about trying to become friends. That had ended with the Headmaster's death. No reason to be nice to the pet Death Eater after its master was dead, he thought, avoiding the memory of himself shouting at Lupin, telling him to take his firewhisky and his furry hide and go find someone else to blubber to. He had just learned of Dumbledore's decision to let the curse take him, and he was angry, and Lupin was so very easy to be angry with. That was the last time that the werewolf had darkened his doorway. And he certainly didn't miss him.

He should do the same with Granger, Severus decided. He didn't want or need her pity. He certainly didn't need her company. She would realise soon enough that she was wasting her forgiveness on him. Her *pity*. He would meet with her. He would meet with her and remind her of just what sort of man he was.

Severus slammed out of his rooms, his mood seeming to crackle around him, students scurrying from his path as he stormed up to the Headmistress's gargoyles. He was no one's pet Death Eater. He was just a nasty, irredeemable, miserable bastard, just as young McGonagall had told him.

He reached the gargoyles to see another already there, and the door opening to her. Melina turned to him and smiled.

"Professor Snape! It is good to see you!"

Severus grunted at her and stepped onto the moving stair behind her.

"Minerva told me that you gave her the details about the curse. Thank you. I have just been from St. Mungo's, looking at the records of the other patients whose names you gave us. That was most helpful. I do think it is too late to help them, but I am very hopeful about Quin," Melina said, smiling brightly back at him. "You have no idea how much good you have done. Thank you! I believe that with time, we can find a countercurse or other cure, and he will recover."

Severus shrugged, but then his curiosity won out. "How will you treat him if you cannot use magic around him?"

They arrived at the top of the stairs, and Melina opened the door.

"My son is a chemist and a researcher for a pharmaceuticals manufacturer...a wizard, but he preferred to study the Muggle sciences, much to the dismay of my father," Melina said with a laugh, "but he is still a qualified wizard, and he helped me to develop some methods of delivering potions to Quin that make him believe that he is taking Muggle medicine. I think he suspects they are not, but they are sufficiently disguised that he can ignore whatever doubts he may have. I can sedate him first, if necessary."

"That is interesting," Snape said, his professional curiosity piqued. "I have wondered whether there might not be some developments in Muggle medicine that might be useful in Potions, but I have had little time to explore the notion."

"My father and I have recently worked to greatly improve the delivery of certain potions that normally have to be taken several times a day so that one dose releases slowly over time. We simply modified a Muggle method...improved on it, of course, using magic...and although each potion reacts somewhat differently and we have had to make various adjustments, we have had success with a few different ones."

Severus furrowed his brow. "I haven't much reading time, but I have not seen anything in the Potions journals about this."

"Oh, we're still working out the kinks," Melina said quickly. "We will probably publish something in a year or so. And there is the potential for misuse of the methods, so we would prefer to wait until at least one Dark Wizard in particular is no longer a factor to consider."

"Any magic can be turned to Dark purposes," Severus said.

"Precisely. But I do want to thank you, Severus. There are many who will benefit indirectly if we are able to cure Quin. I will make sure that he knows who to thank when he is well."

"No, no, don't do that. I have done nothing," Severus said, and yet as he looked down into the dark-eyed witch's cheerful face, he felt an easing in his chest and a peculiar desire to return her smile. "But I am glad that it will help him."

"Were you meeting with...?"

"Not with the Headmistress, no," Severus replied, shaking his head slightly. "Give my regards to your father."

Melina smiled brightly again. "I will. And I will let you know if we make progress."

"I would be interested," Severus said softly.

He nodded to the Healer, then turned and went toward the library. He was quite late. His fit of anger, or whatever it had been, had delayed him. Hermione might have already left. He would have, if he were the one waiting.

But she hadn't left, and when he stepped into the library and closed the door behind him, she smiled warmly.

"You needed to see me," Severus said shortly. "Has the intrepid trio done something as idiotic as breaking into Gringotts again?"

"No. In fact, I've been sitting here wondering whether my excuse to see you was good enough. I decided it wasn't."

Severus raised an eyebrow as he sat down.

"I actually just wanted to see you because I'm getting nervous," Hermione admitted. "I am worried about Harry. I am worried about what is going to happen. Last time we met, it sounded as though you believe the Dark Lord is going to attack Hogwarts. It makes me sick to think of that. All the children . . ."

"It makes me uncomfortable, as well, Hermione," Severus said softly. "And my role, my necessary role . . . that is even worse."

"You are a spy . . ."

"I am more than a spy, Hermione. I don't simply hide behind bushes and eavesdrop on conversations, you know."

Hermione nodded and looked down.

"Somehow, he has to gain entry to Hogwarts," Severus continued. "With or without me. With me, with my assistance, the Headmistress will have some warning. But I will still be responsible and unable to do anything to stop him."

"You have slowed him, though. You have saved Harry over and over again. And Harry will be able to defeat him."

"That is the hope."

"Yes, it is. And I think he will, if we are right about the two of them, and the Horcrux being contained in a shell of magic. As long as Harry doesn't resist, if he lets Vol lets him attack him without resisting, I think that he has a chance. Harry will have to kill him, of course," Hermione said with a sigh.

"Yes, he will. At least, that is what the Headmaster always believed," Severus said quietly.

"Or Harry will be killed."

"We have to hope that his skill and his luck are sufficient to prevent that. Has he been practising at all?"

Hermione shrugged. "They say they are, and I don't know why they would lie about that. But duelling with friends is quite different from having to kill someone who is ruthless."

"It is . . . but there may still be some kind of an effect remaining even after the Horcrux is released. The Dark Lord will still have some of Potter's substance in him even if Potter no longer contains any of his soul or his magic."

"I would think that would only make him less vulnerable to Harry," Hermione said with a sigh. "I suppose I should do more work on this. I will need to tell Harry."

"You should wait to tell him. Wait until he needs to know. Don't give him time to think about it or to get any batty notions from Lovegood."

"That doesn't sound very fair."

"Potter's great strength is that he will act, and that he reacts. Give him something to act upon, let him react, don't let him lose that impulse to act on what you tell him by allowing him too much time to think about it."

"He is more than a bundle of impulses," Hermione said defensively.

Severus suppressed his own impulse to sneer. "Of course, but it is nonetheless true of him. When he knows what he must do, he will do it. Surely you can see the sense in not giving him too much information too soon, Hermione. He can only brood about it in that case...or fly off on impulse and do something precipitously that could lead to disaster."

"I think he's becoming steadier," Hermione said.

"That may be, but I ask that you not tell him until the time is right."

Hermione nodded. "If you think it's best."

"Not only I, but the Headmistress does, as well."

"I know it's none of my business, but you seem to be getting along well with her lately, and spending more time with her."

"You noticed. Good. Perhaps others have, as well."

They had made an effort to enter and leave the Great Hall together for more meals, and for him to be seen with her without the constant presence of her shadow. He had also presented memories to the Dark Lord that indicated that the Headmistress was relying more heavily on him and his advice...though he had not made use of any of the memories from the time he was afflicted by the *Adfectus*. The Dark Lord's expectations of him would shift if he saw any of those memories, and he did not want that, no more did he wish to exploit any of the memories of Minerva's great generosity. To share them with the Dark Lord would be to sully them.

"Oh, is it only an act, then?" Hermione asked.

"No, not only an act."

"Good." Hermione thought a moment. "You're friends, then."

"Mmm." Severus did not wish to discuss his friendships or lack thereof with Hermione.

"I see." Hermione fidgeted in her seat. "Was that Healer O'Donald you were speaking to before?"

"Yes."

"She was thanking you for something."

"Yes," Severus said tersely.

"I'm sorry, I have wasted your time. I'm sorry." Hermione began to stand, blushing.

"No, you haven't. I . . . I simply don't wish to speak of those things," Severus said. "Why did you really want to see me?"

"I told you. I am nervous about what's to come."

Severus shook his head slowly. "But why would you want to *seeme*?"

"I usually feel better, more confident, after we meet," Hermione explained.

"That is a most atypical reaction to my company," Severus said drily.

Hermione shrugged and smiled. "I'm just lucky, then."

Severus bit back his sarcastic retort, although later, he wondered why, since he had left his rooms so very determined to show Hermione precisely what kind of a man he was. Instead, he said, "No, it is my good fortune." As he uttered those words, he felt a tightness in his chest again, and when Hermione's eyes met his, his breath caught in his throat. He suddenly felt a greater sense of danger than he did even in the midst of the baldest lie to the Dark Lord.

Hermione blushed and lowered her eyes. "I do feel better now."

Severus swallowed. "Good."

"I should have asked how you are," Hermione said. "You looked unhappy at dinner. I thought you might be angry with me, actually, then I decided that was silly of me, since we hadn't even spoken recently. But it did occur to me that I might be wasting your time."

"No, Hermione, you are not wasting my time. I have student essays to read, but your company is far preferable."

"How are you, then?"

Severus thought a moment. "I do not know how to answer that, unless I merely say that I am fine."

"Are you fine?"

"I do not know. I do not wish to discuss it."

"All right. I just thought . . . it's been a few years since the Dark Lord returned. It must be difficult for you. And all of the people around you . . . the ones here and in the Order, ones that the Death Eaters have hurt, and then the Death Eaters, who you have to associate with but who you're betraying." Hermione shrugged. "I can't imagine it, but it must be difficult."

Severus looked vacantly at a space above her left shoulder, then he blinked and looked back at her. "Whatever you may imagine, I doubt that you will understand that it was almost a relief when he returned. I had waited more than a decade for that moment. It had been my purpose, waiting, and my only one, it seemed. Waiting." He paused. "I have the existence that was given me, and I have the opportunity . . . an opportunity." One corner of his mouth twitched up slightly. "I am fine, Hermione."

They sat in silence for a few minutes, then Hermione raised her eyes and said softly, "I wish you something beyond that. When it's over."

"And that, I cannot imagine," Severus said.

"If you live, and I do, I could help you imagine it," she said, almost whispering.

"I think it is time for you to leave, Hermione. And I do have second-year essays to read tonight."

She nodded and stood.

"Thank you. I am glad we met tonight," he said quietly.

"Good night." She placed her hand on the door handle, then turned. "I do feel better, sir."

"So do I," he replied, but without looking at her.

Hermione hesitated a moment, then she opened the door and left, closing it gently behind her.

"So do I, Hermione," he whispered again. "So do I."

Chapter Fifteen: Lift its head to the blows of the rain

Chapter 16 of 34

It's a sunny day in early April, and Hermione and Severus spend time together.



Chapter Fifteen: *Lift its head to the blows of the rain*

11 April 1998

Hermione stretched and rubbed her eyes. She had been making her way through a German text on Horcruxes. Not only was her German barely up to the challenge, but the book was old and the typeface, Fraktur, so it was giving her quite a headache to try to read. She knew a charm that she could cast on each page that would convert the font from Fraktur into ordinary Roman type to make it easier to read, but it was a very old book, and she didn't want to cast any charms on it without the Headmistress's permission.

She had spent the entire day in the Headmistress's library. It was a beautiful, sunny Saturday in early April, and she was in a windowless library reading an esoteric text in a language that required her to keep a dictionary at her elbow...which was hardly useful, either, since it didn't contain most of the more obscure magical terms. Nonetheless, and despite the reason she was shut up in the library reading what she was, Hermione felt content.

She had felt as though, on some level, she had betrayed Harry when she hadn't left the castle with him at the end of September, and she had also felt that she had driven Ron to Luna just when the two of them had begun to become closer. She had daydreamed of marrying Ron, having children with him, raising them together in some perfect, sunlit home. But now, she couldn't imagine what had appealed to her about those dreams, except for the fact that they were filled with peace, tranquillity, and safety. But there was peace, tranquillity, and safety within the library, in performing satisfying work for a good cause, with people whom one respected and trusted. She had sat with Robert Crouch the evening before and discussed the nature of the soul, and what the fact that Horcruxes could be created said about it. They hadn't discussed Light or Dark magic, though it was clear that Crouch found Horcruxes themselves an abomination; they had discussed magic and epistemology, and Hermione found herself wishing there were wizarding universities where she could go and study further, explore ideas, have long discussions over black coffee...well, not black coffee, she didn't like black coffee. But she had seen Muggle university students and felt a twinge of envy for them. She would never want to give up magic, but she also didn't want to stop learning and exploring ideas. Hermione knew that once she left Hogwarts, if she survived the war, she would have to carry on her education on her own, perhaps having an apprenticeship, but she had no idea how she would have managed that if she had followed her daydreams into marriage with Ron.

She thought that she loved Ron, but she wondered whether she would have continued to love him if she felt hemmed in by their marriage. It was fine for a couple to have disparate interests, Hermione thought, but having seen how her parents related so well, both of them dentists and both with a strong interest in modern art, she couldn't imagine what dinnertime conversations would be like in a Granger-Weasley household. She could just see Ron talking excitedly about the Chudley Cannons, boring her, and then her discussing the most recent article in *Arithmancy Today* and putting him to sleep. She enjoyed cheering on the Gryffindor Quidditch team because it was her House, but she had no interest at all in the professional teams where the players were all strangers to her. Her parents even listened to a lot of the same music, groups that they had both grown up listening to. She and Ron didn't even have that much in common.

Hermione had no idea what had drawn Ron and Luna together, other than propinquity, but that wasn't any of her concern. Now that she was over the initial shock and disappointment of seeing the two together, she was relieved. She would prefer to wait and find someone with whom she had more in common, and for whom she felt some passion. Her love of Ron had always been warm, and her teenage hormones had been pleased to respond to Ron's romantic overtures, but she didn't think she would ever feel true passion for him. Not that passion was everything, of course, but it was a nice way to start a relationship. Passion might fade with time, or change with familiarity, but it would be nice if it could progress from hot passion to warm desire, and not from tepid desire to cool lack of interest. At the thought of passion, she thrust a vision of dark eyes and fathomless pupils from her mind and turned back to her book.

She had made it through three more sentences...almost a half page of text, they were so long and convoluted...when there was a light rap on the door and it opened. She knew immediately that it was Professor Snape, even though he had never knocked before, and she raised her eyes to see his dark silhouette outlined by the bright sunlight streaming in through the windows of the Headmistress's Office.

"Professor Crouch suggested that you might require my assistance." Severus swallowed and closed the door behind him. "I noticed you were not at lunch, so I brought you something." He could feel the heat rise in his face, and he did not want to examine the reason for it.

"You brought me something?"

"Yes. Just a snack," Severus said, pulling a wrapped packet from his pocket. He placed it on the table.

"I had best put the book somewhere else while I eat, then." Instead of moving the book, though, she moved herself down to the end of the table near the door.

"It's chicken. You ate chicken before," Severus explained.

"Thank you. I'm sure it will be good...is there anything to drink? No, don't worry, I don't need anything to drink."

"Of course you do. I am sorry. Thoughtless of me. I will be right back." He left the room quickly.

Hermione smiled at her sandwich. It was slightly smushed from being in Snape's pocket, but that just made her smile more. She waited to take a bite until Snape returned a few minutes later, carrying a glass.

"Apple juice," he said tersely as he put it in front of her. "It's cold."

Hermione smiled brightly at him. "Thank you. It's perfect." She couldn't imagine Severus Snape bringing any other student a sandwich and a glass of cold apple juice. Or any other snack. Though perhaps if one of his Slytherins was ill, he might. But he would probably call a house-elf. It was perfect.

Hermione took a bite of her sandwich, and Severus walked down to the other end of the table and looked at the book she had been reading.

"German? I didn't know you spoke German."

"I don't. Not really. I can read it. Or I thought I could until this afternoon," Hermione replied with a rueful grin. "I took a summer language course a couple years ago. My French is much better, but I think it's more suited to discussions of meals, skiing, tennis, and the beauties of nature than it is anything wizarding."

Snape smiled. "And my French is best suited to discussions of Potions and the Dark Arts. Together, we might be able to hold an entire conversation in French with someone on any subject."

"But not with each other," Hermione said with a laugh. "Do you read German?"

"I learned it for my apprenticeship. Many of the seminal texts in Potions are written in German. Most have been translated, but it is traditional to require the apprentice to

read them in the original language." He shook his head as he looked at the open book before him. "This, though, is something quite different."

"It has given me a headache," Hermione admitted.

Severus frowned. "You should have told me. I would have brought you a potion with your juice."

"I think part of it was forgetting lunch. I'm feeling better already," Hermione reassured him.

Snape nodded and pulled out the chair opposite her.

"I'm glad Professor Crouch sent you," Hermione said. "I needed to see a friendly face. Reading that was quite depressing."

"Is it one that the Headmistress left for you?"

Hermione shook her head and swallowed a bite of her sandwich. "No. It's something that Professor Crouch gave me last night."

"You saw him last night?"

"Yes. He came in while I was here and we talked. He thought this book would be helpful, and I think it is, it's just taking me time to get through it." Hermione took a sip of apple juice. "I think it was one of Professor Dumbledore's books. There were some parchments in the back of it with notes in his handwriting. Lists of things. They were useful, too. He reminds me of him."

"What? Who? Who reminds you of whom?" Severus asked, completely ignoring the mention of the lists in Dumbledore's hand.

"Professor Crouch. He reminds me of Dumbledore. A lot," Hermione said.

"He's nothing like him," Snape said coolly.

Hermione shrugged, tilting her head as she thought. "You knew Professor Dumbledore better than I did, of course, and I don't really know Professor Crouch, but there's still something. The way he almost smiles sometimes when he says something just to . . . to provoke you to think. And the way he feels in the room. I can't put my finger on it, but he does remind me of him."

Severus snorted a quick laugh, but didn't respond.

"Anyway, I like him, and it was good to talk with him last night."

"You talked to him about Potter and your Horcrux-and-wand theory?" Severus asked, ignoring his jealousy, which said that Hermione was supposed to be discussing her theory with *him*, not with Crouch.

"Only a little. He did say that my comparison of Harry and Vol er, the Dark Lord with brother wands was quite apt. Mostly, we discussed philosophy, I guess you could call it."

"All about Good and Evil, I presume," Snape said sarcastically.

"No, actually. It was mentioned, but mainly we discussed the nature of the soul," Hermione said mildly.

Severus smirked. "Just the thing an apothecary from Amsterdam would know about, I'm sure."

Hermione fixed him with a glare. "More than a seventh-year Hogwarts student," she said. "I enjoyed it. You would have, too, I think."

"Hmmpf."

"You just don't like him."

"I have little reason to like him."

"Why do you dislike him? Because he reminds you of Professor Dumbledore, too? Or because he's close to Professor McGonagall?"

Snape's eyes narrowed.

"There must be a reason you dislike him," Hermione persisted.

"He does not remind me of the Headmaster, except that he was present at his death."

"And the Headmistress?"

"They are old friends."

"Good." Hermione smiled. "I would have enjoyed your perspective."

"Hmmpf. I do not waste thought about such things."

"You should. Even if there's no practical result, it can be fun. And sometimes, it's nice to talk about something that has little to do with the reality of the war and Dark Magic. It's like a holiday for the brain," Hermione said brightly.

Severus actually chuckled at that. "I can imagine no one but you, Hermione, describing a philosophical discussion of the soul as a 'holiday for the brain,'" he said.

Hermione blushed. She probably sounded like such a child to him.

"Rather an interesting way of thinking of it," Severus continued, his eyes warming as he gazed at her. "Our Hogwarts matron has been encouraging me to find . . . diversion, I believe she called it. That variety of diversion appeals to me more than most."

Hermione smiled at him. "You could tell her that you are taking brain holidays...she might think you had lost a few brain cells if you said that, but she would certainly believe that you were doing something recreational!" She laughed.

"Recreational potions, probably," Snape said with a crooked smile. "She'd probably give me a lecture on the perils that Potions masters face when they start brewing and sampling some of the more unusual potions."

Hermione laughed again, imagining Madam Pomfrey lecturing Professor Snape about the dangers of illicit potions, which seemed oddly amusing, particularly considering the irony of the other dangers he faced daily. Somehow, the entire scene she conjured in her head seemed hysterically funny, and she laughed until tears came to her eyes.

Gulping with laughter, she said, "She would probably recommend going to a self-help group . . . where you'd have to stand up . . . where you'd have to stand up and say,

"hello, my name is Severus, and I take brain holidays!"

She wiped her eyes as Severus began to chuckle despite himself. He liked the way his name sounded coming from Hermione's lips. Not reproving or sarcastic, not avuncular or patronising, just . . . natural.

"No one calls me Severus," he said, deliberately excluding Death Eaters in his mind. "Almost no one. The Headmistress does sometimes, and Lupin." He grimaced. "He tries to call me 'Sev' when he's had too much to drink."

"I'm sorry, it's just that in those groups..." Hermione began, thinking she had insulted him.

Severus quirked another smile. "I know. I grew up with Muggles. I am familiar with those programmes. Just don't ever call me 'Sev' unless you want to be hexed."

Hermione nodded, suppressing a smile. "I will remember that." She paused, then asked, "Does Remus really get drunk?"

"Sometimes." Severus shrugged. He really shouldn't be discussing such things with a student. "It's better, I think, since he and Tonks..." He hesitated.

"I know they're together," Hermione said.

"They are married, actually. No one is supposed to know. Her parents were the only witnesses. It was in a Muggle registry office, just as Weasley's was." Severus sighed. "I am not supposed to know, officially. The Dark Lord was very angry when I was unaware that the Weasley wedding was just a sham. He lost several Death Eaters that day. I only found out afterward that they had actually been married days before. I had thought it folly to have such a large affair, making a perfect target for the Dark Lord, but no one told me that it was faked until after it was over. It was at about the same time that Potter was taken from the Dursleys early, too, and so the Dark Lord was very displeased with me."

"But you couldn't have told him, anyway," Hermione said.

"Sometimes I must tell him things I would rather not, Hermione, though I do try to choose what I tell him very carefully. There are some things that, much as it may cause me difficulties, it may be best that I not know. I was unprepared for his wrath, however, since I was unaware that there was anything that I was not telling him."

"I am sorry," Hermione said softly, remembering how Severus had appeared after he'd been cursed with the *Cruciatius*, and she could only imagine what Voldemort did to him when two high-profile targets in a row turned out to be a trap in one instance, and a completely abandoned Muggle house, in the other.

"It is to be expected," Severus replied. "And there are times when he simply becomes angry without reason, only because he is frustrated by the pace of his progress. He is mad, and a sadist, and he seems to receive some bizarre comfort from causing others pain."

"Why did people ever follow him?" Hermione asked, foregoing mention of some of Snape's own petty meanness, which was on an entirely different order from the kind of pain that Voldemort enjoyed inflicting, though still not healthy.

"People want power. He is a powerful wizard. He spent years learning all he could of the Dark Arts, which some see as the most powerful of all magic. To follow him, some believed, was to share in that power. And I understand that in the beginning, he was quite charismatic and honey-tongued. The more followers he had, though, the freer he felt to express his darkest sides. Of course, many saw this as simply a sign of his power and wished even more to obtain his favour." Severus shrugged. "Others joined him, particularly later, simply because they felt that it was safer to join him than not to, or because they felt disaffected in some way from mainstream wizarding society. He appealed to different people for different reasons."

"I could never understand why Pettigrew became a Death Eater."

"Because he's a Gryffindor?" Severus asked with a sneer.

"No," Hermione replied patiently. "Because he was friends with people he betrayed. People whom he very specifically betrayed. I don't understand how he could do that. Why he would. Had he always hated them?"

"I don't know. I never understood the dynamic of that group." Severus took a breath. He knew that he could not entirely divorce his feelings from his descriptions of the Gryffindors who had plagued his youth, but he could try to be somewhat objective. "Pettigrew was a hanger-on and an imitator of his betters; always a bit of a fool. Potter was . . . Potter was a self-absorbed show-off, very talented, and well aware of that. He would make fun of Pettigrew and the rat's attempts to be clever. Black was just an adolescent rebelling against his parents, with a long, deep mean streak, like most Blacks, though he could be quite magnanimous with his friends. Lupin was more like Pettigrew, but brighter. He was so worried about losing his precious friends, he never did the right thing...even when it was clear to him what that was...if it might alienate them."

"And Lily?"

"Lily . . . Lily was even brighter than Potter, but kind, principled, and with more backbone than any of the boys...or all of them put together," Severus said softly.

"You were friends with her."

Severus shrugged. "We had a few things in common. And I . . ." Severus took in a deep breath and let it out slowly. "It was complicated."

Hermione nodded, sensing that he had said all he would on that topic. "Well, I suppose I should get back to work on that book."

"It is almost dinnertime. Don't miss dinner."

"I won't . . . you know, I've been working up here most evenings. If you ever want to . . . to stop by and help me. Or just talk. About anything."

"I will remember that."

"And I keep confidences, you know."

"I am aware of that, Hermione," Severus said. He quirked a grin. "After all, no one has said anything to me about my being taken unawares by a nonverbal Cheering Charm...or about its dubious efficacy."

"Dubious efficacy!" Hermione exclaimed, pretending to be put out. "I will have you know that if that is true, it is solely the fault of the Defence instructor who only taught us nonverbal jinxes and blocks. He never covered nonverbal Cheering Charms."

"He probably had no notion that they could be used in an ambush. I am certain he has been reeducated on that point."

Hermione laughed. Severus warmed to hear her. It was good to elicit something other than fear . . . or screams. He sobered, remembering the last attack that the Dark Lord had insisted he lead. He had silenced the screams.

Hermione felt his change in mood. "Are you all right?"

"Yes. I am fine."

"I see. If you do want to talk..."

"It would be inappropriate even if I wished to," he replied.

"No, I don't think so. It's different here, now. If you want to talk, even if it's about something difficult or painful, you can talk to me here. I am your student in the rest of Hogwarts," Hermione said boldly. "Here, I am not."

Severus was silent for a moment, then he said, "Even if I were to agree with that statement, it does not change that I am what I am, and you are very young and . . . you are good. And I do not want to give you nightmares."

"I think you can leave me to deal with whether or not what you tell me gives me nightmares," Hermione said patiently. "And you were my age when you joined Volde when you took the Dark Mark. I have been wounded in battle. I am not so very young."

"I do not wish you to look at me and see . . . and see me and what I do," he admitted softly.

"Do you still kill people?"

"Sometimes."

"And they aren't Death Eaters."

"Never Death Eaters."

"Do you have any choice when you do it, any choice that wouldn't leave you dead yourself?"

He did not answer. Choice hardly entered into anything he did, it seemed.

"I could not do what you do," Hermione said quietly. "I cannot imagine how hard it must be to be so torn, to want to serve the Order and do the right thing, but in order to do that, you still have to do all the things that you wished to escape when you changed sides. I know that I couldn't do it, and I can't do it for you or do anything so that you won't have to do it anymore, but I can listen to you if you want to talk."

"I don't want to talk about it."

"Then you don't have to. But you don't have to avoid it, either," Hermione replied, successfully fighting the urge to reach across the table and touch him.

"I do enjoy talking about other things." His mouth twitched a brief smile as he remembered Hermione's earlier laughter. "Hello, my name is Severus, and I am a recovering Death Eater."

Hermione smiled. "Hello, Severus."

"I am not certain what I am supposed to say after that, but I know that I would prefer to talk about . . . philosophy, Cheering Charms, and brain holidays."

"Then that is what we will talk about," Hermione said warmly.

"But not today. Time for dinner, Miss Granger!"

"I will be back this evening, and most evenings this week."

"I will remember. Make notes of anything you have questions about. Leave them with whatever book you are reading. If you are not here when I am, I can look at them and answer your questions, if I am able to. I can at least think about them until the next time we see each other."

"All right, I'll do that, then." Hermione stood and picked up her book bag. "I will see you at dinner, Professor."

He nodded, filled with a tangle of confused emotions, and watched as she left, lithe and confident, that same confidence with which she had led Umbridge into the Forbidden Forest. Hermione would be a cat like her former Head of House, if she were to become an Animagus, Snape thought. A magnificent cat, wily and clever, something strong and beautiful . . . if he were moved to poetry, he would, like Byron, say she walked in beauty like the night, with smiles that win and a heart whose love is innocent. But Snape despised romantic poetry . . . Still, he might find that old book that had belonged to his father and see whether he had remembered the lines correctly.

He rose from his chair and left the library, reminding himself that he would be dead before Hermione became an Animagus. He put all thoughts of poetry out of his mind as he made his way down to dinner in the Great Hall, which he knew would already be depressingly filled with dunderheads talking noisily about nothing as they stuffed their vacant faces. He suppressed a sigh. Perhaps later that evening he could take a brain holiday. This time, Severus suppressed a smile.

Chapter Sixteen: Twisting on racks

Chapter 17 of 34

Severus arrives back at Hogwarts after a bad night, requiring assistance. Minerva is angered by a member of the Order.



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Severus tore the third button from his left sleeve, the effort causing him to tip further into the mud despite the tree he was propped against. His fingers were slippery and trembled, but they closed around the small black button.

He gathered his energy and his breath, then whispered, *Domi*."

His eyes fluttered, he recognised the safety of his surroundings, and he sighed as he collapsed with his head on the hearth. He was vaguely aware of a voice...Dilys, he thought...instructing someone to go, quick, and fetch the Headmistress. Somewhere, some part of him was amused as he thought that if Minerva Flooed through to her office, he hoped she didn't trip over his head.

"You hold on, Severus," he heard the former headmistress's portrait say. "Phineas Nigellus is fetching the Headmistress. She will be here in a moment. Oh, I wish I could step out and take care of you! Try to stay awake, Severus!"

Severus didn't manage to open his eyes, though he tried to reply, but only a harsh breath emerged from his mouth. He wished Dilys would cease her prattling so that he could just lie there and sleep. Every bit of him hurt, and every breath burned, and if he slept, it would stop. The absence of pain was all that he cared about at that moment.

When the Headmaster had given him the Portkey three years ago...four identical ones, actually, which could only be activated if not attached to his clothing...Albus had said they would return him "here," but Severus had thought that simply meant Hogwarts, perhaps by the gates or to his own rooms. Albus had literally meant they would bring him to the Headmaster's Office. Until that night, he had not had occasion to use one of them, though he had almost given in once or twice before. This time, though, he knew that he would Splinch if he tried to Apparate...if he managed to summon the energy to Apparate at all, since he could not even stand...and he would die in that wet wood if he did not Portkey away.

Less than a minute after Dilys had told him that Black had gone to fetch the Headmistress, Minerva was rushing down the stairs from her suite, only dressed in a nightgown and slippers.

"Oh, Severus! Oh, dear gods, what happened to you?"

Severus tried to open his eyes as she knelt beside him. The first thing he felt was a charm drying his clothing, then her hand on his forehead.

"You should go fetch Poppy," Severus heard another voice say. "I will bring him upstairs to the guest room and do what I can for him until then."

He felt another gentle hand on his cheek, and he forced his eyes open. Everything was out-of-focus, but he recognised the wizard crouched next to him. He closed his eyes again. Humiliation upon humiliation that night, but he could scarcely bring himself to care. Pain seemed to be his entire existence.

"You will be all right, Severus," Minerva said after Summoning an old teaching robe from a rack in the back of the office. "Robbie will take good care of you. Don't you think about a thing. I'll be back with Poppy as quickly as possible."

"Don't worry, son," came Robbie's soft voice in his ear, "*noMobicorpus*. That can be quite uncomfortable when one is conscious."

He was aware of the sound of a door closing, then he felt Robbie's arms, one under his knees, the other cradling his shoulders.

"You must let me know if it hurts when I lift you."

Severus tried to lick his dry lips and managed to rasp, "Hurts . . . hurts anyway."

"I will try not to make it worse," the older wizard said gently as he stood, bringing Severus with him. As he crossed the office to the stairs, he said conversationally, though still in a soft, soothing voice, "I have thought you were not eating enough and that you should put on some weight, but I suppose that it is convenient at the moment that you have not."

Severus sighed and let his head rest on Robbie's shoulder, past caring about humiliation or weakness. The other wizard took the stairs carefully and deliberately, trying not to jostle the younger man in his arms.

With a whispered spell, Robbie first opened the door at the top of the stairs and then the one to the guest bedroom, and Severus felt the other wizard's magic course past him. There was something comforting about allowing himself to put himself in his hands, just to let go. Perhaps if he let go enough, he might breathe his last and finally be free. Then the image of Hermione's smiling face flitted through his consciousness, and it came to him that he still had more to do, he had to become that better Severus that Albus used to speak of. And Hermione believed in him. She needed him. He still had to help her.

As Robbie pulled back the bedcovers with another whispered spell, Severus thought he understood what Hermione had meant about Robbie feeling like Albus. Of course, he was nothing like Albus at all. But as the older wizard gently laid him down on the bed and carefully removed his boots and outer garments, and then, using both magic and the gentle touch of his hand, began to explore Severus for injury and broken bones, Severus thought that Albus himself would have done the same, in the same caring manner.

"Oh, Severus." He heard pain in the older wizard's voice as he discovered the injury to his lower back. "What did they do to you?"

It was a rhetorical question, but Severus opened his eyes and tried to speak. "Oh..."

"You needn't say anything now, Professor. Wait for Poppy to come," Robbie said softly as he used his wand to remove the final layers of damaged fabric from around the large wound on Severus's back, but still leaving him clothed in the remnants of his robes.

But Severus persisted. "Aurors," he gasped. "Moody. Knew me. Moody. Then..." Severus grimaced. "Then the . . . Dark Lord . . . very angry."

"Sh, sh, don't speak. Do not speak. Help is on its way." Robbie smoothed Severus's damp hair back from his face and perched on the edge of the bed. "Stay on your side. You have a large burn of some type on your back. It looks like an acid burn. You should not lie on it until it is healed. Am I right in understanding that that damage was done by an Auror?"

Severus swallowed and closed his eyes. "Yes." His voice rasped in his throat.

"Was it Moody himself?"

"Yes." He ignored the fact that the wizard was still gently caressing his forehead and holding his hand. He certainly ignored the fact that it felt nice and that it reminded him of the time his father had taken care of him when he was four and had the mumps.

"And you are sure he knew who you were beneath your mask?" Robbie asked gently, but with not a hint of scepticism in his voice.

Severus just grunted his assent.

"We will deal with that, then. I think I hear Minerva and Poppy," Robbie said, looking toward the door.

A minute later, Poppy strode into the room, immediately drawing her wand and beginning to cast diagnostic spells as Robbie looked on. Minerva, a teaching robe cast loosely over her nightgown, watched from the doorway.

"You can wait outside, unless Severus would prefer you to stay," the matron said as she opened her bag and removed three different potions and set them on the bedside table.

Robbie stood from his perch on the edge of the bed, but at the slight pressure of Severus's fingers around his hand, he said, "I will stay."

"Very well, but you'll have to move out of the way," Poppy replied.

Robbie let go of Severus's hand and moved away from the bed. Minerva stepped up beside him and put her arm around his waist. She turned her head into his shoulder, averting her eyes from the terrible melted flesh on Severus's back as Poppy began to pass her wand over the wound. Robbie pressed his lips lightly against her temple.

Now that the wound was partially healed, though still angry red and the flesh uneven, Poppy poured a viscous, light brown potion over it. The potion seemed to disappear as it touched the skin, and Poppy nodded in approval, though Minerva could see no difference in the wound. Poppy cast two more spells, healing spells this time, directed toward his abdomen. Next, she uncorked another bottle and poured out a dose of bright orange potion into a small cup.

"Here, Severus, this will help with the pain," Poppy said as she gently raised his head with one hand and brought the cup to his mouth.

Severus gulped it down weakly, a little of the potion dribbling from the corner of his mouth. Poppy wiped it away. She measured out some thick, dark potion and likewise raised it to his mouth for him to swallow. After he had taken that dose, he let out a sigh and his head lolled back against the pillows.

"Now, let's get you out of these clothes and into a clean nightshirt, and I can treat your other injuries." She turned to the other two. "Robert, could you give me a hand? Minerva, if you could fetch him a nightshirt?"

Almost an hour later, Poppy closed the door gently behind her and stepped out into Minerva's sitting room, where Robbie and Minerva were sitting on the sofa waiting for her. Severus had been washed, dressed in a clean nightshirt, and Poppy had cast some healing spells and given him two more potions to treat his injuries and counteract the curses that had been cast on him.

"When can I question him about what happened?" Minerva asked.

Poppy raised an eyebrow, but responded. "He is asleep now. When he wakes up in about four or five hours, he should be well enough to answer your questions. And he will recover quite well, I believe."

"I am glad. Could you tell what curses struck him? Is there any way of telling when they were cast or by whom?"

Poppy looked at Minerva, frowning with slight disapproval. "I am surprised you are not more concerned about Severus."

"She is concerned, Poppy," Robbie interjected. "But she has faith in your abilities, and she has weighty responsibilities that must take precedence over her feelings for Severus."

Poppy took a breath as she settled back into her chair. "He had both spell damage and physical injuries. In addition to the large burn on his back, which was the result of a curse, he also had minor burns on his hands and forearms and suffered some smoke inhalation, all of which were the result of an actual physical fire. Those injuries occurred, I would estimate, anywhere from thirty minutes to an hour before his others, which were all the result of some rather nasty curses, including the *Cruciatus*, as you may have surmised from the muscle spasms. In addition to the obvious burn and the multiple haematomas on his head and torso, he had some internal injuries, none of which were individually immediately life-threatening, but combined with the other injuries and the exposure to the weather, they could have been fatal if he had not reached Hogwarts when he did."

"What kind of internal injuries?" Minerva asked.

"Bruised kidneys, crushed testicles, some interstitial haemorrhaging caused by a curse I have never encountered before, an injured spleen, a few cracked ribs, and a lowered volume of cerebrospinal fluid, also from a curse I have never seen before. I was able to repair almost all of the damage, but it will take time for him to fully recover."

"Would it help if we contacted Melina?" Minerva asked.

"Yes, I was actually going to recommend that. The curses that I didn't recognise may have caused damage that wasn't immediately evident. Since this is her specialty, she would know what to look for even if she hasn't seen the specific curses before."

"Robbie, please owl Melina immediately...send a persistent Eagle Owl. She is a heavy sleeper."

"I will go myself," he said.

Minerva hesitated, then she nodded. "But be quick and be careful!"

Robbie smiled slightly, kissing her cheek as he rose. "I will be."

After he had left the room, Minerva turned back to Poppy. "Is there anything more that you can do for him? Anything you need to do?"

"No, not yet. I will be glad when Melina has had a look at him. A few of those spells were very, very nasty, and the one on his back wasn't the least of them...though it wasn't the worst, either."

"I'll sit with him, Poppy. Why don't you go back to bed...or lie down here on the couch, if you prefer?"

Poppy looked at her, thinking for a moment, then said, "I don't think you'll learn anything from him for a few hours yet. He is sleeping quite soundly."

"I do wish to sit with him for reasons other than getting information from him. If he wakes, I do not want him to be alone," Minerva replied.

"Of course." Poppy stood and stretched. "I'll kip on the couch, then. If he does wake and has any pain or other symptoms, I would like to be here, as well, and I need to tell Melina how I treated him so far."

Minerva smiled. "Thank you, Poppy."

"You have changed. You have changed since he died. Since before then."

"No, I haven't. I have become focussed, but I have not changed, not fundamentally."

Poppy didn't respond.

"We are all in danger, Poppy, all of us, and the entire wizarding world...and the Muggle world, as well. You can understand duty. I know that you do."

"It's not just that . . . Robert . . . I did not think you were so close to him, that you knew him so well, before everything. He is a good man; I see that, so do not mistake me. I am simply . . . puzzled."

Minerva shrugged. "As he said, I have very heavy responsibilities. Sharing them with him, having his support, it is what helps me to continue what Albus began."

"Of course." Poppy sat down on the couch and toed off her slippers. "You know, though, that if you ever need an old friend to talk to, you can trust me."

"I always know that, Poppy. But some things, as much as it might be a relief for me to share them, it would be a burden for you, and my own relief would be short-lived."

"You talked to me after the *Adfectus*," Poppy pointed out.

"That was different. And you shouldn't say that...if Severus overheard, he would be mortified, and he has suffered more than enough."

Poppy nodded. "But if you want to talk..."

"Someday, if we both live through this, we will talk." Minerva reached out and squeezed her friend's arm. "I promise."

Minerva had been sitting with Severus in the dimly lit guest room for less than a half hour before Melina arrived. Minerva felt the tingle from the gargoyle and stepped out into the sitting room to meet her. Poppy had been dozing on the couch, but she opened her eyes groggily.

"What is it? Is Severus..."

"He is fine, still sleeping. Melina is on her way up."

"Oh. I never know how you do that," Poppy replied, yawning.

Minerva just smiled and winked. "Top secret!"

Melina immediately went in to see Severus, Poppy going in with her to tell her what she had already done to treat him and what she had determined about his injuries and the curses that had hit him. When they reemerged twenty minutes later, Minerva was dozing against Robbie's chest, but she opened her eyes and was immediately alert.

"How is he, Melina?"

"He will be fine," Melina reassured her aunt. "Poppy did well with him, and I was able to provide some additional treatment. There was some undetected renal damage, which I treated, and I did a little more repair on . . . on some of his other sensitive injuries. The burn on his back must have been immensely painful, but Poppy did a nice job with that. I treated it again with a more specialised potion and the countercurse, and it will heal quite nicely, I'm sure. He woke briefly while we were treating him. He asked to see you, but be aware that he is very groggy from the potions, and he won't be very lucid."

"You go on in, Minerva," Robbie said. "I will call Blampa for some tea for Poppy and Melina."

Minerva entered the guest room quietly, closing the door behind her. The lamps had been dimmed again, and she hesitated to raise them. She walked over to the side of the bed and looked down at Severus, who was lying on his right side. Reaching out tentatively, she touched his cheek.

"Severus, Severus," she whispered. "I am here."

Severus's eyes opened briefly and he gave a long sigh.

"Melina said you will be fine. You just need to rest."

"My report . . ." Severus said, blinking.

"Unless there is something I need to know right this minute, it can wait until morning, when you are more awake."

"Mmm." Severus sighed. "The Dark Lord was angry, but . . . nothing urgent. Morning's good." He swallowed and licked his lips.

"Are you thirsty?"

"Mmm." Severus nodded slightly.

Minerva poured him a glass of cool water from the cut-glass pitcher by the bed, then she put an arm under his shoulders and helped him raise up enough to sip it. He coughed.

"Slowly, slowly," Minerva said.

After he'd had several swallows, Minerva eased him back against the pillows.

"Thank you."

Minerva nodded. "Of course. Now you sleep. We will talk in the morning. Robbie told me how you received the curse on your back. You can tell me the entire thing then."

Severus nodded, his eyes closing. "Stay a while?"

"I'll stay a while, Severus. Till you're asleep."

"Mmm. Thank you. And Crouch." His eyes opened again. "See why you like him now."

Minerva quirked a brief smile. "That's good, Severus. You sleep now." She caressed his face gently as he closed his eyes and let out a deep sigh.

She sat with him for several minutes as his breathing became slow and regular, watching his face relax, all trace of discomfort and worry disappearing. Finally, she bent and kissed his forehead and whispered, "Sleep well and dream sweetly."

As she left the room, Minerva completely extinguished the lamps. With the heavy draperies over the room's one window, Severus would not be awakened by the sunrise, which Minerva estimated would be in about two hours. Fortunately, it was a Friday night...Saturday morning, now...and the few duties that Severus may have had that weekend could be shifted. She could even take his curfew patrol shift herself, if he had one. It might actually make a nice change from her usual duties. Robbie had already volunteered to take Potions on Monday, and they could find someone else to take Defence for a day or two.

Minerva sat next to Robbie on the couch, and he poured her a cup of tea.

"I think that one of us should stay up in case Severus awakens," she said, "but otherwise, we should get some sleep. I'll stay up with him now, then go to breakfast in the Great Hall. I can talk to Severus after that, then take a nap later."

"I'll stay up with you," Robbie offered.

"No, you need your sleep, too. You can sit with him when I go to breakfast."

"I should stay," Melina said. "I would like to check him again later for complications."

"You can stay in the Hufflepuff guest room. The password hasn't changed since the last time you were here," Minerva said.

"Or in my rooms," Robbie said. "I'll be up here."

"That would be a lot closer than being down in Hufflepuff. Thank you, Robbie," Melina said, standing. She turned to Poppy. "You can walk me down, Poppy. You should get some sleep, too. Minerva will call us if we're needed."

After the two witches had left, Minerva poured herself another cup of tea.

"Now, you go to bed. You can sit with him later when I nap. I know you are worried about him, but he's sleeping. It's unlikely he'll awaken any time soon, but I'll check on him every half hour just in case."

"All right, my darling, if you wish, but I could easily stay up and keep you company."

"No, I'll wake you in a few hours. I'll be fine. And I am going to summon Moody to come see me here. I want to get the full story from Severus first, but whether it was intentional or accidental, that curse was completely uncalled-for, and I intend to let him know precisely how much he endangered the Order's cause last night, even if he doesn't care one whit for Severus."

"You're angry with him, but I am more so. I never would have thought that Alastor could have done something like that...to anyone."

"His dislike of Severus goes beyond any reasoning and beyond even his ordinary dislike of Dark Wizards. You know that," Minerva said. "But he wouldn't have done that before Arthur led the Order, and I think I need to reinforce a few things with him." Her voice was hard with her anger.

"I will speak to him, as well."

"No, you won't. He doesn't trust you. The way he looks at you, if you defended Severus, he'd probably be hexing you in the back next," Minerva said. "He wouldn't credit what you said, and if you were even present when I spoke with him, he wouldn't take me as seriously."

"You are getting rather good at this. I knew you would."

"Hmmp. Necessity, as they say. And I never did like bullies," Minerva replied, "nor gratuitous infliction of pain. That hex was nasty and uncalled-for, even against a Death Eater. And if he did recognise Severus...which I do not doubt, though I will make certain of it first...that is even worse. Fighting Dark Wizards for so many years may have changed Alastor, it has changed many people, but I will not tolerate this behaviour. Beyond the cruelty, it is counterproductive to our cause. And we cannot become like those we fight, no matter the provocation."

"I agree completely, as you know. It is difficult enough to be aware of all that Severus must do as a spy, and to know that without our spy, we might lose the fight, but the gratuitous infliction of pain and violence cannot be tolerated. And that he would do that to Severus, knowing who he was . . ."

"Don't think about it. Go get some sleep. I'll wake you."

A few hours later, Minerva entered her bedroom, approached the bed, closed her eyes, and kissed Robbie's forehead. "Time to get up!"

"Mmm, what a lovely sight to wake up to. Was Severus so lucky?"

Minerva laughed. "Yes, he was, in fact, though I don't know as he noticed," Minerva replied. "He still isn't feeling well. But he ate a little breakfast, and Melina checked him over one more time before she had to leave. She'll be back this evening, unless we need her sooner. He told me what happened last night, and after I'm back from the Great Hall, I will tell you all about it. He's expecting you, but I think he is just going to sleep. You can leave his door ajar and sit in the sitting room, if you prefer."

"I am rather peckish this morning, so I will look in on him then have some breakfast, myself, I think." He pulled on a shapeless blue robe.

"I'll send Poppy up when I see her. I need to speak with Alroy...he wanted to visit Rosemary this weekend, but with Severus ill, he will need to stay at the school...and I need to speak with Filius about a few things, as well, then ask Sinistra to look in on the Slytherins discreetly. I will be as quick as I can, though."

"Have you contacted Alastor yet?"

"Yes, I owled him, but I haven't heard anything back. I asked him to arrive at four, but didn't tell him why."

"He'll think you invited him to tea."

"Let him," Minerva said as they stepped into the sitting room.

"And if I'm not present, he may mistake your intentions further."

"Let him," she repeated. "I'll be back. Blampa should be able to find me if you need me. Don't forget your potion!"

When Minerva returned two hours later, she opened the door to the guest room to find Robbie sitting in a rocking chair by the bed with a book open on his lap. Both he and Severus were snoring lightly. She smiled and closed the door gently.

She was in her study when there was a light rap, then the door opened and Robbie stepped in.

"I thought you might be back. Severus is asking for you. He's concerned about school business, I believe."

"I didn't want to disturb you. You both looked so peaceful," Minerva said with a smile.

"I was reading to him from *Rob Roy*. I think he was enjoying it, but we both fell asleep."

Minerva chuckled. "All right. Poppy said she would stay up here during lunch, and so you and I can both go."

"Did you speak with Alroy?"

"Yes. He was disappointed, but he understands. I told him he could leave the school on Wednesday after classes and be gone overnight. I thought you could stay in Gryffindor Tower in case there are any issues that arise in his absence."

"Yes, I would be happy to. I will miss you, but I know it must be harder on Alroy and Rosemary."

"Oh, I thought I could use the Floo to the study and come for a little visit...if you don't mind, of course!" she replied jokingly. "But I'll go see what has Severus concerned. And you have work to do...didn't you say something about reading a hundred-twenty essays this weekend?"

"Not all of them, but I hoped to get through half of them before Monday."

"Off you go, then! I'll see you at lunch."

Minerva knocked on the partially open door to the guest room.

"I'm awake," Severus said. His voice was still somewhat hoarse, but he sounded stronger.

"How are you feeling?" Minerva asked, coming into the bedroom.

"Not bad. Better."

"You look better. How is your back?"

He shrugged one shoulder. "I can barely notice it now."

"You asked to see me."

"Yes. I have work to do. I have rounds tonight, and I have to prepare for classes on Monday. The potions that the third, fifth, and seventh years will be brewing..."

"Don't worry about any of that. Melina said you're not to do anything until Tuesday, and then only if you feel well. Robbie and I talked about that last night...early this morning, actually. He will be taking your Potions classes on Monday. I will tell him to consult with you about any preparation."

"And his classes?"

"Gareth. I have sent him a message. I anticipate he will arrive tomorrow. If you aren't well enough on Tuesday, I am sure that Gareth will stay another day."

"I am sure he will be thrilled to be helping me," Severus said drily.

"I am sure he will be thrilled to be at Hogwarts. And helping Robbie and me."

"Hmmpf."

"Whatever he said to you, Gareth has a good heart. He may still harbour a grudge of sorts, but he would be appalled by what happened to you."

"He would see it as only just, as I am sure Moody does. And perhaps they would be right."

"Severus, you take care of your own justice now. You make amends as your conscience dictates. You have already suffered sufficiently from your mistakes...all right, all right!" she said, holding up her hand when Severus opened his mouth to interrupt. "Not simply mistakes. Crimes, sins, whatever you wish to call them. But I think you would find that Gareth would prefer an honest confrontation...he certainly wouldn't cast a devastating hex at you when your back was turned. And he will be happy to help out for a day or two."

"Very well. But I will teach on Tuesday. And move back to my rooms this evening."

"No, I think it's best you stay here for the rest of the weekend. Sinistra has agreed to look in on your House at intervals, and your prefects know to go to her."

Severus frowned. "What have they been told?"

"You are not available. I didn't go into any detail. As far as they know, you may not even be in the castle this weekend. And don't worry about your rounds. I'm taking those."

"You?"

"Yes. I thought it would be refreshing. A nice change of pace. I never thought I would miss rounds after becoming Headmistress, but I find I don't get out and about in the castle very much any longer. I am here in the Tower, in the staff room, in the Great Hall, and other than occasionally looking in on a class, I don't get around very much. I will enjoy it," she reassured him.

"If you wish," Severus said with a slight nod. "But I still should return to my rooms. I cannot inconvenience you."

"No. If you are well enough on Monday morning, you can go back to your own rooms then, but your body took quite a beating, and as effective as Poppy and Melina's treatments were, you need time to recover," she replied. "Is there anything you need from your rooms? I would be happy to get you anything you require."

"I would like to shave, actually. Robbie shaved me this morning, and I am not . . . ungrateful, but if I am going to spend another night here, I would prefer to do it myself."

Minerva looked at Severus's hands, which still trembled slightly, an aftereffect of the extended bouts of *Cruciatus*. "I will fetch your shaving kit, then. But it's time for another dose of your potion, I think, especially if you don't want to accidentally slit your throat when you're shaving tomorrow."

"Hmmpf. Perhaps not accidentally," Severus muttered as Minerva poured his viscous brown potion into a small cup. At her sharp glance, he said, "Just joking, Minerva."

"You had better be."

Severus swallowed down the hot potion, and Minerva had a glass of water ready for him.

"I was supposed to meet with Miss Granger this evening," he said after drinking some of the chilled water. "Perhaps you could tell her that I am unable to attend? She will likely wish to spend time in your library, anyway, so I see no need to inform her in advance, but I would prefer it if she didn't simply believe that I forgot."

"She has no doubt noticed your absence from breakfast, and as you will not be at lunch or dinner, either, she will be unsurprised if you are not in the library to meet her."

"Perhaps I could, though. It is just downstairs. If you brought me some robes."

"I think it's better you spend today in bed. If you are well enough tomorrow, you can join us in the sitting room."

"As you wish," Severus said with a sigh. He was just as glad not to have to do anything. His head was beginning to ache again. He looked over at the array of potions bottles on the bedside table.

"Is there another potion you need, Severus?"

"No. Although I have a headache."

"I would give you something for it, but perhaps Poppy should see you."

"It's a headache. No cause to bother her again."

Minerva poured a dose of bright blue Headache Potion into a spoon and gave it to him.

"Be sure you tell Poppy, though."

"Mmph. Do you have any of that green potion?"

"The muscle relaxant? For the cramping?" Minerva asked. "Yes...but when was your last dose?"

"I don't remember...it was whenever you gave it to me," Severus said.

Minerva gave him several drops of the green potion. "No more now until at least two o'clock, Severus."

"I think I'll sleep now." Indeed, his eyes were already closing.

Minerva waved her wand and drew the draperies closed. "There will always be someone nearby if you need anything."

"Mhm."

"Sleep well."

Severus let out a long breath and relaxed into the pillow. It was probably just all of the potions running through his body, but as he drifted off to sleep, he thought that despite feeling as though a herd of Hippogriffs had rampaged over him, he hadn't felt so safe and well in a very long time.

Minerva was dozing on the couch when Robbie returned to fetch her for lunch.

"You should have called for me," he said. "You could have taken a real nap. I would have stayed out here."

"He's been asleep the whole time," Minerva replied. She stretched. "As soon as Poppy arrives, we can go to lunch, then I will tell you everything that Severus told me about last night. But I do think I need a nap before I face Alastor."

"And you are certain you don't want me here with you."

"Yes! Really! I am quite capable, you know."

"I know, my dear."

"You can listen, if you want. As long as you don't decide to tell me afterward everything you think I've done wrong," Minerva said crossly.

"I wouldn't." He leaned over and kissed her. "You do need a nap, I think. You'll be as liable to hex Alastor as to lecture him if you don't," he said with a chuckle.

"I am not in a joking mood. But that's all right." Minerva sighed. "I should see if Severus wants lunch."

"Poppy can do that."

"I suppose. She suggested at breakfast that we move him to the infirmary, but I rejected the idea. I think he's better off here, don't you?"

"Yes, I do. It is more comfortable for him, safer and more private, and he knows that you care about him. Much better than down in the Hospital Wing," Robbie replied. "What did he tell you about last night?"

Minerva sighed again. "I'd rather tell you after lunch."

"All right, my love. And I believe Poppy is on her way up now, anyway."

"Yes, and it will take more than a few minutes to tell," Minerva replied. "I need some fortification before I think about it again, too."

"Severus was going back into the house when Alastor hexed him?"

"Yes," Minerva replied. "If it had been a completely debilitating hex, that little boy would have died in the fire," Minerva said. "What's worse, though, is that when Severus tried to Disapparate, he discovered that there were new Anti-Apparition wards up, and he had deliberately dropped the Death Eaters' wards to allow the rest of the family to escape. He had to find a way out of the building through the fire. That's why he had so much smoke inhalation. His Death Eater robes saved him from the worst of the flames, but they and his mask did nothing to keep him from breathing in the smoke."

"But the rest of the family got away all right?"

"Yes. Which is one of the reasons that Riddle was so angry. Severus deliberately botched the raid to allow the family time to escape, and he forced the father to leave after the house was set on fire. That's when the Aurors arrived. Severus was casting light curses at them, to maintain appearances, and then he blasted a tree, making it look as though he had missed accidentally. He was just turning to go into the house after the boy when he heard Moody say his name. He didn't think anything of it, but then the curse hit his back, he fell, and he looked around to see Moody raising his wand to cast again. Severus managed a successful Expelliarmus, got up, went into the burning house, and got the little boy out. He left him where he would be easily found, but it took him time to do, so when he arrived, he was obviously late. He used the excuse that he had been going to finish off the child, but had become trapped in the fire and had to get out. Riddle seemed to believe it was just another example of Severus's incompetence, and the fact that Moody had cursed him was persuasive, as well."

"Did Tom punish anyone else?"

"The others were given a few bouts of Cruciatus, but only Severus received such a massive punishment. Fortunately, he still had a Portkey. I don't know how Tom thought he would survive out there in the rain in the middle of nowhere," Minerva said, "though I assume that he didn't particularly care."

"When Lucius was free, he would sometimes go back for Severus to see if he could Disapparate on his own. One time, he Apparated him to the gates, from what I understand. The man has few principles, but he would do that. I think that Tom would not want to lose Severus at this point...he will wait until he has free access to the school to try to kill him...but he simply assumes that Severus will somehow survive. He is unstable."

"Yes, Severus said it seemed that he was becoming increasingly irrational. By the way," Minerva added with a smile, "he said he now understands why I like you."

Robbie chuckled. "So do we have his blessing? That is good." He leaned over and kissed Minerva's cheek. "I do wonder what we will do when this is over," he said softly.

"We will think about that then, if we both live. And you know what I want you to do if you live and I do not," Minerva said.

Robbie nodded. "Yes, I do. And I will."

"I am glad you have ceased protesting. It was becoming tiresome."

"I also believe that we will both survive. But if you don't, I will go to Eilean Tèarmunn," he said softly.

"And if we both do, we will try to convince Gertrude to move back to Hogsmeade. I believe Gareth would help us."

"Yes, I believe he would," Robbie agreed with a nod. "You go take your nap now. I will see whether Severus requires anything and wake you at three-thirty."

Robbie entered the guest room and closed the door behind him. Severus opened his eyes.

"I have been temporarily banished from the sitting room. I thought you might like some company."

"Stay if you like," Severus said, closing his eyes again.

"Alastor Moody is on his way up."

Severus opened his eyes and looked into Robbie's grey ones.

"Would you like to hear the conversation? Minerva gave me permission to eavesdrop," Robbie said with a slight smile. "Much more interesting than hearing about it second-hand."

"What..." Severus coughed and cleared his throat as Robbie poured him some water. After a few swallows, he said, "What is she going to say to him?"

"I believe she has a few words about his treatment of you last night," Robbie said softly. "As I said, I think it could be interesting."

Muted voices came from the sitting room, and Robbie raised his eyebrows questioningly. Severus hesitated only a moment, then nodded. Robbie raised his wand and cast an eavesdropping spell on the door, and the two wizards heard Minerva's voice clearly as she invited Moody to sit.

Chapter Seventeen: When sinews give way

Chapter 18 of 34

Alastor receives a lesson from Minerva as Severus and Robbie eavesdrop. Severus receives unexpected visitors.



Chapter Seventeen: *When sinews give way*

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Robbie settled back in the rocking chair, and Severus pushed himself up to sit with his pillows against the headboard. The two wizards were silent as they listened to the conversation coming from the sitting room.

"I was surprised to receive your invitation, Minerva," Moody said. "It has been a busy time. He's planning something big, soon." There was a pause. "And usually Crouch is with you."

"It was not an invitation, Alastor," Minerva replied.

"No?"

"It was a summons. Can you imagine why I have summoned you?"

"You have a viper in your midst and you would like me to . . . *eradicate* it," Moody said, his voice gruff and hard.

"What I would like, Alastor," came Minerva's soft, even reply, "is for you to *eradicate* the viper that lies within *you*."

There was a slight scuffling sound, Moody's wooden leg, perhaps. "You want...you have surrounded yourself with those of dubious intent, to put it mildly, and you want me to..."

"To rid yourself of whatever it is that makes you like them, like the Death Eaters, like Riddle," Minerva said bluntly, "whatever it is that induces you to undermine our cause, the cause of the Order, Albus's Order. It will lead you to your end, if you do not; it may lead us all to our end."

"What are you on about?" Moody asked querulously.

"Last night. Tell me about last night."

"Gladly! They were after Scrimgeour's granddaughter and her family, out to kill them all, or to kidnap her to draw out Rufus from his security. We arrived just in time."

"Did you really?" Minerva asked coolly. "And how many of her family were killed? Was she kidnapped?"

"No, no, as I said, we arrived in time. The two Aurors on duty..."

"Ah, so her guard was killed, then," Minerva said.

"No, Stunned. But they could have been killed. The house was on fire. The bastards set the house on fire with the family inside."

"And was the family inside when you arrived?"

"No, they were in the garden, then the Anti-Apparition wards fell, and we got them out. The father was hysterical. He'd been under the *Imperio*."

"And what was he forced to do under *Imperio*?"

"It's an Unforgivable!" Moody roared.

"What was he forced to do?"

"Leave the house," Moody muttered.

"*What* was he forced to do?"

"He was forced to leave the house...but his son was inside!"

"And so the son is dead? Died in the fire?" Minerva asked, though her voice was hardly questioning.

"No," Moody said quietly. "They tried to kidnap him. But they didn't get him far. We found him a few hundred yards from the house. Obliviated."

"So this Death Eater went into the burning building, picked up a four year-old boy and then just dropped him and happened to Obliviate him?" Minerva asked. "What kind of Death Eater would do that? Tell me, Moody. Who was the Death Eater?"

There was a moment's silence, then Moody said, "You obviously know who the Death Eater was. He can't hide from this eye. I knew Snape as soon as I saw him."

"You knew him, yet you cast a curse at him?" Minerva said. "Why? And why that curse?"

"I saw the fire. I wanted him to burn, to know what the fire felt like. And to stop him, but he didn't stop," Moody replied.

"No, he didn't stop. What did he do?"

"He . . . he went back into the house."

"Before that, Alastor."

Silence.

"What did he do before he went back into the house?" Minerva repeated insistently.

"He disarmed me," Moody admitted.

"And then he did what? Hex you within an inch of your life?"

"No, he was in a hurry. He didn't take the time," Moody replied. "He needed to kidnap the boy."

"In a hurry to go into a burning house, with his own back aflame in pain? In a hurry to kidnap a boy at the risk of his own life, and then just leave him? Surely, even you cannot believe that?"

"He was there. You know what they do. You know what he has done. Once a Dark Wizard, always a Dark Wizard," he said. "You know what things he has done. Murder, torture, destruction."

"And what would you call what you did last night?"

"Justice! Justice delayed, but justice!"

"That was no justice! That was torture, that was cruelty, that was the act of a Death Eater! Inflicting such pain, and not merely to stop or to slow your opponent, but from some twisted sense of justice, or revenge!" Minerva said, her voice low and hard, biting anger in every word. "If Severus had not reentered that building, that little boy would have died. Then, to his dismay, he reached the child and discovered that although he had dropped the Death Eaters' Anti-Apparition wards to allow the family to escape, there were new ones, and he had to struggle through the smoke and flame to bring the boy to safety. Even after you hexed him, Alastor, Severus was intent on saving the child. Twenty years ago, he may have turned on you, and he may not have given a tinker's dam about the life of the child, but last night, it was *you*, Alastor, who cared more about revenge and causing pain than you did about the life of a child."

"He could have killed him, kidnapped him..."

"Alastor, you knew it was Severus. You know that he is in the Order. He is our spy, and you know that by necessity, he must sometimes behave as a Death Eater, but you ought to have trusted him in this instance. Your inability to think clearly has the potential to undermine the work of the Order, Alastor, and it could endanger our one reliable spy. Your nasty curse did have one positive effect, however," Minerva said, pausing.

"What was that?" Moody finally asked after the silence had lengthened uncomfortably.

"It was instrumental in convincing Riddle that Severus was merely incompetent, and that was the cause of the failure of the raid; it also gave Severus an excuse for being so late in returning to his side. He was severely punished, but his status is still intact...his status as a spy, at any rate."

"I see."

"Do you see? Do you?" Minerva asked. "Severus deliberately bungled the raid to allow the family to leave. He was on his way in to get the boy, to Apparate him out, when you cursed him. He was going to tell Riddle that he couldn't find him and the boy must have been rescued by the Aurors. He would have been delayed by mere moments instead of by several minutes if he had been able to do that. Instead, he had to carry the boy out, Oblivate him so that he could not say that a Death Eater saved him, and then, without being caught, suffering from smoke inhalation and burns to his hands as well as the painful damage to his back, Severus had to walk out past the wards you put up. That all took precious time, Alastor."

"I just thought . . . one less rat."

"You *didn't* think." Minerva sighed. "In my first flush of anger, I wanted to have you suffer as Severus suffered, though only for a minute, but that desire faded quickly. Alastor, we cannot become like those we fight. We must already make compromises. I have, myself. But I will not compromise my basic principles. Severus is not the only one who has changed. You have, too. Unfortunately, I cannot say that the change in you has been positive."

"We have to use whatever means necessary to stop them. You don't understand..."

"I do understand. And there is much that I would sacrifice, including my life, to defeat this little toe-rag, but taking satisfaction in the pain of others, that is not something that we can ever, ever allow ourselves. You cast a curse on Severus whose primary purpose was to cause pain, Alastor. What kind of wizard does that? And how do you think that Albus would feel if he were here now, knowing what you did?"

"Snape hasn't changed..."

"Whether he has or not is immaterial to me at the moment. We are talking about you. We were never close friends, Alastor, but I thought I knew you. I thought I knew a proud, strong, noble wizard who would always fight for the Light and who would never do such a thing. And Albus . . . you must know what you owed him. Do not forget his expectations of you simply because he no longer is here to lead the Order."

"I have never used Unforgivables," Alastor mumbled.

"I know you haven't, but I think you have forgotten what it is that makes a spell Dark, what makes a heart Dark," Minerva said gently. "If you are willing to be honest with yourself, I think that you can examine what Severus did that night and what you did, and you can see which of you behaved in the way that would have made Albus proud, which of you behaved as a fighter for the Light. Fortunately, I do believe in second chances. Even for stubborn old Aurors."

"I didn't know what Snape was doing."

"You didn't think, and you didn't trust. Trust that Albus would not have believed in Severus's allegiance for all these years if he did not have good reason. Albus was not infallible, but I know that in this, he was right."

"Sometimes . . . I see him, and I can only remember all that he did, or what he must have done, during the first war, before he . . . before he became a spy. And then what he must still do . . ."

"As you say, it is what he must do. He often has little choice. The terrible choice between evil and greater evil. You did not face that choice last night, Alastor," Minerva said softly. She paused, then said, "I would not inflict pain upon you just to show you the pain he experienced. And you know pain. But I do want to show you something."

There was more silence, some rustling, then the sound of something heavy being placed on the table.

"A Pensieve?"

"I want you to see a few of my memories, Alastor, and understand my horror at what you have done, what you have become. Just a few . . . snippets."

In the guest room, Severus began to sit up, his eyes wide with the realisation that Minerva intended to show Alastor some of her memories from the night before and early that morning.

Robbie raised his finger to his lips, then whispered, "Trust Minerva."

Severus stiffened, then nodded and leaned back against the pillows again.

A half hour later, Alastor Moody, chastened and sober, left the Headmistress's suite, and Minerva rapped lightly on the door to the guest room.

Severus cleared his throat and said, "Come in."

Minerva entered and smiled slightly at the two wizards. "I gave him something to think about, anyway. And I think that you are safe from a repeated performance, Severus."

"I wish you hadn't shown him . . ."

"I want you to see what memories I put in the Pensieve. It is likely not precisely what you believe it to be, and it might benefit you in a different way," Minerva said. "Robbie, would you fetch the Pensieve?"

When Robbie returned with it, he placed it on the bedside table, which Minerva had enlarged to accommodate the heavy, shallow bowl.

"I think you should view it, as well, Robbie," Minerva said. "Now or later, your preference."

Robbie raised an eyebrow, but nodded. "Now, I think. Shall we?" he asked Severus.

The two dipped into the Pensieve, Severus first, Robbie following, entering the memories that Minerva had placed in it for Alastor's edification.

Severus looked around, confused. He was in a wood at night, but it was none he recognised. He glanced back at Robbie behind him and blinked. Robbie seemed peculiarly indistinct. Some odd effect of this Pensieve, he thought, wondering where and when he was.

"An old memory, I believe," Robbie said softly in response to Severus's unasked question.

At that moment, a small form flashed by them, a cat. Minerva in her Tabby form. The two wizards followed, unencumbered by the phantom underbrush of the memory. They watched the cat stop and sniff, then proceed again, picking her way through the scrubby dead bracken. She seemed to pick up a scent and started forward more rapidly. She stopped in a small clearing, listening and sniffing the wind, then she walked carefully around a scraggly tree toward a large flat rock, which had been heaved up at an angle. She stopped again, looking intently beneath the rock, then she disappeared underneath it. A moment later, she reappeared and transformed into her ordinary form. Severus could see that Minerva must have been only in her early twenties at the time of these events.

The two wizards listened as Minerva spoke to someone beneath the rock, explaining why she was there, then watched as she helped Albus crawl out from beneath it. She had said he looked terrible, and he did. He seemed covered in blood, his forehead was split open on the left side, and the tremendous swelling around it prevented him from opening his left eye. It appeared from his movements and the deformation of his left shoulder that he had other injuries, as well. They watched as Minerva gently cleaned Albus, cut the coat from him, and treated the swelling around his shoulder, all the while explaining their situation and their options. There was little more that she could do for him, though, and after a slight shift in the memory, they watched as she transformed into her Animagus form and ran off into the night. There was a moment of disjuncture, and the memory shifted slightly again. Albus was standing by a tree; they could hear others approaching as Minerva cleaned the traces of blood around the rock, then grabbed up a log, held onto Albus, and the two Portkeyed away.

Another disjuncture, and this time, Severus found himself in a brightly lit ward at St. Mungo's. Minerva was approaching a bed on the far side of the room.

"Alastor!" Minerva smiled down at the boy in the bed.

Severus scarcely recognised him. The Auror's leg was gone, but his face was whole, both eyes, natural. He certainly didn't recognise the open, warm smile on the young wizard's face. Not a hint of malice or sarcasm to be seen.

"Minerva! They told me I had a visitor, but I didn't expect you." He sat up, pulling a pillow around behind him.

"I wanted to see you and bring you something." Minerva looked around, then pulled out a bottle of Old Ogdens and two small glasses. "Carson can't be with us, but I understand he wanted to share a firewhisky with you," she whispered, "so I brought some."

At the mention of Carson's name, young Alastor sobered and nodded. Minerva poured out two small shots of the firewhisky and handed one to Alastor.

"To Carson," Minerva said, raising her glass.

"To Carson...and to Professor Dumbledore," he said.

The two drank down the alcohol, both making a face at its potency, then laughing.

"If it weren't for Professor Dumbledore, I wouldn't be here," Alastor said softly. "And Carson, too. He could have taken the Portkey instead, but they both insisted I use it." He looked up, his dark eyes brimming with tears. "I owe them both my life."

"And they are both happy you survived, I am sure of that. Wherever Carson may be, he will be glad that you lived to keep fighting the good fight."

The memory shifted again, and Severus looked around. They were in the Headmaster's bedroom, the curtains drawn back to let in the sunlight. Dumbledore was lying propped up in bed, his breath rattling and wheezing in his chest. It must have been only a day or two before he died. Minerva stood and let someone into the room. Moody.

Albus's eyes opened, and he smiled slightly. "Alastor! So good . . . of you to come."

Minerva helped him sit up further and held a glass to his lips, and he sipped some water through a straw.

"I heard you were sick. Getting sicker," the old Auror said gruffly. "You've got us all worried."

"Oh, don't worry about me! Too late for any worry," Albus said. "Here, sit. Tell me how you are, how the work is, if you're still enjoying . . . being back in the saddle again."

"I'm well, as you see me," Alastor replied. "And we're holding up against them. We'll beat them yet. There are a lot of good young witches and wizards who aren't beguiled by the likes of him. We're still able to recruit some good ones. Of course . . . there are losses, too."

"There are always losses. We must make them meaningful or simply . . . quit," Albus said. He began to cough, and Alastor sprang up in surprise, but Minerva put her arm around him, held a handkerchief before his mouth, and whispered a spell to ease the spasm. When Albus settled back against the pillows again, Minerva poured out a small amount of a clear potion, but Albus waved her away. "Just a sherbet lemon, my dear." He quirked a smile. "For the little tickle in the back of my throat."

Minerva shook her head in disapproval, but gave him a sherbet lemon.

"Mm. Still tastes nice," he said. Albus looked over at Alastor. "Some things taste metallic now. Rather unpleasant. But back to you. Would you care for a sherbet lemon? No? You were saying about the young ones, Alastor . . . Set an example for them. Show them what a good, strong wizard really looks like, that the Death Eaters are not the strong ones. Set an example, my boy."

The memory seemed to shimmer, and now Severus saw himself, lying on the floor of the Headmistress's Office, his hair and clothing sodden, his Death Eater's mask protruding from one pocket of his robes. Minerva rushed to his side. He hadn't seen her expression at the time, but now he could see the distress in her face, the pain, as she asked what had happened to him. The memory shifted again, and Minerva was turning her face away as Poppy healed the wounded flesh on his back. Severus grimaced at the memory. Robbie had been right: it looked like a large acid burn. There was another shift, they were in the sitting room, and Severus listened as Minerva asked when he would be able to answer questions, and Poppy recited the injuries he had suffered, including the fact that he would have died had he been unable to Portkey away from the cold, wet wood to a place of safety.

The two wizards emerged from the Pensieve, Robbie returning to his seat in the rocker, and Severus falling back against the pillows and closing his eyes. Minerva had been sitting at the foot of the bed waiting, and now she rose and poured Severus some water, letting him hold the glass, but ready to take it from him when he was through. Severus watched as she replaced the glass on the table, thinking how very well she seemed to do everything, and how natural she made it seem. He never felt resentment when she did something for him; he felt gratitude wholly unmixed with any resentment, something he had once thought impossible. He had learned that when he was afflicted by the *Adfectus*, and it was a good lesson to remember, he thought as he watched Minerva use her wand to retrieve her memories from the Pensieve.

"So, what is the first thing that strikes you when you think of the memories I showed you?" Minerva asked, sitting again at the foot of the bed.

"That you were beautiful then and still are," Severus said softly, momentarily unaware of the other wizard's presence and forgetting himself.

Minerva blushed slightly and said, "Thank you, but other than that."

"Who was Carson?" he asked.

Minerva was taken aback by the question, having expected something different, but she answered him. "He was the other Auror with Albus that day. The three of them had been caught in an explosion, and all three were wounded. Carson's wounds were the worst. Albus had a Portkey with him, but it had been specifically designed to be able to transport only one person and to transport only Albus. Albus was badly injured, as you saw, the wand he had carried that day was broken, and his magical energy was very low. He was able to alter the Portkey to carry someone other than himself, and he and Carson both agreed to send Alastor. While Albus and Carson were awaiting help, Carson died. That . . . that log that I had . . . that was his Transfigured body. His corpse was restored and returned to his family." Minerva hesitated a moment, then added, "Carson was also a very good friend of mine. My first boyfriend, I suppose you might call him, although at the time he was killed, we were just good friends."

Severus nodded. "And Moody lost his leg then?"

Minerva nodded.

"He looked so different. Very . . . young. He was a boy," Severus said.

"He was. He was scarcely out of school, really," Minerva replied. "But he wanted to do his duty. I think that after that incident, he felt it even more keenly, as though he had to be twice the Auror in order to live up to some heightened expectations he had for himself."

"Thank you for not showing him everything from last night...this morning, I suppose it was," Severus said, remembering how she had helped clean him up and dress him in the fresh nightshirt while Poppy treated his injuries. "I thought . . . I thought you were going to show him everything."

"I assumed that what I showed him was sufficient without violating your privacy and your dignity. But it was important to me that he saw what he himself had done and learned something of what you had suffered." The corner of Minerva's mouth twitched a slight smile. "He did rather grimace when Poppy mentioned crushed testicles."

"That wasn't even what hurt the most. The burn was worse, and the pain in my head . . ."

"I think Melina said that was from the curse that reduced the volume of your cerebrospinal fluid. You were also very bruised," Minerva said.

"Thank you for your help," Severus said, addressing them both. "And for having me here. I overheard Poppy saying something about the Hospital Wing."

"This is much better. I wouldn't want you anywhere else right now," Minerva said briskly. "Now, I'm going down to dinner; you two men can eat up here. I'll be back later...don't forget that Melina will be returning and may arrive before I do. Robbie, in the meantime, take good care of Severus for me!"

When Minerva returned from dinner an hour later, she entered her suite to hear peculiar gulping sounds coming from the guest room. Puzzled and slightly alarmed, she pushed open the partially open door to find Severus gripping his sides, apparently grimacing in pain, but Robbie was only sitting holding an open book and smiling at the younger wizard.

"What's going on here?" Minerva asked, stepping into the room.

"Oh, Minerva, thank Merlin you're back," Severus gasped. "He's torturing me! Tell him to stop!"

Minerva suddenly realised that Severus was trying to keep from laughing...or perhaps trying to laugh; it was difficult to tell which way his efforts were being expended.

"So, what form is his torture taking?" Minerva asked, suppressing a grin.

"His reading...he is butchering the English language! No, the Scots accent! It's dreadful!" Severus exclaimed, but his eyes were brighter than Minerva had ever seen them, save when he had been afflicted by the *Adfectus* spell and all of his emotions were so much closer to the surface.

"I must protest," Robbie said. "I believe that I am adding some life to the text, some flavour! I have modelled the accent on your very own, Minerva, and I believe it to be quite fine."

"Are you reading him *Rob Roy*?" Minerva asked, ignoring Robbie's evaluation of his Scottish burr.

"Yes, we skipped over the first couple chapters, but then we fell asleep somewhere in the fifth chapter this morning, so we still are not very far into it. You are welcome to join us," Robbie said.

"I think not. I will leave you boys to it...though perhaps I might recommend choosing a book that will provide a change in tortures for your bed-bound audience?"

"I don't know, I'm becoming interested in it now," Severus said. "But I don't think it's supposed to be this painfully humorous."

"Whatever you like. I'm going down to my office now. Melina will be here shortly, so your entertainment will of necessity come to an end for the evening...don't tire him too much, Robbie!"

"Of course, Minerva," Robbie said. "Your wish is my command!"

"As it should be!" Minerva said with a slight grin. "I will see you both later."

Twenty minutes later, Minerva was back again; this time when she looked in, Robbie was reading some student essays and Severus was dozing. Robbie looked up and smiled at her. Minerva returned his smile, but crossed over to Severus.

"Severus! Severus!" she said lightly, placing a hand on his shoulder.

Severus took a sharp breath and opened his eyes. "Is Melina here?" he asked. He didn't want to admit it, but he still felt as though someone had put him through a wringer, and he was not unhappy about the visit from the Healer. Perhaps she could cast another spell or two and all his residual aches would disappear.

"No, you have a visitor," Minerva replied. "It's Miss Granger. She's waiting in the sitting room. May I show her in? She is worried about you."

Severus's first reaction was to say "no," but he didn't immediately. There was a part of him that wanted to see Hermione, though even that part of him didn't want her to see him dressed in one of Albus's old red, white, and gold striped nightshirts, lying like an invalid in bed.

"What shall I tell her?" Minerva asked. "I can tell her that you're resting. I am sure she would understand."

Severus shook his head and pushed himself into a sitting position. "Could you give me the dressing gown?" When Minerva handed him the dark red dressing gown and began to help him into it, he said, "I don't particularly want her to see me, but if I don't . . . she may worry."

"She probably would, but you needn't see her," Minerva said softly.

"No, I will."

"Melina will be here soon, anyway, so it will need to be a brief visit." She turned to Robbie. "Why don't you join me in the sitting room...I have a few things I need to discuss with you."

Robbie inclined his head in agreement and stood. Severus didn't have to wait long after their departure for a knock on the door.

"Come in," he called out, glad that most of his hoarseness had disappeared.

The door opened just a crack and Hermione looked in. On seeing him sitting up in the bed in the small guest room, she smiled and entered.

"Good evening, Miss Granger," Severus said.

"Hello, Professor." Hermione stepped toward the bed. "Professor McGonagall said you had been hurt. How are you feeling?"

"Much better," Severus replied. "Would you like to have a seat?" He gestured toward the rocking chair that Robbie had vacated.

Hermione smiled and walked around the bed to sit in the chair to his right.

"Do you want to talk about it?" Hermione asked. "Professor McGonagall didn't really tell me anything."

"I do not particularly wish to talk about it, but for your information . . . I was on a raid for the Dark Lord and there were a few complications, then he was displeased with my apparent incompetence, and so . . ." Severus shrugged one shoulder.

"I'm sorry," Hermione said softly.

Severus nodded. It felt awkward to just sit there, so he asked, "Did you have any Order business you wished to discuss with me?"

"No, but I was worried when you weren't at any meals today."

"I will be well soon enough," Severus replied.

"You still don't look very well," Hermione said frankly. "You must have been very badly injured."

Severus didn't know what to say to that. It was difficult enough to know how to react to her honest concern; he had an urge to scoff at her and her worries, but he did not.

"I had a Portkey. It brought me to safety," Severus said.

"I'm glad," Hermione replied.

Severus was acutely aware of the genuine concern in her eyes. He was beginning to think that it had been a bad idea to agree to see her. He did not need her sympathy or concern, and he had no idea what to say to her.

"Do you need anything?" Hermione asked.

"No, thank you. The Headmistress is supplying me with what I require." He looked down at the dressing gown. "In Gryffindor colours, but nonetheless . . ."

Hermione giggled shortly. "It doesn't look bad, though, honestly. I am glad you're up here and not all alone."

"It has been comfortable," Severus admitted, "and better than being in the Hospital Wing."

"Could I visit you again?"

"I will not be here long. I will teach again on Tuesday, I believe," Severus responded, "but if you like, yes, you may visit me tomorrow."

Hermione smiled brightly. "We could take a brain holiday together!"

Severus returned her smile. "Yes, we could." Remembering their conversation of the previous week, he said, "My name is Severus, and I take brain holidays...care to come along?"

Hermione laughed. "Hello, Severus. Yes, I would, as long as they don't require peculiar potions."

"Only whatever the Healer recommends for me," Severus said, feigning seriousness. "I will not insist you partake."

There was a light knock on the partially open door, and Minerva stepped through as Hermione was laughing.

"Melina has arrived, Severus. I am afraid we must cut your visit short, Miss Granger," Minerva said.

"That's all right," Hermione replied. She turned back to Severus. "Thank you for seeing me. I hope you feel better. Till tomorrow?"

Severus nodded shortly. "Tomorrow."

After Hermione had left, Minerva asked, "Tomorrow, Severus?"

"She wished to visit again, and I thought it might provide some relief from your friend's idea of entertainment," Severus said drily.

Minerva smiled at that. "I am sure that he would be pleased to read to you from *Potions Quarterly* instead."

"Mmph."

"Are you ready to see Melina?"

"There is little to do to prepare to see her," Severus replied impatiently.

Minerva called Melina in, then left.

"I showed Hermione down to your office," Robbie said, entering the sitting room just as Minerva returned, herself. "She seemed to have enjoyed her brief visit."

"I believe that Severus did, as well," Minerva said. "He apparently invited her to come visit him tomorrow."

"He did?" Robbie asked.

"Yes. Apparently to provide him relief from your entertainment," Minerva said. She paused, then added, "Before I went in, I thought I heard her call him by his first name."

"Really?" Robbie's brow furrowed. "That doesn't sound like anything that Severus would stand for, even from Hermione."

"He always addresses her by her first name now...except, I presume, in class."

"Well, you did want him to have a friend," Robbie pointed out, "and you encouraged her to see him as one."

"I know, but now . . . I know I try to remain positive about his future, but there is every chance that he won't survive, despite our efforts."

"Unless Tom actually uses the Killing Curse on him, I have hope that he will survive. We will do what we can to ensure that Severus does not face him alone."

Minerva shook her head. "There may be no choice for us."

"We shall see," Robbie replied. "We must simply be prepared to act quickly."

Several minutes later, Melina stuck her head out and called to the two of them. When they came in, she said, "As I told Professor Snape, he should make a complete recovery, but he will need to get sufficient rest over the next few days. It's particularly important that he remain well-hydrated. I have written down which of the potions he should continue to take, and he should have the salve applied to his back three times daily for the next couple days. I noted that he hasn't had it done again since this noon when Poppy did it, so I will apply it before I leave. Don't neglect that, though. Not only will it help with the residual discomfort, but it will eliminate any chance for scarring."

"As though I care about a little scarring," Severus said with a sneer, his arms crossed. He looked up at Melina. "You could scarcely have missed the scars already there."

"Well, it isn't a treatment that I would recommend," Melina replied good-humouredly, "but the curse actually did so much damage to your back that any old scars in that area were destroyed. Once the new skin is entirely regenerated, your lower back will be as smooth and beautiful as can be. You should be careful not to expose it to sunlight for several weeks, though."

Severus snorted. "Do I look like a sunbather to you?"

Melina just laughed. "Still, Professor, you must allow Poppy to apply the salve regularly...by Tuesday, you will only need it done morning and evening, so it shouldn't interfere with your teaching day."

Severus just grunted at her.

Minerva and Robbie left her alone with Severus so she could put the salve on his back.

When Melina returned to the sitting room, Minerva said to her, "He certainly went from a good mood to a bad one very quickly. When you arrived, he seemed, not cheerful...I don't know as he's ever cheerful...but he seemed fairly relaxed."

"He didn't like my physical examination, but there are certain areas of the anatomy that do require palpation to ensure there is no unusual discomfort and that he is healing properly. He took exception to that," Melina replied.

"I sympathise," Robbie said, wrinkling his nose.

"Is he? Healing properly?" Minerva asked.

"Very well. I think he'll likely still be in discomfort in that area for another day or two, but Poppy did a good job with the initial treatment, and the repairs I made took well. I was a little concerned about the level of his cerebrospinal fluid, so I gave him another dose of potion. The curse seems to be having a lingering effect," Melina said.

"He's complained of headache," Minerva remarked.

"That would be at least part of the reason for it. I massaged his head, neck, and shoulders when I applied the salve. He didn't say anything, but I am fairly sure he felt better after. I am going to stop by and see Poppy and leave her with some instructions to follow. If she keeps an eye on him, applies the salve regularly, and sees to it that he takes his potions, he should recover very well...provided he cooperates."

"He's been fairly cooperative, but I think he's felt too unwell for most of the day to put up a fuss," Minerva said.

"You will need to be firm with him as he begins to feel better, then. I would almost recommend that he remain here through Monday, but I know he wants to return to his own rooms."

"We will see," Robbie said. "Thank you for your help, Melina."

"You will be receiving an accounting...not for my time, only for a few of the potions, and at my cost," Melina said. "A few are rather pricey because of the ingredients. I assume you want the bill personally, and not have it charged to Hogwarts."

"Yes," Minerva said. "Just send it to me. I will take care of it."

After Melina left, Robbie said, "Perhaps I should look in on Severus, see if he needs to make a trip to the loo or anything else."

"In a minute. I need you at the moment," Minerva said looking up into his eyes.

"Do you?" Robbie's question was soft, a mere breath.

"Yes, I do." She slid closer to him on the sofa as she reached up and put one hand on the back of his head. As she drew him down to her, she whispered, "I do, very much."

Her kiss was long and languid, and as one arm embraced him, her other hand was unbuttoning first one layer of his robes then the second, permitting her to touch his chest and run her hand down over his torso. Robbie drew back, breaking the kiss. He looked at her and shook his head slightly.

"Severus is in the next room," he said softly.

"I don't want to ravage you right here on the sofa," Minerva said. "Well, perhaps I do, but not at the moment." Her hand caressed him beneath his robes, passing over his chest and side, down to his hip and back up again.

"This is nice," Robbie said with a smile. "It has been a while since we have had time to ourselves. I had thought that this weekend, we could go to those old rooms in the Tower again, make a little holiday away from the world for a while. With Severus here, of course . . . we cannot do that."

"That would have been nice, but I don't think we should any longer. There is too much happening. I don't want us both out of contact with everyone for that long."

Robbie nodded. "You are right, of course." He kissed her forehead then took her hand and kissed each fingertip softly. "I am glad you are more comfortable now than you were."

"It isn't the same as it was, but it is still good." Minerva caressed his face as she looked up into his eyes. "You should have pushed me harder. You should have persuaded me sooner."

"You were in pain, my love, and had so many burdens to bear. I did not wish to make it harder for you. I felt it would be selfish of me."

"I love you."

"And I, you," Robbie whispered as her lips approached his again.

The next morning, Minerva rose and dressed, then looked in on Severus. He was sitting up and paging through a magazine that Robbie had brought him the day before.

"Good morning, Severus. How do you feel?" Minerva thought he looked dreadful.

"Like Thestral crap. I didn't sleep well. I woke at four and I took some analgesic potion, but couldn't fall back to sleep. Then I had to use the loo, and I fell over on the way back. Five feet from the door to the bed, and I fell over," he said bitterly.

She sat down on the edge of the bed. "I am sorry. You should have called, rung the bell we left you. Robbie would have helped you."

Severus flung the magazine across the room. "I don't want his help, or yours, or anyone's."

"I know you don't want it, but I hope you will continue to accept it," Minerva said softly.

"I want to go back to my own rooms."

"Tomorrow morning, Severus."

"The Hospital Wing, then."

Minerva looked at his hand trembling atop the white counterpane. She closed her eyes a moment, and when she opened them, she laid her own hand on his.

"I thought you were comfortable here."

She had expected him to pull his hand away from her light touch, but he didn't; he merely looked away.

"What is it, Severus? We have been through a lot together, you and I. You can talk to me."

He shook his head slightly, then sighed. "I don't know what it is. It is so many things. So many . . . You have been good to me. I would say you have been kind, but so many are kind in such a condescending way. I don't feel that with you. But I still . . . I do not know why, Minerva, but I do not want you to give me anything or do anything for me. And I cannot even say why."

"Do you dislike it so much? Do you resent it?"

"No, no, that's not it at all," Severus said. "In fact, I don't. That's why I don't understand . . . but I don't resent it."

"Do you think that I do?"

Severus was silent for a moment. "Perhaps. Perhaps that is a part of it. If you do not now, I do not want you to later. You have already done so much. And I know how I have hurt you, many times, and not the least when I told you of the Vow. The consequences of that..."

"Shush, Severus, shush. We will not speak of that again. When everything is over, we can, but not until then. For you, I want you to forget it for a while. You have so much responsibility now, and you need to focus on that. You made up for taking the Vow by telling me about it. It was painful, but it was the right thing to do."

Severus raised his eyes and looked at Minerva. "How can you say that?"

"We live and we have much to accomplish, Severus. We will talk about all of that when the little toe-rag has been dealt with."

"I should still leave you to your privacy," he said.

"I would prefer you to stay," Minerva said. "I wouldn't say that if it weren't true."

"And Crouch?"

"This is my suite and you are my guest. How he feels is not relevant. Nonetheless, I know that he is happy to have you here, as well." When Severus didn't respond, she said, "He saw what was done to you, Severus. Whatever his feelings may have been in the past, he is glad you are recovering here. I think that he enjoyed your company yesterday."

"I don't know . . ."

"Hermione is looking forward to visiting you today. She would be disappointed if she couldn't."

Severus moved his head in a noncommittal way.

"I have a suggestion. Let me apply your potion to your back, we'll give you whatever other potions you are to take this morning...Melina left some instructions with them...and then you have your breakfast. After that, take a little nap, and if you still want to leave when you wake up, we'll move you down to the infirmary then. Otherwise, I hope you will stay until tomorrow morning at least."

Severus agreed, seeming to be relieved. He lay down, rolled over, and let Minerva fold the covers down over his legs then raise his nightshirt to expose his lower back. The skin was glistening and pink, a far cry from the horrid mess it had been only a little more than a day before.

"How does it feel?" Minerva asked as she gently applied the shiny white salve to his back, using her fingertips and small circular motions as the instructions indicated.

"Sore, but much better. As the potions wear off, it begins to burn some again, from the inside out. Not the way it did, though. The salve relieves it immediately."

"Good. I'm glad that it feels better. By the end of the week, you probably won't even notice it," Minerva said as she finished applying the potion and pulled his nightshirt back down.

Severus rolled over and sat up. "Thank you."

"Now potions, breakfast, and a nap."

"I would like to shave, too. Do you think I can shower today?"

"I don't know. I'll ask Poppy when she comes up. Hopefully she'll be able to check you over without disturbing you, and you'll be able to sleep right through it."

"As long as she doesn't start poking me the way your niece did last night," Severus grumbled.

Minerva smiled. "I doubt it. But don't think about that. Just take your potions and enjoy your breakfast."

Severus opened his eyes in the dimly lit room. He blinked. Minerva was leaning over him, saying his name.

"Severus, I am sorry to wake you, but it is after noon already. Time for more potions, and you should have something to eat, as well."

"I slept all that time?" he asked groggily.

"Apparently!" Minerva said with a smile as she drew back the curtains with her wand as she perused the instructions Melina had left. "Just two potions now, and then later this afternoon, you need the salve applied to your back again, then once more before you sleep tonight."

Severus sat up and swung his legs over the edge of the bed. He waited a moment, then stood.

When Minerva made a move to help him, he shook his head. "I'm fine."

He made it to the loo and back without falling over, and Minerva smiled. "You're doing well."

"Sleep helped," he said curtly.

Minerva conjured a small table, and Severus sat up in the bedroom's straight chair to eat his lunch. She kept him company as he ate, reading a sheaf of parchments and making notes in the margins. When he finished, she banished the dishes for him.

"I have to leave the suite this afternoon. I won't be back until after dinner. Robbie will be here some of the time, but if he must leave as well, he will make sure there is someone here with you."

"Miss Granger..."

"I left her a note in my office letting her know she could come up to the suite. Whoever is with you will let her in," Minerva said. "Now, would you like to sit up for a while, or go back to bed?"

Minerva left him sitting in the rocking chair reading *Transfiguration Quarterly*. She promised to bring him something more interesting when she returned.

Robbie came in about a half hour later. "More *Rob Roy*? Or are you up for a game of chess?"

"Neither," Severus said, turning the page he was reading.

"Interesting article?"

"Animagus theory. Something about internal Transfiguration. Never heard of it before," Severus said shortly.

"I doubt it is a normal part of the Hogwarts curriculum, as it is rather specialised," Robbie replied.

Severus looked up at him. "You know about it?"

Robbie shrugged. "I have sufficient training in Transfiguration to be acquainted with the concept. In addition, I know several Animagi."

"Hmmpf." Severus turned back to his article.

Robbie stood uncertainly in the doorway for a minute, then said, "Let me know if you need anything, Professor. I am just in the sitting room."

"Mm-hm."

The door closed quietly behind the older wizard. Severus sighed and put down the journal. Some company would have been welcome, and he hadn't been concentrating very well on his reading, but he didn't want to play chess or listen to Crouch's rendition of Sir Walter Scott's novel. He no longer felt distaste for the older Potions master, but he had no idea what they could find to talk about.

Severus glanced at the window, trying to judge the time. Perhaps since it was Sunday, Hermione would come to visit in the afternoon rather than in the evening. It was odd, he thought, that he had come to enjoy her company. In some ways, she was still so very young, and really relatively innocent, despite her experience and her knowledge. Yet she was a witch with potential. MacAirt had noticed her potential and offered her Animagus training. He stifled his jealousy, admitting it this time, but reasoning that it would certainly be foolish to think that he could teach her all she wished to learn. What he really envied MacAirt, he supposed, was the time that Hermione shared with him. But that was unreasonable, as well. Hermione actually sought out his company and enjoyed spending time with him. That was more than most people did. Of course, he wouldn't want to spend time with most people.

Severus stood from his chair and stretched. He was feeling better, though not yet normal. He drew back the covers and settled down on the bed, only pulling a light coverlet up over his feet and lower legs. He was growing drowsy again when the door opened.

"Professor Snape?" It was Robbie again. "I must go out now. My brother has arrived. He said he was happy to stay with you, but if you are uncomfortable with that, I will see if Poppy..."

"That's fine," Snape interrupted. "I doubt he'll kill me in my sleep." At the expression on Crouch's face, he added, "It really is fine. I don't think I will need anything."

"If you are sure . . ."

"Yes."

Severus expected to spend the rest of the afternoon undisturbed, but a half hour later, he was in the loo and he heard a knock and then the door to the guest room opening. Probably McGonagall had been given instruction to check on him periodically. He washed his hands slowly, hoping that when he emerged, the man would be gone. When he opened the door, though, McGonagall was there, standing just inside the room, dressed in his kilt, white Jacobite shirt, and short Graphornhide boots.

"Robbie said you were reading some Transfiguration journal. I thought you might prefer one of these," he said, holding out a few journals.

Severus walked back to the bed, trying not to shuffle. He nodded at the younger wizard. "You can put them down. I'll look at them."

"Two Arithmancy journals...don't know if that interests you...and the most recent *Modern European Potions*."

"That's a rather advanced journal for an Arithmancer to be reading," Severus remarked, picking up the Potions journal from where Gareth had placed it at the foot of the bed. He settled back against the headboard and flipped it open to the table of contents.

Gareth wandered over to look at the potions lined up on the bedside table. "I lived with a Potions master for years, studied with him, helped out in the apothecary. Then Uncle Murdoch is a Potions master, too, and Melina and my grandmother are both Healers. If I hadn't chosen Arithmancy, perhaps Potions . . . but that would have been difficult without a NEWT."

"You took your NEWTs independently?"

Gareth nodded. "I did my OWLs the same way. Received an Outstanding in my Potions OWL. But as you know, in order to attempt a NEWT as an independent student, you require the permission of the Hogwarts instructor in that subject."

"And I was the instructor, and you did not want my permission."

Gareth shrugged. "It didn't really matter, anyway. I still received nine NEWTs, and I did my Arithmancy apprenticeship with an old master in Oxford who didn't care about anything but how well I did in Arithmancy and Ancient Runes."

"Did you enjoy it?" Severus asked. Most apprentices didn't enjoy most aspects of their apprenticeship, but a good master could still be exciting to study under. Severus had apprenticed with a Death Eater. He hadn't enjoyed it.

"Yes, actually, I did." Gareth picked up one of the potion bottles and uncorked it. He waved his hand over it, wafting its scent toward him. His brow knit, he sniffed it directly. "I don't know this one. Is it safe to taste?"

Severus nodded shortly and watched as Gareth poured out a drop of the thick, brown potion, sniffed it again, then stuck out his tongue and tasted it.

"Interesting. Some kind of antispasmodic. Mustard in it, ginger, a little willow, some marshmallow root, fenugreek, and juniper. I think a few other things that I don't recognise. Probably takes at least a day's brewing."

Severus raised an eyebrow. It was a potion of his own devising, intended to counter the effects of the *Cruciatus*. "Not bad. You are not a dunderhead."

Gareth grinned. "That is one thing I am never accused of being."

"There's also armadillo bile in it and crushed scarab beetles," Severus said.

"Have you considered adding pulverised Ashwinder eggshells halfway through the brewing?"

Severus paused, thinking. "I will try that and let you know whether it increases its potency."

Gareth nodded, examining the other potions. He seemed familiar with them all. He picked up the tin of salve and popped the lid off. He saw the brilliant white potion and began to replace the lid, then paused and looked at Severus.

"Aunt Minerva told me about your back. I was sorry to hear it, believe me or not."

Severus nodded once, acknowledging McGonagall's statement. He didn't know why the wizard was still there, unless he was simply bored. He'd probably been told to babysit the Death Eater. At least he hadn't been offensive.

As Severus scanned the table of contents in the Potions journal, Gareth picked up the parchment with the instructions Melina had left.

"Did Robbie apply this potion before he left?" Gareth asked, holding up the tin.

Severus looked up briefly, shook his head, and paged through the journal to find the article on the uses of Erumpent horn.

"It says here you're supposed to have it applied in the afternoon."

Severus nodded. The author of the article had developed a new cardiac elixir using Erumpent horn. Severus thought that with a few minor changes, the potion could be quite a potent poison. Definitely not a potion for a dunderhead to brew.

"Would you like me to apply it for you?"

Snape looked up. "What?"

"Would you like me to apply the potion for you?" McGonagall said impatiently.

"No." He turned back to the article.

"I'll get Poppy, then. I'll just be a few minutes." The younger wizard hesitated. "You'll be all right for a few minutes?"

"I would be, but there is no need to fetch the matron. I am sure that she will be up later, or Minerva will be. One of them can do it later."

"It's already gone three, though. You need to have it applied now, not later," the wizard persisted.

"I don't need it now," Severus said without looking up.

"It will take just a minute. Roll over on your stomach and I'll do it. It must be hurting again by now."

Severus frowned. It was beginning to burn. He lowered the journal and looked up at young McGonagall. "You will persist, won't you?"

"Yep!" Gareth grinned. "I am most annoying that way. Not a dunderhead, but a hardhead, sometimes."

"Mmm." Severus put the journal down on the bed next to him then turned and lay on his stomach. "It's just the lower part of the back."

He felt Gareth move a sheet to cover his legs, then lift the nightshirt and tug it up, but gently.

"This must be one of Uncle Albus's nightshirts," Gareth remarked. "It is too big on you. And the colours are something he would have worn."

"I think it was," Severus said.

"I didn't realise how big the burn was," Gareth said softly as he pulled the garment up higher so that he could see the entire burn. "It's over the entire lower half of your back."

"I am aware of that."

"Sorry."

Severus felt the salve being smoothed over his skin in the same gentle circular movements that Minerva had used that morning. Gareth seemed to apply it more slowly, though, and Severus could feel the tingle of magic as he rubbed it into the skin.

"What are you doing?" Severus asked, raising himself slightly on one elbow and looking back at Gareth.

"Nothing. Applying the potion," came the bewildered response.

"I thought I felt a spell."

"Oh, that. Intent. Intent matters. Potions are magic, too...as I do not need to tell you. Melina always says that when applying a salve or other external potion, one should form a healing intent."

"Mmph." Severus settled back down. That was true, and he had noticed a similar sensation when O'Donald had applied the potion the night before. It hadn't been as evident when Poppy applied it, and he had noticed nothing when Minerva had. "I hope you know what you're doing."

"I think so," Gareth said softly, dipping his fingers back into the tin, then resuming the slow, soothing circular motion of his fingertips over Severus's back. "It looks better as I do it."

"You don't want to scar me for life?" Severus asked sarcastically.

"No. You already are," Gareth replied sombrely.

When Gareth finished, Severus was surprised to feel his hands, both of them, reach up under the nightshirt.

"What are you doing!?"

"Just thought you might appreciate a massage. But if not . . ." Gareth withdrew his hands. "I apologise. That was rude of me."

"As long as you aren't trying to throttle me, I suppose," Severus said grudgingly, but he rolled over. "I will inform your aunt that you did an adequate job."

Gareth nodded. He seemed subdued as he replaced the lid on the tin and stood.

"You probably want to be left alone."

Severus shrugged. "If you do not prattle, you may stay."

Gareth scowled at him. "You don't have to say it as though you were doing me a favour."

"You do not need to behave as though you actually want to stay," Severus retorted.

"I have spent most of the last fifteen months alone on an island with my mother. I love my mother, but . . . she has become a bit peculiar. Aside from her oddities, I am in fear of becoming just as peculiar, living out there in isolation. It shouldn't be terribly strange to you that I might actually prefer your company to further solitude."

"Even the pet Death Eater's company?" Severus asked sarcastically, unsure why he was feeling so surly, but the wizard disturbed him...more now than when he had been angry and vitriolic.

Gareth seemed to bite his lip. He nodded curtly and turned to leave.

"If you can bear my company, I can bear yours," Severus said impulsively.

"We can have a competition, then," Gareth said, turning and quirking a smile. "Which of us becomes intolerable first."

"Or intolerant first," Severus countered.

Gareth laughed, picked up *Arithmancy Today*, and settled down in the rocking chair to read.

Note: The first events viewed in the Pensieve are described in Chapters XIX - XXIII of *Resolving a Misunderstanding*, if you would care to refresh your memories!

Chapter Eighteen: Strapped to a wheel

Chapter 19 of 34

Minerva and Albus carry on during the weeks following the *Celebrare Affectus Amor Ultimus*. Severus learns something of Albus's plans and is appalled.



Chapter Eighteen: *Strapped to a wheel*

12 January 14 February 1997

Albus reclined on the sofa in Minerva's sitting room in Gryffindor Tower, sipping a cup of chamomile and kava tea and trying to get comfortable while he waited for her. He was concerned about Minerva. Since she had unveiled her plan to him after Melina had cast the *Celebrare Affectus Amor Ultimus* and the results had played themselves out the week before, Minerva had scarcely had more than five hours of sleep a night and was barely eating. She was driving herself night and day, and the strain, he believed, was becoming evident. Her usual teaching duties were sufficient to tire anyone, and although he had not left the castle since the students had returned, she did still have significant responsibilities as Deputy Headmistress and Head of Gryffindor.

Albus stretched out his right hand and looked at it, turning it over, examining the wrist, then letting his sleeve fall back so he could see his forearm. Black and shrivelled, fading to grey and wasted. He nodded in approval, then shook his sleeve back down and reached for his teacup with his left hand. He paused as the door opened and Minerva stepped through.

"My dear! What is it?" Albus sat up and gestured to the space beside him on the couch. "Come here, my love."

Minerva's eyes were bloodshot and her face, pale. She lowered herself wearily to the cushion beside Albus and blinked.

"What is it, Minerva?"

Minerva blinked again and a few tears escaped her eyes. "Melina . . ." she began, her voice cracking. "Oh, Albus!" She turned into his waiting embrace and rested her head against his shoulder, silent tears falling on his robes.

"Yes, my dear?" Albus asked in a whisper.

"Melina made me . . . she brought a cat this time. Oh, Albus!" The silent tears became sobs. "How can I do this? I have to do this, but how?"

"Shh, shh, shh, my sweet one," Albus murmured. "Tell me. Tell me about it, my dear, brave Gryffindor, my love."

Minerva shook her head slightly. "I killed it. I killed it, Albus. It was dreadful. How can I do what I must when this . . . I have failed, Albus, I have failed," she said, weeping uncontrollably.

Albus held her and rubbed her back as she wept, murmuring soothing sounds in her ear.

"We buried it near the Forest," Minerva finally said. "I couldn't even manage to make its little grave. I was too upset. Melina had to do it. A simple charm like that, and I couldn't do it. How can I continue?"

"You will continue because you must, my love. Your plan is clever and it has every chance of success. Your role is the most difficult, for all that you may claim is demanded of me, but I have faith in you." He kissed her hot forehead. "I have complete faith in you, my love. I know you will succeed; all is dependent upon you, and my faith in you is unwavering. We will succeed and all your goals will be met. I am sure of it."

Minerva nodded and fumbled for her handkerchief, finding only a wadded up one in her pocket. Albus reached into his own pocket and gave her his. She wiped her face and blew her nose.

"The poor little thing was sick and would have been dead within days, Melina told me, which is why she chose it, to make it easier for me if . . . if . . ."

"Shh, no need to talk about it. You will succeed. But in order to succeed, you need rest and you need food. You will go to bed, I will order a tray for you, and you will sleep until at least six."

Minerva shook her head and sat up. "I have too much to do, Albus. I can't sleep."

"You will sleep. And if you cannot, you will take a potion to help you. And you will have something to eat."

"Dinner..."

"The Great Hall will do without us tonight. You will have something now, then go to bed. You are exhausted."

"You should go, though, Albus. We cannot both be gone. Not yet."

Albus took a deep breath and let it out. "All right. I will go for a little while." He looked at Minerva's clock. "I will leave in a few minutes, but I will draw you a bath before I go. When I get back, we will get you some light supper...which you will eat; don't think I haven't noticed that you are banishing your food...and then I will tuck you into bed."

"Will you stay with me tonight?" she asked, leaning into his solid warmth.

"Yes, my darling Minerva, I will stay with you tonight." He kissed her forehead. "I will stay with you, my love."

Two days later, Tuesday evening, Minerva ate her dinner with little appetite but with some determination as Albus kept a discreet watch on every mouthful. Still, she finished as quickly as possible, and when the pudding arrived on the tables, she rose and excused herself. As she left, Severus stood and followed her out.

"Minerva," he said, catching up with her in the front hall. "Minerva . . . I have not seen you since Boxing Day."

"You have seen me almost daily, Professor Snape," Minerva said stiffly, bearing in mind all that she must do and why.

"We have not spoken..."

"We spoke just yesterday at the meeting of the Heads of House, Professor. Now, if you will excuse me, I have work to do."

Severus reached for her, but dropped his arm as a small group of students emerged from the Great Hall.

Minerva turned and began to walk at a good clip down the hallway past the staff room.

"Minerva, Professor McGonagall..." Severus said, following her, determined to speak with her.

"I have five minutes for you, Professor," Minerva said, turning and facing him. She walked back, opened the door to the staff room, and Severus followed her in.

"You spoke with the Headmaster. Were you able to persuade him?"

"I persuaded him to reexamine his decision," Minerva replied coolly.

"And?"

"And he reexamined his decision. If you wish to know more, I suggest you speak with him."

"I have seen your niece here recently. Is she treating him? Is he taking the new potions?"

"Dumbledore is a stubborn man, as you know, Professor. Melina is attempting to assist me. I have also been . . . under something of a strain. Her presence has been a comfort to me."

"But the potions..."

"Speak with Dumbledore, Professor," Minerva said briskly. "I suggest tomorrow afternoon. I will tell him to expect you after your last class. Good evening, Professor Snape!"

Minerva quickly left the staff room and an unappeased Severus Snape.

The next afternoon, following Minerva's advice, Severus went directly to the Headmaster's Office after the final class of the day. There, he found another wizard already waiting for the Headmaster: a tall, lanky man, the lamplight glinting off his greying auburn hair. Severus had seen him from a distance a few weeks before, but had not recognised him then and still did not at closer proximity.

The older wizard turned and nodded in greeting, his words tinged with a peculiar accent. "Professor Snape. The Headmaster said that he will be with us shortly."

"You have the advantage of me, sir," Severus replied.

"Crouch. Robert Crouch," the wizard said, introducing himself but not offering his hand.

"Crouch?" Severus asked. "I thought that the Crouches . . . that young Bartimus Crouch was the last of them."

"My cousin, a somewhat distant cousin," Crouch said softly. "I did not grow up in England. Perhaps I am the last of the Crouches. I do not know." The wizard shrugged and gave a peculiar half-smile.

"I see . . ."

"Do you?" Crouch asked, sitting down in one of the armchairs near the fireplace, neatly smoothing his dark brown robes as he sat. "Perhaps you do. Perhaps you would see better if you knew of my father, my father Reginald Crouch."

Severus sat and listened in horror and dread as this foreign Crouch described to him his father's end and then his mother's fate, a fate in which Severus had played a part. Crouch never accused, but it was clear that he knew who Snape was, beyond his role as an instructor at Hogwarts.

After Albus had arrived and Robert had greeted him with a warm embrace, Albus told him that Minerva was waiting for him in his sitting room and to go up to see her.

"So, my boy, Minerva said you wished to see me," Albus said, lowering himself slowly into the chair opposite Severus, which Robert had just vacated.

"Yes. I want to know what you have decided. Whether you have reconsidered. I know that Minerva spoke with you. She told you . . . I will not do it. I will not."

"I know that, Severus," Albus said mildly, "and as I told you that night, as it is so important to you, I will bear that in mind. I appreciate that you have given me time to find a different course, if there is one to be found."

"But..."

"If you are abdicating the role that you were to play, Severus, there is no need for you to be involved any further. Continue as you have done. Bring me word of Tom's activities, let me know if there is any genuine information that you need to mangle with the lies you feed him, and I will tell you what you may safely divulge. Watch over

Harry and Draco, and, if you are able, over Minerva. She is unhappy with us both at the moment, but she will come around in time. I believe that she will need your assistance in the future."

"And the Vow?"

"Follow your conscience, my boy." Albus smiled. "I am very glad that you have one, despite the inconvenience of it! And do not concern yourself about me. Now, dinner will be served soon and I need to speak with Robert, so I must excuse myself. Was there anything else?"

"Crouch."

"Yes?"

"He told me who he is. Who his mother was. Who she is."

"Did he," Albus said softly.

"Is it true?"

"You know the answer to that, Severus."

"Why is he here?"

"Robert is a relative and a friend," Albus explained. "He has been here as a support to Minerva. He is also a Potions master, and Minerva hopes that his presence will . . . be useful."

Severus felt a sense of relief. Albus would try the new potions, then, even if he didn't want Severus to brew them.

"I am sorry if I disappointed you, Albus."

"You exceeded my expectations, my dear boy. Any fault lies with me." Albus stood. "Now, go to dinner. I will see you there shortly."

It was a very cold first day of February, sleet turning to ice as it hit the ground, and Minerva wished she had been able to prevail upon Melina to stay overnight, but her niece insisted on returning home, saying she had been spending too much time away from Brennan as it was. Although her husband was very understanding about it, and their daughter, Rosemary, had temporarily moved back home, so he wasn't alone all day, Melina still felt neglectful.

Minerva returned first to her rooms, and when Albus was not there, she Flooed through to Albus's bedroom. She entered his sitting room to find him lying on his sofa with a book open on his lap, but seemingly asleep. As she bent to kiss him, though, his eyes opened and he smiled.

Minerva pressed her lips to his forehead, then she looked at him appraisingly. He had appeared so much better after the *Celebrare*, strong and solid, much as he had before the curse had struck him, or perhaps even better. Now that healthy glow had faded completely.

"How do you feel?"

Albus gave a wan grin. "Better than I look, I am sure."

Albus was pale and he had dark circles under his eyes. He also appeared to have lost weight, and his cheekbones seemed more prominent. He sat up more fully, having to take some genuine effort to do so. Minerva winced.

"Those potions of Robert and Murdoch's seem to be doing what they are intended to," Albus said as Minerva sat down beside him.

She lay a hand on his forehead. "You feel feverish."

"I think that's the yellow potion," Albus said, "but I am not certain."

"I thought you weren't to begin taking that until next week," Minerva said with a frown.

"Robert and Melina had me take a dose this morning. They needed to adjust something. I didn't work on the formula for that potion, but they are concerned about its interaction with one of the others, and it seemed reasonable to test it today."

"You didn't eat very much at lunch. Did you have anything later?" Minerva asked.

"No. I couldn't seem to keep much down today, and I don't want to take any nausea potions," Albus replied. "But don't worry. I am fine. Melina says I am doing quite well, and the nausea is much better in the evening. I will have some supper after dinner in the Great Hall."

Minerva laughed shortly at that. "Very well. But I hope you do. You need to maintain your strength, and, as you keep reminding me, you can't do that if you don't eat." She reached out and pulled back his right sleeve. "It doesn't look any different."

"It shouldn't. Melina said this is fine."

"You're certain?" Minerva stopped herself, shaking her head. "Of course you are. Is it very uncomfortable?"

Albus shrugged. "It could be better, but I won't complain." He sighed. "I do wish it were only a Glamour, though."

Minerva lightly touched his blackened hand. "I am sorry, Albus," she said softly.

He pulled his hand away and put his arms around her, drawing her close. "Do not be. You are doing what you must, and so am I. Now, tell me how your day was. You seem happier, more relaxed."

"It went well. We are still back with mice, as I told you. Melina was pleased with my progress. She will be returning again tomorrow...and she is bringing both Murdoch and Robert with her to see you this time."

Albus smiled. "I am glad that Robert and Murdoch are getting along so well. They always were friendly, but it's quite a different thing to be working with someone."

"And living with them. Fortunately, Estelle is happy to have the company, too."

"Yes, well, soon enough, she'll have her husband to herself again. I thought we could move Robert into the castle in two or three weeks. He can begin taking some of your easier classes."

"I don't know, Albus. I have never thought that Transfiguration was Robert's strong suit," Minerva said with a slight frown.

"He will be fine. It will make the later transition easier and more seamless. And he needs to have more reason to be here at the castle than simply looking after me."

"You are right, of course. And Gertrude's calculations indicate that there is greater opportunity for problems to arise if he does not move in soon."

"Have you seen Gareth recently?" Albus asked hesitantly.

"No, but he will be visiting again Friday evening," Minerva replied. "You know that he has come to see you every time he has visited, Albus. The only time he didn't was when it was better for our early planning that he not."

Albus nodded. "I tried to thank him last time I saw him, and he became irritated with me. I do not understand him, Minerva. I love him, but I do not understand him. I never know whether I am about to say or do the wrong thing."

"Don't worry so much about it, then," Minerva said sensibly. "You know that he loves you. He is just somewhat mercurial. Just do or say whatever you think best without worrying too much beforehand."

"You are right, of course. And sometimes, I forget that he is a grown wizard, I think, and still treat him like the boy he was. I wish I could go back and change everything, but I don't know what I could have done, unless I could have prevented what happened to Malcolm or to Gertrude, and that wasn't possible. The rest . . . I made the decisions I had to, not because I wanted to. It wasn't easy. Even apart from what it did to him, it wasn't easy."

"Gareth knows that, Albus, and he understands. But as you say, he was just a boy at the time and now he is a man. He understands hard choices. And he is his parents' son. He will do what is right even when it is difficult."

"His participation . . . I know you have faith in it, and I will rely on that. But I was concerned about it when you initially told me."

"Yes, and you saw that his calculations, done with a different approach from Gertrude's, also showed that Severus's death would be disastrous for the Order if it were to occur as a result of the Unbreakable Vow. Gareth is an honest wizard, Albus. We can rely on him."

"You are right. And he is his parents' son. He is a credit to them, and to Robert and Thea."

"Yes, he is. Malcolm would be very proud of him." Tears welled in Minerva's eyes. "He would be very proud, indeed."

Late the next afternoon, Albus stepped out of his study when he heard Minerva come into the sitting room. He smiled. Minerva was glowing.

"I did it, I did it! I did it, Albus!" Minerva threw her arms around him and squeezed. "Melina said I just hadn't been properly prepared before. She brought me a cat again, I did it, and I'm fine!"

Albus hugged her and whirled her around. "You see! I knew you could, my dear!"

"Albus, your hand..."

"Oh, don't worry about that...and no one will be coming up here today but Melina, Murdoch, and Robert," he said, but he paused and stretched out his right arm to look at it. "It looks fine, I think."

"But you might have other visitors, Albus." Minerva looked closely at his arm. Blackened skin fading to grey part way up his arm. She poked it, then shook her head.

Albus withdrew his arm. "I am hardly going to begin to allow any unexpected visitors to poke and prod me, Minerva," he said slightly impatiently. "And besides, my sleeves are quite long. They reach my knuckles."

"All right, fine. I am in too good a mood to have that bother me right now," Minerva said. She looked around. "Where are Robert and Murdoch? I thought they were staying."

"They are in the laboratory."

"I thought they were doing all their work at Murdoch's now."

Albus shrugged. "They had an idea they wanted to try. Something they thought of when discussing the time-limit problem with Calum yesterday. I wanted to wait for you, though."

"Thank you, Albus." Minerva kissed his cheek. "Melina will be joining us in a few minutes. She just wanted to clean up our workroom then stop and say hello to Poppy. After we go to dinner and you don't eat, we can come back up here and have some supper with them. How does that sound?"

"Lovely, my dear. I feel much better today. I think I would enjoy supper with family tonight." Albus bent and kissed her cheek. "I am supposed to go into the Ministry tomorrow, but I think I am not well enough."

Minerva nodded. "Very well. I will come by in the afternoon after my last class and see how you are doing. Do you think you will come to dinner tomorrow?"

"Yes...and I have a meeting with Harry tomorrow evening."

"More breadcrumbs?" Minerva asked.

"A few breadcrumbs, yes, but also more information about the Horcruxes. I had hoped to be able to help him to locate the locket and destroy it with him, but I am afraid that the best I can do is set him on its track. We have not enough time left to do much else, and I can't continue seeking it, given . . . given the events we have to set into motion in the next few weeks."

Minerva nodded, suddenly very serious. She looked up to him. "What if I fail, Albus? What if I fail?"

"You will not fail. But if something intervenes and the outcome is not what we expect, you must still carry on, just the same. The prophecy will be fulfilled one way or the other, and Severus will survive, Draco will be saved, and finally, Harry will prevail. And you must not spend another thought on me."

"Albus! How can you say such a thing?!"

"I know . . . I simply mean that you must know that I did what was necessary, as did you, and you have to carry on," Albus replied, caressing her cheek.

"I don't want to carry on without you, Albus."

"I know, my darling, but we will get through it, *you* will get through it. Whatever happens. And I have faith in you."

Minerva leaned against Albus. "That means more to me than any of Gertrude and Gareth's Arithmantic calculations." She raised her face and looked up at him. "But you have to help me, Albus. You cannot give up."

"I will not give up, Minerva. I promise you. I believe in you and your plan and will do my part for you."

"I love you, Albus," Minerva whispered, resting her head against him again.

"And I, you."

After Albus had spent the dinner hour pushing his food around on his plate, and Minerva only ate half of her own meal, the two rejoined Melina, Murdoch, and Robert in the Headmaster's suite for a late supper. Despite the reason for their gathering, the meal was convivial, Albus felt well, and Melina even allowed him to have a small glass of wine, though she did say that it had to be his last one, so he savoured every drop.

Finally, Melina said, "I need to speak with Albus alone for a while, Aunt Minerva."

"I should be there," Minerva said.

"No, no, you and I have discussed what we must," Melina said. "I need to speak with Uncle Albus. Please."

"Why don't we go into my study...unless the bedroom would be more suitable," Albus said.

"Your study is fine," Melina replied. "I will only cast a few spells tonight, nothing more."

Murdoch drew a deck of cards from his pocket. "Skat?"

Minerva, somewhat distracted, agreed, and Robert cleared the table for their game as Albus and Melina went into the Headmaster's study.

After Melina closed the door, she cast an Imperturbable.

"Is that necessary?" Albus asked, his eyebrows raised.

"Yes, it is. I have told Minerva all she needs to know, but we need to have a frank talk, you and I, Albus. I told Minerva that I believed the trouble the first time was that she was not properly prepared, but I also believe that the state of the creature's health played a role. You must understand that you will be quite ill at the end. You will feel wretched. You will likely minimise your discomfort when you speak with Minerva, but you must not do that with me. We need to be able to strike a careful balance."

Albus nodded. "I understand. I am quite prepared, I believe, both for the progression of my illness and for the possibility that things will not work out as we plan. I do not doubt Minerva; however, I will not speak with her about that possibility any more than necessary. I know that she needs to be strong and maintain her confidence and sense of purpose."

"Yes, she does. I do not, however. I have been a Healer for a good many years. Do not hide anything from me, Albus. Fluid accumulation could place a significant strain on your organs, particularly your heart, but we must minimise that. It is vital that you let me know exactly how you are feeling. I have learned that a diagnostic spell is only useful when cast...you will need to let me know if something changes that I need to be aware of." Melina reached out and rubbed Albus's upper arm. "Aside from all of that, none of us wants to see you suffer needlessly. I will be quite cross with you if you maintain a stiff upper lip with me."

"I promise that I will let you know if there are any unexpected changes or if I feel more ill than we had anticipated at any point," Albus said.

Melina looked away for a moment. "This is the hardest thing I have ever done, Albus," she said softly.

"I know, my dear, I know. And Minerva and I are grateful to you." Albus stood and pulled Melina to her feet, grimacing slightly at the pressure on his right hand as he did so, but he put his arms around her. "Everything will be fine."

"As long as the Ministry doesn't prevent me from ever practising Healing again," Melina said with a sigh, returning his embrace. "I don't think that the secrecy of my research will hold up after this if we are successful."

"Yes, well, I may have something to say about that; no one will know all the details, anyway. And I believe the Ministry was wrong in not supporting your research in the first place."

Melina withdrew. "You never said anything at the time."

"I . . . I had my own reservations about its misuse," Albus admitted.

"And now?"

"And now I believe it is better if it isn't secret...though not at the moment, of course," Albus hastily added. "I was wrong."

"If you had known that I was continuing with it without the Ministry's approval and travelling to the Continent to do much of it, you would have stopped me?"

"No, I would not have. And I did know. Well, that is inaccurate. *Isurmised* you were doing that. You are a McGonagall. It would not have been in keeping with your character to simply go away quietly as you apparently did."

"Good thing, too," Melina replied. "The sooner we all realise how much we have to learn from Muggles, the better, as far as I'm concerned. And I think if we had done that long ago, Voldemort would not have had as much appeal."

"He may have had more. There are those who are threatened by any change, particularly any that seem Muggle in origin, and then there are others who see any magic to do with life and death as automatically being a Dark Art," Albus said. He took in a deep breath and let it out. "You were going to cast some diagnostics."

"Mm, just on your arm. I didn't like the way it looked this afternoon. It didn't feel right, though it seems better now."

"Oh, that was my fault. I'm sorry. Just a little cheating in private. I am sorry, my dear," Albus said, apologising again.

"Still . . . I would like to check it. And you shouldn't become complacent. I am quite surprised at you, Albus!" Melina chided.

Albus chuckled. "I suppose I need to have Alastor nearby to remind me of 'constant vigilance!'"

"Yes, but you should remember that on your own," Melina said. "But let me check you out and then we can return to the others."

Two weeks later, on Valentine's Day, the students enjoying special Valentine's treats and looking forward toward their Hogsmeade weekend the next day, Albus leaned over and whispered to Minerva that he wasn't feeling particularly well and he thought he would return to his office. He stood, took three steps, then keeled over. Minerva gasped, leapt to her feet, and was at his side immediately. Poppy hurried over to see him just as Albus's eyes were opening.

Poppy took out her wand to examine Albus, but he sat up.

"No, no, Poppy, no need for that. I merely stood too quickly," Albus said, trying to deflect the matron's wand.

"You don't fall over in a faint from standing up too quickly, not unless there's something wrong with you," Poppy said, trying to get him to let go of her wand arm.

"Here, Albus," Minerva said, putting a hand under one arm. "Let's get you up off the floor."

"We shouldn't move him," Poppy protested.

Minerva and Albus ignored her. He regained his feet and swayed, but Minerva didn't let go, and Severus had come around to his other side to steady him. Albus looked out over the Great Hall at the worried and astounded faces of the students. A peculiar feeling passed over him as he looked at them, and he shook off Severus and Minerva's hands.

"I am quite fine, now," he said. "I just need to get up to my office."

"You are coming to the Hospital Wing!" Poppy exclaimed.

"No, I am not, Poppy," Albus said quietly. "I know what is wrong with me. There is nothing you can do." He turned to Minerva. "You may owl Melina."

Minerva nodded.

"Headmaster..." Severus began.

"You may accompany me if you wish, my boy. It might reassure Madam Pomfrey to know you will be there to catch me if I'm a bit unsteady."

"Albus!" Poppy protested, but in vain.

Albus shook off Severus's hand at his elbow as they started down the length of the table. "Not in front of the students, please, Severus," Albus said softly. "I will be fine."

"I am coming too," Poppy said.

"I don't need an entourage, but if you insist," Albus said.

The four left the Great Hall under the stares of the students and staff. When they reached Albus's office, Minerva went directly to his desk and penned a few quick lines. Albus sat in his favourite armchair, and Poppy pulled out her wand again.

"Severus, please escort Madam Pomfrey to the Hospital Wing." Albus looked up at Poppy and cringed inwardly to see the injured expression on her face. "We will call you, I am sure. I am fine, Poppy. Really."

Severus himself seemed torn between obeying Albus and staying to question him.

"Albus?" he said tentatively.

"I will speak with you later, Severus," the Headmaster said tiredly. "Please, go. Minerva will stay with me."

"Your owl..." Poppy began.

"We will manage," Albus said, dismissing them finally.

When they were gone, Minerva rushed to his side and put her hand to his forehead. "You feel cool, not feverish. Next time you plan to do something like that, please let me know. It was alarming."

"I am most sorry, my dear, but I didn't plan it," Albus said. "You go send the note to Melina. I will be fine. I think it is time for Robert to begin staying at the castle now."

Minerva nodded. "I asked Melina to have him come, too. I can have Wilspy owl the note, and I will stay with you until they arrive."

"No, no, my dear. Please. I would like to be alone for a few moments. That was . . . that was very uncomfortable for me. I need some time to think quietly."

Minerva nodded in understanding, kissed his cheek, and promised to return as quickly as possible.

When she was gone, Albus sighed and closed his eyes, leaning his head back. He had known the day would come when he would become more obviously ill, though his weight loss and pallor had already become noticeable, but he had not wanted to make a public spectacle of himself, either. It was one thing to exhibit weakness in front of family and quite another to collapse in front of the entire assembled Hogwarts population. And poor Poppy. She must believe that he had no faith in her abilities at all, or that he did not trust her. The trouble was, he did have faith in her abilities, and he could not risk having her involved. As for Severus . . . he had not wanted to let the younger wizard know anything of the plan quite this early. He would have to consider not only what to tell him, but what to tell Tom, as well. Clearly, Tom could not learn that Albus was dying, and Severus . . . he would not appreciate such news, but perhaps it was time to tell him.

He felt the tingle that indicated someone had entered the stair below. He thought that Minerva would Floo back to save time, so he assumed it was either a new busybody...no, that was unfair...someone entirely new who was worried about him, or it was Severus returned from his errand to deliver Poppy to the infirmary.

Albus was unsure whether he felt relief or not when Severus opened the door. He must have walked up the moving stair, since he had arrived very quickly.

"Come in, sit down. Minerva went to owl her niece. You may keep me company until she returns, Severus."

Severus didn't sit, though he moved closer. "You told Madam Pomfrey that you knew what was wrong. What is it, Albus?"

"Please, sit. I cannot look up at you like this," Albus said, gesturing to the chair beside him.

Severus sat in the indicated chair and waited.

"I told you that I would find another solution to the problem, one that did not involve your fulfilling the final requirement of the Vow, Severus, and I have." Albus looked over at him, and with genuine regret, he said, "I am very sorry, Severus. There was only one other course I could take. It will free you, my boy." He smiled slightly. "It will free us both in different ways."

Severus blanched. "What do you mean?"

"You see me, Severus. I am old. I am ill. I haven't very much longer, in any case, and therefore, it seemed most sensible to simply let nature take its course . . . perhaps assist it along a bit."

"What? You can't mean..." Severus's gaze fixed on the shrivelled fingers that emerged from the end of Albus's right sleeve. "No, you wouldn't."

"It is most sensible, Severus. I will be quite comfortable for a bit longer."

"That is why you are telling me all you are about the . . . the items, about Potter and what he must do," Severus said. "I thought you were merely . . . I don't know . . ."

"It is so that you will have sufficient knowledge to carry on after I am gone, although Minerva now knows all I know, and she will be here to help you, to tell you more of those objects, what I might not have time to impart before the end...there will be others here for you, as well. And there is more that I will share with you in the coming weeks," Albus said, letting out a weary sigh. "We cannot allow Tom to know what is actually happening, of course; you will tell him that I have an inner ear infection, that Poppy informed you of that, but that you think that I am actually more ill than you are being told and that I am 'losing my grip,' as they say. Tell him that you believe that it is

Minerva who is beginning to direct everything, both at school and in the Order. You can make me sound quite gaga, if you wish, but do not say anything that would indicate that I am in any danger of dying. There will be an Order meeting next week, and we will orchestrate that to make it evident that Minerva is my voice now. I do not plan for her to lead the Order when I am gone, but she will be in charge of your activities, and this will set the stage for Tom to find that credible when it happens."

"Albus! She and I are barely speaking! Not to mention that she has no experience in such things," Severus protested.

"She understands the necessity, Severus. And she is angry with you because she . . . because of the Vow and the decision I have made."

"You cannot do this."

"You do not tell me what I can and cannot do. This is my decision alone. I am entrusting its secret to you. If you cannot keep it secret, I am still perfectly capable of Obliviating you," Albus said, sitting up straighter and looking sternly at the younger wizard.

"Minerva...she cannot agree with this!"

"She does not wish it, but she understands that in this, our personal wishes are not paramount. She would never sacrifice the world in order to save me. Nor should you be prepared to do so, my boy. You may sacrifice yourself, if you wish, but no other."

"But you are...you cannot!"

"I am. You will live, Severus, and you will continue in your mission. You will not commit suicide on my behalf. If you were to do that, I would only die, anyway. You know that. This is the only sensible course."

"No, no! It is not!"

"There are things that you do not know, things that I cannot tell you, but there are other factors at work. Believe me, this is best."

"What about Crouch? I thought he was brewing the improved potions for you. Why is he visiting all of the time if not to brew for you?"

"He is brewing me potions, yes. They will . . . they will keep me relatively comfortable. He knows what he is doing, as do I."

"You should at least take the standard potion, Albus. It would give you more time, more time to think about it, consider your options."

Albus closed his eyes and gathered his patience, then he opened them and looked at Severus. "I have considered my options. They were significantly narrowed. I have made my decision. More time would simply lead to folly."

"But Minerva..."

"You must learn to accept this, Severus. It is my choice. It has been made. There is nothing to discuss."

Flames flared green in the fireplace and Minerva stepped through. She glanced briefly at Severus, then turned to Albus. "I owed Melina and I also stopped by to see Poppy for a moment. I told her that Melina would certainly speak to her after she examined you."

"Yes, and I told Severus just now that I have an inner ear infection, combined with the general decrepitude of my old age," Albus said with a smile.

"Hmph. I do not believe it will take long for Melina and Robert to arrive. We should go up and get you into your bed."

Severus recognised that as a dismissal and stood. "I will tell the Dark Lord whatever you wish, Headmaster, as there is little doubt that he will learn of this incident quickly and want details, but you have not heard the last from me on the subject." He looked over at Minerva, who was studiously ignoring him. "I will not have you die for nothing. We will speak again."

With that, Severus turned and left, disturbed by what he had witnessed and what Albus had revealed to him. He would dissuade him from this course of action. This was not at all what he had intended when he had declared he would not kill Albus and fulfill the Vow. He had thought that he would die and Albus would live. He would finally be free.

But his efforts were for naught, and five weeks later, Robert Crouch emerged from the Headmaster's bedroom and announced that there was no Headmaster at Hogwarts.

Chapter Nineteen: Waves break loud on the seashores

Chapter 20 of 34

Severus continues to recover from his injuries. Hermione visits again as Gareth is with him.



Chapter Nineteen: *Waves break loud on the seashores*

19 April 1998

Minerva pushed open the door to the guest room to find Gareth sitting in the rocking chair reading *Arithmancy Today* and Severus asleep with *Modern European Potions* open on his lap. Gareth raised a finger to his lips and stood gracefully, placing the journal on the seat of the chair. He followed his aunt out into the sitting room, closing the door quietly behind him.

"Are you back, then?" he asked.

"No, just checking on you. I have work awaiting me in my office. When I saw Robbie and he told me that he had left you here with Severus, I was concerned, to be frank," Minerva said. "I also wanted to tell Severus that he can shower today as long as he has help. Poppy said that someone should stay with him and that his back should have an *Impervius* cast on the healing area. She is willing to come by to help him tonight, but Robbie said he can do it after dinner. I think that Severus would prefer that."

"I'll let him know when he wakes up," Gareth said with a nod. "Personally, I wouldn't mind having Poppy's help in the shower." He grinned.

Minerva smiled. "You are incorrigible, Gareth."

"I hope so! But a mediwitch or mediwizard or Healer always has added points of attraction," he said brightly. "You just know they must have some special tricks to use...and a few to teach. But I don't think Snape has the appreciation for human touch, even from an attractive witch such as Poppy, so you are probably right that he would prefer Robbie's help."

"I was surprised to see you in Severus's room," Minerva said, "and even more surprised to see that he was asleep with you there."

"I applied the salve to his back, then he had his afternoon potions. He tried to read for a while, but I think the potions made him sleepy."

"Still, it surprises me. Last time you were here, you threatened his life."

"No, I didn't. Not precisely. And I think . . . I think I did kill him. Not literally, obviously, but the monster I had created in my mind. Snape was not what I expected." Gareth's eyes narrowed as he thought. "I still cannot forgive what he did, but holding on to it, holding on to the monster, having it live inside of me, it just seemed foolish. None of it can be undone. But it's the way things are, and I can see that he doesn't live easy with it, either." Gareth shrugged.

"I don't always like Severus, even now, and when I remember the things that he did, it is still painful, but I do love him and I know that he has not had a normal life. He has not even had the freedom to change and to grow as much as he might have if Riddle had been truly defeated the first time. He was chained to a life he chose on the basis of one thing only, and he was constrained in what relationships he could form and even in what personal habits he could take up. All was focussed on Riddle's eventual return and on what Severus viewed as payment for one particular inadvertent betrayal and murder. I hope he lives to grow beyond that."

"He'll never be a nice person, Aunt Minerva," Gareth said, remembering the sadistic Death Eater that must still lived somewhere within Snape, "and I don't know whether he will ever be able to have normal relationships. It may be a mercy if he doesn't have to find a way to live after it's over."

"He should have the opportunity, though. He deserves a true second chance, a chance to really live."

Gareth shook his head. "You sound like Uncle Albus. That's what he told Mum. That Snape deserved a chance to make it right. But he can't really. I'm not saying he can't contribute to Riddle's downfall, or that he is incapable of choosing the right action, but he can't fix what he destroyed."

"He can't. That is true, but it's about more than just fixing what he destroyed, or about some imaginary scales of justice weighing his sacrifices and good deeds against all of the evil that he did or that he set in motion. It is about his way of being, the conscious approach he takes toward the choices he must make, the shift from acting purely from regret and some notion of payment for past transgressions to acting in order to give to others, to impress a good and positive part of himself onto the world, to feel hope and a desire to create good for its own sake. Chiefly, it is about him changing himself and his relationship to others. And it's about learning to be happy."

"Change his whole framework for being? His perceptions of himself and others and how he acts in response to those perceptions? That is what you are implying," Gareth said with a shake of his head. "I don't know if that is even possible. His behaviour might be trainable, but the heart and mind are something altogether different."

"They *are* different, but they are also connected. I have hope for him. He was never a truly bad child. Often obnoxious and unkind, but not like Riddle was as a boy."

"Not a psychopath, you mean?" Gareth chuckled shortly. "Saying that someone isn't a psychopath is far from a ringing endorsement of their character."

"Still, I hope that you will not do or say anything that will make it more difficult for him."

"I don't know whether I can promise that, but I certainly can promise that I won't do what Moody did, or anything like it. You know that I never would. But I will be honest with Snape, and if that makes things difficult for him, I cannot help that."

"That is sufficient," Minerva said briskly. "I need to get to my work, but I want to speak with Severus and see how he's feeling first. If he doesn't mind having you here, then you could stay while we go to dinner."

"That would be fine with me."

Minerva entered the guest room. While she and Gareth had been talking, Severus had lain down more fully in bed and the Potions journal had fallen to the floor.

Minerva walked over to the bed, picked up the journal, and placed it on the bedside table. She reached out and caressed his forehead with just the tips of her fingers. "Severus! Severus!"

Severus's eyes opened and he blinked.

"How are you feeling?"

Severus pushed himself up to sit against the headboard. "Thirsty."

"And other than that?" Minerva asked as she poured him a glass of water.

"Fine."

Minerva shook her head, smiling slightly. "I suppose you do look better than you did earlier, but you must feel far from fine, Severus."

"Fine, considering," Severus amended.

"I spoke with Poppy earlier. She said you can take a shower today if you like, but you will need to have an *Impervius* cast on the injury on your back and have someone stay with you. She said that she could come up tonight to do it, but Robbie offered to help you after supper."

Severus hesitated. "Miss Granger is to return today, I believe."

"Ah, yes, I saw her in the library. She said she would be in my office after dinner. I presume she was telling me what time she plans to visit you."

Severus sat and scowled. Taking a shower should not be a major production. He didn't want the girl to arrive when he was having someone help him bathe. He should bathe before he received visitors.

"I can shower myself," Severus said, making a move to swing his legs around and get out of bed. "I am no longer afflicted by dizzy spells."

"You also need the *Impervius* cast. Wait for Robbie," Minerva said. "He is more than happy to help you. It's only a couple more hours to wait."

"You said that Miss Granger is arriving after dinner."

"I am sure she will wait, or Robbie will wait for your guest to leave."

Severus did not want to explain himself to anyone, not even to himself. It was not merely the humiliation of allowing someone to assist him in the shower, it was the fact that Hermione was visiting. He wanted to look more like himself when she arrived, and he wanted to feel more like himself and less like an invalid.

"I can manage," Severus said, standing and looking for the slippers that Minerva had brought him from his quarters. He wished she had brought him one of his own nightshirts. He was still clad in one of Albus's. This one was white with thin blue stripes, so at least he wasn't in Gryffindor colours.

"No, you won't, Severus," Minerva said sternly. "You can hardly cast an accurate *Impervius* on your own back, and you're supposed to be resting your magic, in any case. Poppy would have my hide if I let you take a shower on your own."

"You aren't letting me; I'm just doing it."

"Do you want to undo all the healing on your back? Don't be obstinate. Robbie will be back after dinner. You can wait that long."

"I'll help you, Snape," Gareth said from the doorway, where he'd been watching the other two argue. "I said once that I'd protect your back," he added with a grin, "and here's my chance to do it!"

Severus looked at the Headmistress, who was standing obdurate in the face of his desire to do for himself.

"All right, McGonagall, but if you mention it again...to anyone...you will have to watch your own back," Severus said sharply.

"We should use the main bathroom," Gareth said. "It's bigger and the shower's nicer than the one in here."

"Hmmpf."

Minerva nodded. "I'll leave you two to work things out. I'll be in my office until dinner if you need me."

Fifteen minutes later, Severus was standing in the circular shower stall looking at the various jets and nozzles set into the wall. Gareth had already cast *Impervius*, and he had turned on the water to the large showerhead in the centre of the stall, testing the water's temperature before he would let Severus step in.

"Here, Snape. Flannel and sponge. The sponge is self-soaping, but to your right is a dispenser with some sandalwood soap in it. Unless you prefer citrus, rose, or lavender. The sandalwood is the first one on the left. The shampoo is to your left." Gareth sat down on the small bench beside the shower, facing away from Snape. "Let me know if you need anything else."

"You're going to sit there the entire time?"

"I said I would. If you want to use any of the shower jets set into the wall, you can turn them on selectively, or I can help you with it."

"I don't require your help."

"I'm here if that should change," Gareth said calmly.

Severus washed his hair first, smelling the different shampoos before selecting one that had almost no discernable scent. For all that the students called him a greasy git, he did like to be clean.

"Damn."

"What is it?" Gareth asked.

"Minerva didn't bring me my Shed-Stop Potion," Severus grumbled.

Gareth barely suppressed a laugh. "Your *what*?"

"For my hair. Shed-Stop."

Gareth choked.

"Don't laugh. Can't be too careful about where you leave stray hairs lying about," Severus said.

"Or too paranoid, either," Gareth said, finally allowing himself to laugh. "I doubt you need to worry about that up here. You can rest assured that I have no desire to trade places with you for any reason, nor does anyone else you're likely to see here."

Severus just grunted. He finished washing his hair and the front of his body. He didn't bother with his feet and legs. Despite his insistence that he was fine and not at all dizzy, he didn't want to risk tipping over if he tried to stand on one leg. There was a small built-in bench along what he supposed was the back of the shower, if a circular shower could be said to have a back, but sitting there would expose him too much to view if McGonagall happened to turn his head and look in at him.

He was about to turn off the water when Gareth said, "Would you like me to wash your back for you? Just the upper part, of course."

"I am capable of charming the sponge to wash my back if I so choose," Snape said.

"Mm, no doubt, but it would be easier for me to avoid the healing area than for the Charmed sponge," Gareth replied as he removed his shoes and socks. "Even with the *Impervius*, you might get it wet, or at least disturb the healing skin even if it didn't get wet."

"I can forego washing my back," Severus said. He looked over his shoulder and was alarmed to see Gareth stuffing his socks into his boots then casting *Impervius* on himself and moving his sporrán so that it hung at his side. "You are *not* getting into the shower with me, McGonagall."

"Loosen up, Snape. Accept some help for once." He grinned at the scowling Potions master. "You can look at it as a growth experience!"

It would be nice to have his back and shoulders washed.

"Be quick about it," Severus said irritably, handing him the sponge.

Gareth stepped in and took the sponge. He didn't linger, simply washing Snape's upper back as he had said he would, but then he knelt and began to wash Snape's left leg.

"What the fuck do you think you're doing!"

"I noticed you didn't wash your legs and feet. Hold onto the bar and lift your left foot."

"Are you mad?"

Gareth looked up at him and gave him a crooked smile. "Probably. But you seemed to be looking forward to the shower. Might as well do it properly."

Severus did not lift his foot to be washed, but he allowed Gareth to move over and begin washing his other leg.

"Why are you doing this?"

Gareth shrugged. "Needs doing. I imagine it feels good to you. That's a good thing."

"Not just this. Everything. You said you would never forgive me, McGonagall. Has that changed? Or do you simply want me to feel indebted to you?"

"I cannot forgive what you did," Gareth said quietly, pausing to think, one hand resting on Snape's right calf. "And I don't see that you should be indebted to me for lending you a hand here. But . . . I have always thought that it was the height of rudeness not to accept a sincere apology, even if one could not forgive the underlying act. You didn't precisely apologise, but your contrition was evident. So I accepted that as I would an apology."

"How can you accept an apology without forgiving the person?" Severus asked, genuinely curious and forgetting for a moment his discomfort with having someone wash his legs.

"Forgiveness doesn't depend so much on the one being forgiven. I could forgive someone something even if they had no remorse and never apologised. Well, I don't know as /could, but some people can. Accepting a sincere apology is just the recognition that the person did offer one and then going on without holding it against them, whatever it was they did, even if you couldn't forgive them. If I accept your sincere apology for breaking my favourite teacup, I have no right to grumble about it to you every chance I get, or to throw it in your face when I am angry with you again later. That's the way I see it. Some people would probably say that I didn't really accept your apology if I didn't forgive you, but sometimes to live life in a civilised, humane way, we have to accept apologies even when we can't find it in ourselves to forgive. I may wish to hold your actions against you, but I will behave in a way that lets us both get on with things. And maybe somewhere along the way, I might discover I've actually forgiven you. Even though I really loved that teacup you broke!" Gareth grinned up at Severus.

"Just finish." Snape paused. "And stop when you reach my thighs. I did the rest."

Gareth cocked an ear. "I think there's someone at the door."

As the sound of a more distinct rapping reached the guest room, Severus nodded, ignoring the younger wizard as he rose from his chair and left. He was sitting up in the room's one armchair, engrossed in an article debating the use of human blood in potions work, and whether a complete ban was justified when there were so many applications that were utterly benign, even beneficial, and pointing out that much research in Healing was stymied by the current restrictions on its use. The author arguing for even stronger restrictions on the use of blood seemed to base his reasoning almost wholly within abstract theory, tinged with an amorphous fear of where blood use could lead, whereas the author arguing for a loosening of the restrictions seemed more practically oriented, rooting her argument in terms of the concrete good that could be achieved at no negative expense whatsoever except to what she termed "medieval superstition" about practising any kind of blood-magic.

Gareth returned a moment later. "It is a Miss Granger asking for you, Snape."

Severus set aside his journal. "I will see her."

Gareth nodded and disappeared again. When he reappeared, he opened the door, bowed slightly, and said, "Miss Granger, Professor Snape will see you now."

"For Merlin's sake, McGonagall, you're not my bloody butler. Just let the girl in," Severus said irritably.

Gareth grinned. "Just trying to show the young lady some respect, Snape."

Hermione smiled at Severus as she came in. "You look better than you did yesterday."

"He looks even better than that when he stops scowling...which he might do if I left the room," Gareth said, giving Hermione a wink. He looked at Severus and added, "I'll just be in the sitting room if you need me."

"Just get out," Severus replied.

Gareth turned a broad smile on Hermione. "See! He loves me!" Chuckling to himself, he left the two, though he didn't quite close the door.

After he'd gone, Severus nodded to Hermione. "You may have a seat, if you wish."

"Thank you." Rather than sit in the rocking chair with the bed between the two of them, Hermione took a seat on the end of the bed across from him. "But you do look better. Not as grey and bruised. You have more life in your eyes, too."

"Both Healer O'Donald and Madam Pomfrey have done an adequate job in assisting in my recovery," Severus said stiffly.

"You also look...and don't take this the wrong way, sir...but you look clean. Really clean, not just from cleaning charms and the pass of a damp flannel. I never feel properly bathed when using just charms and sponge baths, and after being in hospital after that business in the Department of Mysteries, it was a relief to shower."

"I was allowed to shower today. It was, as you say, a relief."

"I was surprised to see Mr McGonagall here with you," Hermione said frankly.

"That he was still alive, you mean, and I hadn't killed him for his impertinence?" Severus asked with a sneer, which was as close as he could come to a smile just then.

Hermione laughed. "No, just that he would be here at all, or that anyone would leave him alone with you. Or that you wouldn't chuck him out."

"I just did," Severus said.

"All the way to the sitting room," Hermione pointed out, humour in her eyes. "But he was in here when I arrived."

Severus tried not to let his puzzlement show. "How would you know where he was when you arrived?"

"Well, he may not have been here right at that moment, but *Arithmancy Today* is open on the rocking chair, you're sitting over there, and I looked up Gareth McGonagall in the library. He's an Arithmancer, just like his mother was, is, was..." Hermione blushed. "Sorry."

"For what? His mother is an Arithmancer. It is the truth. I am making an effort not to avoid the truth these days. I still play with it, and I do twist it when necessary, but the habit of recognising only those truths that are useful or comfortable to me is one I am attempting to rid myself of before I . . . before I die."

Hermione didn't blink at the word "die." "That sounds very positive, though not easy," she said. "It's so much more pleasant to avoid thinking about uncomfortable truths."

"I don't think about all of them. Just those that impinge upon my life in some way and which I have avoided thinking about. And not even all of those," he admitted. "And I do still concentrate too much on the ones that make me angry with the world and allow me to blame others for my troubles."

Hermione laughed. "Best not to rush in and take on everything at once, or you might get nosebleed!"

Severus's lips twitched.

"So, how is it that Mr McGonagall has escaped injury...or being chucked out?" Hermione asked.

"I doubt that his aunt would appreciate my maiming her nephew as well as her sister-in-law," Severus said drily. "And as for not being 'chucked out,' he is quite persistent, and he has tried to make himself useful."

"And why hasn't he maimed you? Same concern for his aunt?" Hermione asked with a smile.

"Mmm. He's a McGonagall. I think they are congenitally prone to taking in stray puppies and battered ex-Death Eaters, soft in the head," Severus grumped. "And as of tomorrow, he'll be 'Professor McGonagall.'"

"*Professor?* Has something happened to Professor Vector?" Hermione asked in alarm.

"No. He will be taking Crouch's Defence classes tomorrow since Crouch will be teaching Potions for the day. I hope to return to teaching on Tuesday, so neither of them should have an opportunity to do much harm."

"I know what you can tackle once you've conquered facing unpleasant truths," Hermione said, barely suppressing a smile.

Severus raised a questioning eyebrow.

"Optimism!" Hermione laughed.

"Hmmp. I have a feeling that the more truth I face, the less optimism I will have."

"It's important to remain optimistic. Even when things aren't going well."

"You sound like another Gryffindor I know," Severus said. "Your former Head of House tries to get me to believe in something she calls 'hope.'" He tried to sneer and sound cynical, but he only sounded weary.

Hermione reached out and patted his hand. "Just remember us, then. We'll have that hope and optimism for you, if you can't manage it just yet. Remember that we believe in you."

One corner of Severus's mouth turned up. "Gryffindor witches!" he said, but nodding. "I will try to remember that, though."

"Optimism is a state of mind. A way of facing the future, which is unknown. Optimism can help you to create some pleasant truths," Hermione said.

"It isn't that simple."

"Of course it isn't. But it's better than pessimism. It feels better, too. Naturally, things *can* go wrong, but if you're optimistic, you can take advantage of opportunities you might not see if you believed everything was all doom and gloom. And you still have to face whatever the current truth of things is in order to be able to plan effectively, no matter how unpleasant it may be. You can't be a Pangloss."

Severus snorted. "I could never be Panglossian. No danger of that."

Hermione giggled. "That would be quite startling, coming from you! Or disturbing!" She laughed again. "Definitely disturbing!"

Both corners of Severus's mouth turned up. "You don't think that if I walked about saying that all is created for the best end, and therefore this is the best of all possible worlds, that it would be reassuring to everyone?"

"Disturbing, very disturbing!" Hermione laughed again. "You see! A brain holiday is quite fun."

"Painful fun," Severus said, but his smile grew as he took pleasure in Hermione's laughter.

There was a light knock on the door and Gareth appeared.

"I thought you and Miss Granger might care for some refreshment," he said, waving in the tray that had followed behind him.

Snape glared, but Hermione looked at the contents of the tray and her eyes grew bright. There were two small chocolate tarts, two mixed berry tarts, and two creamy-looking cakes coated with fresh-shaved coconut. Hermione's eyes focussed on the chocolate tart.

Gareth smiled. "The way to a witch's heart, through chocolate." He looked over at Severus. "Don't you agree?"

"Hmmp."

"If you would be kind enough, Miss Granger, to conjure us a table, I shall pour us each a cup of tea," Gareth said, "and you may have your choice of sweets."

"Can't do it yourself, McGonagall?"

"I thought I would allow the lady the pleasure," Gareth said, drawing his own wand from its loop at his waist, but Hermione had already conjured a small round table.

Gareth flicked his wand, pulling the straight chair over from the corner as he picked up the teapot in his left hand. "Milk? Sugar?"

"A little milk, no sugar," Hermione said.

Gareth used his wand to add the milk as he poured the tea manually. "And you, Snape?"

"None for me."

"You should have something. A glass of water?" Without waiting for his response, Gareth flicked his wand at the pitcher on the bedside table and poured some water into the glass beside it, then he Summoned the glass and settled it in front of Severus. "Now, Miss Granger, would you prefer the chocolate tart or one of the other desserts?"

"The chocolate, please, although they all look very good."

"If you have the appetite, you may try one of the others when you have finished that one. And which would you prefer, Snape?"

"I don't eat sweets," he replied stiffly.

"The fruit tart, then, I should think," Gareth said, placing a mixed berry tart in front of the surly wizard. "Not too sweet, and moderately healthy, as well. I shall have a coconut cream cake, and then you, Miss Granger, may still have your choice of seconds!" He smiled at Hermione as he took his own piece of cake and sat down in the wooden chair.

Arms crossed, Severus glared at the younger wizard. "I did not request dessert."

Hermione stopped cold, her fork halfway to her mouth with her first bite of cake.

"Nor did I request your presence," Severus continued.

"I thought it would be more pleasant to share dessert with you than to eat it on my own," Gareth said quietly, "and to provide your guest with some refreshment, as well. However, as I said earlier, I am quite accustomed both to peculiar companions and to my own solitary company." He rose and Levitated his cake and teacup before sketching a short bow in Hermione's direction. "Enjoy your torte, Miss Granger. And the company." He turned to leave.

"You're here now, McGonagall. And not entirely intolerable."

Gareth looked over at Severus. "Is that an invitation to stay?"

"As close as you will receive."

After hesitating a moment, Gareth let his plate and teacup settle back onto the table. "I will let you know if you become intolerable," he said with a slight smile.

"It will only be an indication that you have become intolerant," Snape responded.

Gareth laughed, then he looked over at Hermione. "Don't you like the cake? Would you prefer something different?"

"Oh, no, I haven't tried it yet. It smells quite nice," Hermione replied, looking first at him then at Severus before picking up her fork again.

Gareth sipped some tea, then took a bite of his coconut cake. Severus drank some of his water, then set his glass down.

"Quite good, this," Gareth said. "Worth trying a bite of, Miss Granger. And how is your chocolate torte?"

"Delicious," Hermione said. "Better than the dessert in the Great Hall was tonight."

"Snape? Would you prefer something different?" Gareth asked.

"This is adequate." Severus picked up his fork and poked at his tart. "I'm not hungry."

Gareth shot a quick glance at Hermione, then he said, "You didn't eat all your dinner, though. If you don't want Healer O'Donald insisting on another day's rest, you might want to eat up."

"I do not eat very much normally."

Hermione set her teacup down. "I have noticed, and Mr McGonagall is correct. You should eat your tart. At least try it. It does look good."

Severus scooped some of the berries from the tart and took a taste, then he took another forkful. Hermione smiled.

"So, Miss Granger, you are in your seventh year. Do you have plans for after you leave school?"

"To be honest, although I have thought some about it, I haven't made any definite plans," Hermione said.

"I understand. It is difficult when so much is uncertain." Gareth grinned. "It can be difficult even when things aren't so uncertain. You might need some time just to think about what you'd like to do when you can just be yourself without extraordinary outside pressures bearing on you."

Hermione nodded. "I have considered that, too. I thought I might take some time to spend with my family, perhaps take some Muggle classes. I think it would be difficult to matriculate, but I might be able to invent some qualifications that would withstand scrutiny sufficiently to be able to take some individual courses."

"If you go through the Ministry, you might actually be able to apply to university, if you liked. In the last couple decades, I haven't heard of anyone using the bona fides for educational purposes, but it's theoretically possible to do it," Gareth said. "The Ministry works with the Muggle government to create legitimate credentials for witches and wizards who wish to participate in some type of Muggle enterprise. I understand, however, that the call for such credentials has declined significantly in the last few years. Precipitously, one might say."

"Don't put ideas in Miss Granger's head, McGonagall. She is a . . . she has potential in the wizarding world. There is no need for her to seek a life outside of it."

"She brought it up."

"I thought that living in the Muggle world was discouraged, though," Hermione said with a frown, "because of the dangers of accidentally exposing Muggles to magic, or using magic on unsuspecting Muggles to gain an advantage."

"Clearly, there are rules governing the use of such credentials," Gareth said, "and it is true that the British Ministry has never been very supportive of wizards or witches who, for whatever reason, wish to work in the Muggle world, but it is possible. It would be easier if you were in another country. Compared with other western countries, Britain was rather late in instituting any regularised practices to assist those who wanted to work in the Muggle world, relying more on labyrinthine rules discouraging it, and then once Volde um, once he gained influence over policy through his followers in the Ministry, the new procedures weren't developed any further. My father always believed that the Scottish wizarding world was foolish to have given up its sovereignty and independence. I think that if they hadn't, you would see quite a different picture in Scotland than in England. Much more independence for the individual witch and wizard and less meddling."

"There isn't sufficient population or resources, McGonagall, you know that. Hogwarts is here, for one, and has always served the entire British Isles. It was far more sensible for the whole island to have one Ministry, particularly when dealing with the reality of Muggle Britain and its government as a whole."

"Ireland didn't let that affect it. For years, all of Muggle Ireland was under English control, and even now, the north is part of the UK, but the Irish wizarding population maintained its own sovereignty all along despite that, dealing quite capably with the various Muggle governments."

"With the constant assistance of the British Ministry. Face it, McGonagall, the Irish Ministry is more like a department of the British Ministry than it is an independent entity," Snape countered.

"Do you think that after everything's over, I might be able to obtain some Muggle credentials from the Ministry?" Hermione asked, steering the topic back to something less contentious and more practical. "I had thought of how I could do it on my own, but it would be better to have something more official, I guess."

"I am sure you could," Gareth said. "I know a wizard who should be able to help you with that, if we all survive this."

"That would be useful. Thank you," Hermione replied.

"Shouldn't you tell her who it is, in case you die and she does not?" Snape asked sarcastically.

"Can't." Gareth swallowed his last bit of cake and shook his head. "He's underground, I suppose you could say."

"Doesn't sound like the helpful sort," Severus said with a sneer.

Gareth just shrugged one shoulder. "He does his best. Now, Miss Granger, would you care for another piece of cake? Or perhaps a bite from each of the ones you haven't tried?"

"Just a little bit from each, if you insist!" Hermione replied with a smile.

Gareth obligingly waved his wand and sliced each of the three remaining desserts into two pieces each. After depositing some fruit tart and coconut cake on Hermione's plate, he did the same for Snape, who had actually finished his tart, but serving him some of the chocolate torte and coconut cake this time.

"I do not want any more," Severus said.

"Then leave it," Gareth replied. "Unless Miss Granger would like it?"

"No, I'm stuffed," Hermione said. "And you don't need to call me 'Miss Granger.'" She blushed. "Unless you think it's inappropriate."

"I simply did not wish to presume familiarity," Gareth replied with a bright smile. "My given name is Gareth."

"It would be inappropriate for her to address you so familiarly," Severus began.

Knowing what Severus was about to say, Gareth added, "I do trust that Miss Granger...Hermione...has sufficient sense of decorum to address me more formally when an occasion might call for it." He looked back at Hermione.

"Professor Snape said that you will be teaching Defence tomorrow."

"Yes, just for a day or two," Gareth said. "Then you'll have Robbie back again."

"I do hope your brother doesn't let the students blow themselves up. They are all dunderheads." Severus glanced at Hermione. "With an exception or two."

"Do you enjoy Defence, Hermione?"

"Sometimes. It is very practical, and it can be challenging."

"But not your favourite subject," Gareth ventured.

"No, but it's not bad. I might enjoy it more if we didn't have to take it as seriously as we do," Hermione said.

"So, which is your favourite subject? Potions?"

"No, Arithmancy, although I do enjoy Potions very much," Hermione said. "And Transfiguration, as well."

"Are there any subjects you don't like?"

"Divination," Hermione said immediately. "Almost all of it is a load of rubbish. I don't think it's even a proper subject."

Gareth laughed.

"And Muggle Studies is pretty ridiculous, too. They don't really teach anything about Muggle life, Muggle history, Muggle science, or Muggle arts and literature. It's more about how clever wizards and witches are, and how pathetic Muggles are in trying to deal with life without magic." Hermione rolled her eyes. "As if everything important in life comes from magic...or technology, which wizards see as a sad substitute for magic. It's ludicrous. I think Muggle Studies is a waste of time the way it's taught now."

"Interesting," Gareth said. "Is it really so poor? I am surprised that Uncle Albus or Aunt Minerva, now, would approve of such a course."

"The Ministry sets the exams," Snape interjected, "so the curriculum is aimed toward the OWLs and NEWTs. There are also only a few textbooks on the subject, most of them out-of-date and not even particularly accurate when they were first published. Most witches and wizards wouldn't notice the deficiencies unless they were Muggle-born or half-blood, though I have no doubt that Dumbledore was aware of it. It could hardly be a priority, though."

"Perhaps after the war, that's something that Aunt Minerva could change...and you, Snape. You're Deputy, after all."

"That will likely not be the case following the war," Severus replied.

"Why not?" Gareth asked. "Aunt Minerva doesn't find you objectionable, despite her normally excellent taste in friends and companions."

Severus met Hermione's eyes, and he remembered what she had said about optimism and hope.

"Perhaps, then, it is something we could consider updating," Severus said.

"So, anyone up for a game?" Gareth asked brightly. "Hermione? Do you need to leave, or can you stay and lend the pleasure of your company to brighten the evening of two miserable wizards?"

Severus glared at him. "We had not concluded our business when you interrupted."

Gareth appeared surprised. "I was unaware that it was not a social visit. I will leave you to it, then." He stood and returned the remnants of their meal to the tray. "I will just be in the sitting room if you need me. It was good to meet you, Hermione."

When Gareth had left, Severus reached over and picked up his wand from the bedside table. He closed the door with a flick, then sank back into his armchair.

"You look tired," Hermione said, concerned. "Would you like me to go, too? Do you need to rest?"

"No. I simply . . ." Severus shrugged slightly.

Hermione smiled. "I was looking forward to seeing you, too. I wanted to be finished with everything, though, so I would have more time. But maybe I should have come earlier in the day, when you weren't so tired."

"I think I am tired of resting," Severus said.

"I don't know if you're well enough to do anything else, though," Hermione said seriously. "What happened to you? Professor McGonagall wouldn't say."

"I was unable to avoid being sent on a raid by the Dark Lord. He put me in charge. We were to kidnap Scrimgeour's granddaughter and kill his great-grandson, with no concern at all about what happened to anyone else in the household," Severus said.

"There was something about that in the *Prophet*. It said that the arrival of Aurors drove the Death Eaters away, though they set the house on fire first," Hermione said.

"I have not seen the newspaper. There are small mercies, I suppose," Severus said. "The raid failed because I intended it to fail, not because the Aurors arrived. I set off the *Morsmordre* almost immediately, alerting everyone to our presence before we had done anything, and I did what I could to see to it that the family escaped the house. I was returning to the house after sending my two *colleagues* back to the Dark Lord. I told them that I was going to at least finish off the boy, kidnap him if possible. As I turned to go back in to find the child, I was hit by a curse. It slowed me, unfortunately, but more problematic were the new Anti-Apparition wards that I discovered once I reached the boy. Within seconds of the fire being set, I had lowered the ones we had raised. It gave the family the opportunity to escape. It took time for me to get out of the building with the boy, then I *Obliviated* him. I couldn't have him telling people that a Death Eater had saved him, after all, and I certainly didn't want him to think of Death Eaters as heroes who rescue people from burning buildings. The Dark Lord did not appreciate my failure nor the delay in my return." Severus smirked. "In a sense, the Auror's curse provided me with some measure of legitimacy. The Dark Lord believes only that I am incompetent, not that I am a traitor. I was punished accordingly."

"I am sorry," Hermione said. "Thank you for telling me."

Severus nodded.

After thinking a moment, Hermione said, "It's too bad that there isn't some way of letting the Aurors know who you are...or *not* who you are, of course, but what you are. That you're a spy on our side. But there's no way of doing that without tipping off the Death Eaters, too, I suppose."

Severus was silent. He looked away from her, struggling with his desire to tell Hermione that it had been Moody, a fellow Order member, who had cursed him, that Moody had seen him with his magical eye and knew perfectly well whom he was hexing, and then to tell her precisely how the old Auror had cursed him in the back and what the curse had done to him. But Minerva had dealt with Moody. Moody had seemed contrite. It would bring him only temporary satisfaction to see Hermione's face when she realised what a nasty old bugger Moody was. He closed his eyes. He could not forgive Moody, but he could behave better than the older wizard had, Severus thought, trying to remember what Gareth had told him earlier.

"Professor?" Hermione sounded concerned. "Professor? What is it? Do you need something?"

Severus shook his head slightly, unable to articulate his feelings even to himself. It seemed that redemption, or whatever it was he was after, was a complicated business. Too much evil, too many temptations, inside and out. But Hermione was there, caring about him still, as strange and improbable as it seemed. He would have to tell her. If he lived, he would tell her all. He didn't think he could face it sooner and confront the possibility that once she had a complete picture of Severus Snape, her affection would be overwhelmed by revulsion, and perhaps even fear.

"Professor? Severus, please," Hermione said, reaching out and touching his arm.

He blinked and took in a sharp breath. He turned his head and looked up at Hermione. She had stood from her place on the bed, and her brow was knit with concern.

"What? I did not hear...what did you ask me?"

"Are you all right, sir? You were in a daze. I was worried," Hermione said. "I am sorry. I shouldn't have asked you about what happened. It was insensitive of me."

"No, it wasn't that, Hermione," Severus replied. "It was something quite different." He raised his hand toward her, a slight gesture suggesting a caress, then dropped it again.

"I think that you should get into bed," she said. "Let me fetch Gareth to help you."

"I can tend to myself," he said irritably.

"Normally, yes, but for me, this time, let someone help you, please."

Severus let out a sigh, but he made no move to leave his chair, so Hermione opened the door and called out for Gareth, who was there in a moment.

Gareth took one look at Severus and said, "I think it's been a long day, Snape. And tomorrow's another."

With a wave of his hand, he drew back the covers on the bed. Severus did not look at Gareth as the younger man put one arm under his, circling him under his shoulders, but he pushed up on the armrests and allowed Gareth to assist him into bed. Hermione stood discreetly in the corner and waited until Severus was settled back against the pillows.

"I should go now," she said, "and let you rest."

"I am fine," Severus replied, taking a glass of water from Gareth.

"It's time for one of your potions now, Snape," Gareth said, picking up a bottle and a small cup. He looked over at Hermione. "He'll probably feel better after the potion."

Hermione waited until Severus had taken his potion and Gareth had left before approaching the bed. "Better?"

Severus nodded. "Better." He reached for the glass of water, and Hermione quickly picked it up and handed it to him.

"Thank you. I am sorry," he said.

"Why?"

"For worrying you." He took a sip of water then raised his eyes to meet hers. "If I may admit such a thing, it is a rather novel experience for me. Having someone worry."

"I am sure there are others who do. Professor McGonagall does, I'm sure," Hermione said.

He nodded. "She does. And the Headmaster would worry. He would try to act as though he didn't because I hated it when he worried. I resented it. Whenever he expressed concern or affection, it was difficult to accept it. I did not reject his friendship, but neither did I embrace it. And now he is gone and it is my fault."

"No, I'm sure it isn't. He was sick. He had been cursed by the ring. Whatever killed him, I am sure it wasn't your fault," Hermione said softly, wishing she could find the right words to say. She watched Severus as he attempted to control himself, bunching the sheet in his fist. "You miss him. It must be very hard."

Unable to look at her, Severus could feel his throat constricting, and heat and heaviness rising in his face, unshed tears gathering. He swallowed hard, then said, his voice only slightly roughened, "You should go now."

Hermione stepped closer and placed her hand on his arm. "We're friends here. You can talk to me."

"I do. Talk to you. Surprises me," he said in a low voice. He could feel his eyes burning now. He swallowed again, took in a deep breath, letting it out slowly. "Please, Hermione, it is time to go."

Hermione squeezed his arm then let go. "I'm free tomorrow before lunch, if I could come see you then?"

Severus hesitated. He had been going to move back to his own rooms in the morning, but Minerva had made it clear that he was welcome to stay longer. "That would be acceptable," he agreed with a nod.

"We could take another brain holiday," she said lightly.

"Yes, as this one was interrupted by a man in a skirt," Severus said, trying to put some acid into the remark. "Good night, Miss Granger."

"Good night, Professor. See you tomorrow."

Hermione looked back at him before she closed the door behind her. His eyes were closed but he looked far from relaxed. She suppressed her sigh of sympathy as she stepped into the sitting room. Gareth looked up from the book he was reading.

"Going?"

"Yes. I think he was more tired than he said."

"He was very badly injured," Gareth said quietly. "Arrived almost dead. It's hardly surprising he would be tired. Hates to admit it, though. You would think that accepting help was just a new form of torture for him."

Hermione paused. Almost dead. No wonder he believed he would die before the end. One time, he could slip from almost dead to dead. But he might not. "Is that why you are helping him? Because he was almost dead? Or because he finds it torture?"

Gareth raised an eyebrow. "I help him because he needs it. And I try to do it in a way that is respectful of his dignity."

"I thought you hated him. I overheard you a few weeks ago. I was surprised to see that you were left here with him, let alone were keeping him company," Hermione said frankly.

"I hate what he did. I cannot forgive what he did. I hated the Death Eater who so cruelly maimed my mother, hated him for years," Gareth said softly. "But hating Snape, while it could be quite an engrossing pastime, would do neither of us any good."

"He's not the same man," Hermione said.

"He is the same man, Hermione, but he is also more. And he will always be the man who killed, maimed, poisoned, tortured, and devastated lives. But that is not all he is." Gareth sighed. "Nothing is simple; even my feelings about my feelings about him are complicated. But saying that Snape is not the same man is an over-simplification that does not help him or your understanding of him. I can see that you wish to be his friend, and although I would not encourage you, if you are to be his friend, you can't lie to yourself about who and what he is. He can be more and better than he was, but he can never shed what he did in his past. Not fully, not if he lives to be two hundred."

"I don't lie to myself about it. But I see what he is now, what he has done even when it hasn't been appreciated...even when it was something he probably didn't want to do, but he did it because it was right."

"I think you mistake choosing the right for its own sake and choosing the right out of some sense of obligation or from some other motivation. Not to say that he deserves no credit for his choices, particularly those that go against his instinct for self-preservation or self-gratification, nor to minimise how difficult it must be for him, but I think Snape would prefer to have your friendship based on an honest recognition of who he is, all of him and all of his past, even the parts that are nasty."

"It is no virtue to abstain from eating chocolate if you dislike it," Hermione said. "I think he deserves a lot of credit for what he is doing. It isn't easy for him."

"I would not trade lives with him now," Gareth said, nodding in agreement, "but he did make some choices early in life that he shouldn't have and that led him to do more evil. He made his bed, as they say, and he must live with the consequences."

"In other words, he deserved what happened to him the other night," Hermione said angrily.

"No, no, not that he deserved it. Not in the sense you mean," Gareth replied. "But if you leave here, go down to the ground floor, open the doors to the Great Hall and step through them, you should not be surprised if you do not find yourself in Gryffindor Tower. Snape has his life and his path and he cannot escape it. He can only make new choices based on where he is now."

"But it's not just him," Hermione protested. "Other people make choices that affect his life, or they did things that he had to react to. He isn't responsible for everything that has happened to him."

"Of course not." Gareth looked at Hermione speculatively. "You're a bright witch, Hermione. If you want to be his friend, defend him all you like to others, but face facts yourself. If you don't, you're bound to be disappointed or hurt."

"I always face facts. Even when I don't like them," Hermione replied.

"That's a good Gryffindor response," Gareth said with a smile. "I will see you in class tomorrow, but I will be here for a few days. Perhaps we will see each other again, more informally. We could discuss your future after Voldemort and what your options may be like. You mentioned that Arithmancy is your favourite subject. That happens to be my field, so if you're interested in discussing various masters in Arithmancy, I know many of them personally and many more by repute."

"That might be nice, thank you," Hermione said, "and thank you for dessert."

"It was my pleasure, Hermione," he said, standing and showing her to the door. "Have a good night."

"You, too, Gareth. See you tomorrow."

As soon as Hermione was gone, Gareth went and tapped on the guest room door. When there was no response, he opened it. The lights were out and Severus was lying on his side.

"Snape? You okay?"

"Go away."

Gareth flicked his wand, lighting one of the lamps. "You haven't had all your nightly potions yet, and you still need the one for your back."

"Minerva can do it later." His voice sounded rough and congested.

Gareth stepped further into the room. "Are you in pain? Discomfort?"

"Go away, McGonagall."

Gareth walked over to the bedside table, barely casting a glance at Severus. He poured out a portion of potion.

"Here, take this," he said, holding it out toward the curled figure on the bed. "It's just Headache Potion. It will help a little."

"I said, go away."

"I know. I haven't heeded you yet. Take the potion."

"Leave it on the table and go."

"Snape, sit up. Sit up, man."

Severus didn't respond. Gareth took a breath, then he reached out and touched Snape's shoulder. Severus stiffened.

"You've done harder things than sit up and take a potion, Snape."

"Take your hand off me and go away unless you want to be hexed into the next century."

"Never would have taken you for a coward," Gareth said as he removed his hand.

Severus raised up on one elbow and looked back over his shoulder at Gareth. His expression was hard. "You really do want to be hexed into the next century, don't you, McGonagall?" he said.

"Come, Snape. Take the potion," Gareth said gently. "It will help your headache."

Taking a deep breath, Severus shoved himself into a sitting position and reached out for the potion. After he had gulped it down, Gareth took the used cup and waved his wand to clean it. Severus lay back down with his back turned.

"Do you want to tell me what's wrong?"

"No," Severus replied vehemently. He sighed slightly. "Nothing. Everything."

"Anything specific?"

"You don't care."

"I am here."

Severus was silent for a moment, then he said, "Hermione and I were talking. We spoke of Dumbledore. She cannot understand why I feel responsible for his death, that I am responsible for it." He snorted. "No one but Minerva can understand that, and I can hardly talk to her about it. And I simply miss him. And I hate him for leaving us to go on without him and for allowing me to live."

Gareth reached out and touched Severus's shoulder again, and this time, Severus didn't react.

"He wouldn't leave us if he could stay, you know," Gareth said softly. "And I do know why you feel responsible, and I am certain that Uncle Albus would tell you that his death was one thing that you weren't responsible for."

"You know," Severus said dully.

"Yes. And although it probably doesn't make any difference to you, I don't blame you for that, either."

Severus shook his head.

Gareth rubbed his shoulder lightly, then said, "You know, Snape, there's no shame in tears, whatever you may think." He headed towards the door. "When she returns, I will tell Aunt Minerva that you still need your nighttime potions."

Before he closed the door, Gareth extinguished the lamp. "Good night, Snape."

Chapter Twenty: Yet they shall not break

Chapter 21 of 34

Minerva and Albus proceed with their plan. Anticipating the rapidly approaching time when he no longer can, Albus shares vital information with both Harry and Severus. Severus is increasingly unhappy with the way events are unfolding.

Note: AU. Not DH-compliant.



Chapter Twenty: Yet they shall not break

Mid-February 17 March 1997

Minerva sat up in bed and reached for her wand, turning on her bedside lamp.

"Are you all right, Albus?"

"Can't sleep. I lay flat and I can't breathe; I sit up and I can't get comfortable," he admitted.

"Did you take enough potion before you went to bed?"

"I took the prescribed dose."

"I'm giving you more," Minerva said, getting up and going over to the dresser, where a startling array of potions bottles were lined up, each one labelled only with a number. "It's 'six,' the pale purple one, isn't it?"

"Yes, but I don't know as I should take more..." Albus began.

"You have to sleep, and I can't bear to have you so uncomfortable and unable to breathe." Minerva picked up a parchment with directions written in Melina's precise handwriting. "You increased number two yesterday." She glanced at the second bottle, which contained a glaring red potion, then turned to the second page of parchment and cast a decrypting charm on it. "That's the one that increases the congestion." She flipped back to the other parchment. "But your dosage of number six was not correspondingly increased."

"That was intentional, my dear. There is some concern on all our parts that it will lose its efficacy if we increase the dosage too rapidly."

He tried to take a deep breath and began to cough. His coughing did not abate, but became more violent, and Minerva rushed to his side as he tried to get out of bed. He waved her off as he stumbled toward the loo, where his violent coughing became retching. Minerva followed him in to find him sitting on the cool floor, his eyes closed, his head resting on his left arm as he leaned against the toilet. His breath was shallow and rattled in his chest.

Minerva knelt beside him and rubbed his back. "This is no good, Albus. I know this was my plan, and we are supposed to be following it to the letter, but I cannot bear to see you suffer like this now. We have to make some changes."

Albus raised his head and smiled weakly. "You could always just kill me sooner."

"Do not joke, Albus! There can be no questions about your death. I will do what I have to when I have to, but I don't think I can bear this."

"We must simply find new methods of coping. And I will speak with Melina tomorrow. You may be the architect of the plan, and Robert and Murdoch, the primary designers of all those lovely potions, but Melina is the expert on the curse and on the effects of these potions on my body. And aside from the issue of the second spell that you two are still debating, and which I am leaving up to your judgment, we will do as she says, Minerva. I promised her that. If it means some discomfort for me, I will bear it, and you must try to bear it, as well, my dear. It is the only way that we can succeed. And I was joking about killing me sooner. That might bring relief, but as you say, there must be no questions about my death, and the timing must be carefully adhered to."

Tears rose in Minerva's eyes. "I wish there were another way, Albus. A way to save you *and* keep you from this suffering, but also save Severus, Draco, and Harry."

"My poor, sweet darling," Albus said, caressing her cheek briefly. "You need your sleep, too. I think it might be best if you slept alone. I should begin staying in my own room."

"No. If necessary, I will move up there with you, make some arrangement to avoid having my absence from my rooms noticed. I can Floo here as easily as you can Floo back to your rooms, and if visitors have to wait for me a bit longer than usual, that is the way it must be. At this point in the year, I rarely have anyone seeking me after curfew, anyway."

Albus shook his head as she helped him stand. "You still need your rest. You will not be able to carry on if you become exhausted. You know that."

"I don't want you alone at night when you are unwell."

"I can have Wilsby stay with me, as she used to when I was a child," Albus replied, turning to the sink to wash his face and hand.

"She is already in sufficient distress. I trust her completely, but there is only so much that we can tell her, and she is too observant not to eventually see what we are doing. I do not know how she would react, particularly not knowing why we're doing it. I think it might soon be time to send her to the island with Gertrude and Gareth." She took his arm and steadied him as they returned to the bedroom.

Albus hesitated. "No, no, not until the end. Whatever we finally tell her, I cannot do that to her. It would break her heart. She would pine and die"

Minerva sighed. "I thought you would say that, and I actually agree. But I will still stay with you."

"At least conjure another bed so that you are not overly disturbed by my moving about in the night," he said as he sat down on the edge of the bed and Minerva cast a spell to freshen the sheets for him.

"At some point, for your comfort, I may do that, but for now, I prefer to be awakened when you are uncomfortable." Minerva plumped his pillows and helped him lie back against them. "I will be back in a minute. Some hot tea with a lot of peppermint might help, if you refuse the potion. But do speak with Melina, please. Even if you can't take more of number six...or was it two?...even if you can't take more of that, perhaps there's a standard potion you could take that wouldn't interfere with the others during the day."

"I promise I will talk to her," Albus said.

When she returned a few minutes later with the steaming tea, Albus was leaning against the pillows, dozing, but his eyes fluttered open. He smiled.

"Thank you, my dear."

"No honey or sugar, I'm afraid," Minerva said.

"I know. Melina's instructions," he said with a nod. He breathed in the steam. "Lovely. Thank you."

When they had each had a cup of tea, Minerva had him lean over, holding some pillows in front of him, and she rapidly tapped the blades of her cupped hands over his back. Albus began to cough again, but less violently, and this time, the coughing clearing his chest and not merely choking him. When she was finished, she had him lie back against the pile of pillows again and poured him another cup of hot tea.

"How do you feel?"

"Better." He took a sip of his tea and sighed. "Where did you learn to do that?" he asked, looking at her quizzically. Forty years together, and she could still surprise him.

"Well, you know that I was never particularly interested in Healing," Minerva replied, "but that Mother still used to drag me about with her when I was young. I remember seeing her teach someone to do that. It's Muggle, I think, but Mother did it because the patient was unable to take certain potions for some reason that I don't remember, if I

ever knew it. It fascinated me to watch her thumping the witch's back like that, so different from everything else she did. There was a spell that she used before and after, too. Melina probably knows it. I think it helps loosen everything up, though I'm not entirely sure. I will have to ask her about it, if we have to be cautious about the potions. A spell should be all right, though, and after what I've been doing recently, it should be a simple thing for me to learn. Did it help?"

"I do feel better. I think I could recline more and sleep now."

Minerva helped him fix his pillows, then she lay down herself and reached over to turn off the light.

"Comfortable?" she asked.

"Yes, but I would be more comfortable if you were a little closer."

Minerva moved closer, rolling over and resting her hand on his hip.

"A little closer. A nice warm snuggle," Albus said.

"It won't bother you?"

"No, I feel quite well, aside from the breathing. And a few aches, which your warmth could only soothe."

Minerva rested her head on the pillows he was reclining against and put her arm around his waist. She could hear his breath rattling in his chest, but it wasn't as bad as it had been. Putting her ear to his side, she could hear his heartbeat, still strong and steady, and feel his magic thrumming in time with it, also still strong. Albus put his arm around her and gave her a squeeze. Minerva concentrated on bringing her own magic in tune with his, an easy thing now, after all their years together, and even easier since the *Celebrare* had been cast. She sighed and drifted to sleep, dreaming of his magic streaming like music from his heart.

Minerva looked up as Melina entered the sitting room from the Headmaster's bedroom.

"How is he?"

"He is as I expected he would be at this point," Melina said. "His fever was higher this morning than I thought it would be, though. I want you to check his temperature every morning before he takes his first potions of the day. I will come by earlier tomorrow morning so that I can check him as soon as he wakes up. Shall I meet you in your rooms tomorrow?" When Minerva nodded, she continued, "You should begin recording his temperature, pulse, and respiration each morning before and after he takes his potions."

"But what about his sleeping? He can't breathe at night."

"That will get somewhat worse, but you can do as you did last night," Melina said, "and there's a Muggle medicine I can get for you. It's not particularly powerful, even as a Muggle medicine, but it should be soothing for him. You can rub it into his chest and back before bed. I used to use it on Rosemary and Calum when they were small because it's mild."

Minerva sighed. "I knew he was going to get sicker, but knowing it in the abstract and having to watch it happening are very different things."

"This is not the worst of it, Aunt Minerva. You must try not to allow it to affect you...I know that it will, but you need to remain healthy yourself. You will be helping him most by doing that. Not to mention that the rest of your plan will require you to be at your best. You cannot afford to become sick or to appear in any way to be less than one hundred percent in control of yourself."

"I know," Minerva said with a nod, rubbing her forehead.

The door to the bedroom opened and Albus emerged, cheerily dressed in deep blue silk robes decorated with a scattered vertical pattern of large white lilies and long green leaves. They weren't Minerva's favourites, but Albus liked them. He was pale, but his eyes were bright, and he crossed the room and leaned over to kiss Minerva's cheek as he sat beside her on the sofa.

"You should go down to breakfast, my dear," he said. "I plan to be at lunch and dinner today, and I am spending the morning with Robert until he has to leave to take your first-year classes, then I have a few meetings during the afternoon. After dinner, I am seeing Harry, and then I'm meeting with Severus after that."

Minerva wanted to protest that he should rest after sleeping so poorly, but she knew that he still had work to do, and it was also important that he attend as many meals as he felt he could until he became too ill to go down to the Great Hall. It wouldn't do for Voldemort to have an inkling of precisely how ill Albus was until after he died. It was a careful balancing act. It was all a balancing act, every single thing they did, everything balanced and working together.

Rather than protest, Minerva gave Albus a kiss, said she would see him at lunch, and walked Melina down to the great front doors.

"How is Poppy?" Melina asked as they rode the stairs down to the gargoyle.

"She is still upset that we won't let her help take care of Albus," Minerva said, "but Albus had her to tea a few days ago and reassured her that he had put himself into your hands and would be fine. She will not be pleased to see him deteriorate."

Melina shook her head. "If there were a way to get her out of Hogwarts, I would recommend that," she said, "but I suppose that's not practical."

"Even if I didn't care about Poppy's feelings or the task of finding a new matron for the school, for her to suddenly disappear from the school would be very suspicious to anyone watching Hogwarts, no matter the excuse we gave."

"Have you reconsidered telling her?"

"No, the more people who know, particularly among those who are around us, the greater the chance that something will go wrong," she said. "The only people who can know are those who have a specific role to play, and each of them, only as much as they must know." She looked at Melina and smiled. "There are even a few things that we haven't told you and have shared only with Gareth and Gertrude. Nothing that you need to know, however."

"There will be a lot of people who will be very upset when this is all over," Melina said.

The door at the base of the stairs opened. "It will be over, though," Minerva said. "Fancy staying for breakfast?"

"No, Brennan is expecting me back. I am trying to spend more time at home now, in anticipation of my extended absence in a few weeks. I have dropped everything but a few emergency cases."

"I am sorry, Melina. Please tell him how much we appreciate it," Minerva said, thinking of Melina's elderly Muggle husband and feeling slightly guilty. At eighty years old, the sacrifice of time with his wife could not be an easy thing for him...or for Melina. "How is his health?"

"He's doing very well. Still bicycling every day, and he works with Rosemary in her greenhouse a few days a week. Don't worry, Aunt Minerva, I don't think he is in danger of dying while I'm away. Not that he couldn't, of course, but he's very healthy and we both know that this is important, especially for people like us."

Minerva cautioned her to take care when Apparating home, then stood in the doorway, feeling the chill, damp February air, and watched Melina walk down to the gates.

She was asking a great deal of so many people, some of whom could never even know precisely why they were making sacrifices. They simply took her word for it that it was for the good of the wizarding world. She hoped that she could live up to the trust that everyone placed in her, particularly Albus. Once she had revealed her entire plan to him and he'd considered it, Albus had put himself in her hands and began to help with the plan. Everything hinged on her and her ability to carry through successfully. Minerva pushed that thought from her mind. In the meantime, she had classes to teach.

Albus smiled as Severus took a seat across from him. "Thank you for taking the time to see me so late."

"I saw Potter in the hall. Was he leaving here?"

"Yes, and that is why I wanted to meet with you. I am going to share with you all that I am imparting to him, and more, more that you will need to know but that he cannot yet learn. He will need to discover certain things on his own, with help, yours and others'. I am going to prepare you."

"I doubt he will ever accept my help," Severus replied. "It has been a difficult task up to this point. He fights me every step, and he blunders off doing the most foolish things. That entire fiasco in the Ministry was his fault. His judgment is even worse than his father's, something I never believed possible. And, of course, he blames me for Black's death. If you do carry through on your plan, he will trust me even less."

"More, though, than he would have if we had proceeded with the original plan," Albus pointed out, ignoring the rest of Severus's statement.

"Albus, you need to start taking your potions again. You don't look well. When I said that I would not fulfill the requirements of the Vow, this is not what I intended. I wanted you whole and here..."

"Severus, it is better this way. Please, I do know what I am doing. You will have an opportunity for *docus poenitentiae* of sorts. This is for the best, and not just for you, but for Draco, too. And Tom will not have a victory to use to his advantage. My early demise will slow his progress." Albus paused and cleared his throat, then took a sip from the water glass at his elbow. "I will rest easy knowing that I will leave you in the best possible position to help Harry and to complete what you set out to do all those years ago. Do not forget that, Severus. Do not forget in the frustration of the moment why it was that you came to me almost seventeen years ago, and why you have been here at Hogwarts for the last sixteen. You still have much to do."

"There must be another way," Severus protested, acutely aware that the Headmaster was having difficulty taking a full breath.

"Events are overtaking us, my boy," Albus replied patiently. "We must make the most of the time we have. We will need to meet frequently in the next days. There is much you need to understand...about Tom, about Harry, about certain deceptions I have created over the years. Minerva now knows all that I know about them, and there are a few select facts that I have shared with Arthur Weasley, but when I am gone, you can rely on Minerva if you have questions, or if there are things I have neglected to tell you...or even if you just need someone to talk to. You can trust her."

"Minerva is barely speaking to me," Severus said bitterly. "She is perfectly *civil*, but I cannot foresee that she will welcome that."

"She is agreed, Severus. She still cares about you, you know. She is just angry and over-worked right now. That is one reason that Robert has come to stay. He can take some of her burden from her, both in helping me and in taking a few of her classes. He will already be in place when she needs a replacement to teach Transfiguration. He is also an excellent Potions master."

"I had thought he was brewing your potions for you," Severus said, sounding glum despite himself.

"He is. He and Murdoch both. I will be quite comfortable for some time longer, my boy. Do not worry about that. My family is taking good care of me, and they will care for you, too, when I am gone."

"Minerva..."

"Minerva will recover, and she will eventually thaw toward you. She will certainly work with you. Now, I have a good deal to show you tonight," Albus said, gesturing toward his large Pensieve, "so let's begin."

Albus sighed with relief when the gargoyle sprang aside. He stepped up and leaned heavily on the railing spiralling up beside him. Lunch had been a gruelling ordeal. Merely crossing the Great Hall had exhausted him. By the time he had reached his chair, he felt he would never catch his breath again. His muscles ached from coughing during the night and each inhalation was painful, but beyond that, he felt as though he were trying to breath through a heavy, saturated sponge. Minerva had entered the Great Hall after he did. Her expression flickered when she saw him, but then she set her jaw and proceeded calmly to the staff table, taking her seat next to him.

"How are you, Professor?" she asked as she reached for her water.

"About as well as I look at the moment, unfortunately," he said softly.

She looked at him. "Would you like me to accompany you back to your office?"

"No, no, thank you. I need to rest first, and you need to eat."

Unfortunately, the meal included boiled cabbage, which Albus normally enjoyed, especially with a lot of butter, salt, and pepper, but now, the aroma made his stomach lurch. He pretended to eat some soup and bread, then left with Minerva, who walked up the stairs with him, taking them at his slowed pace, the students rushing past them on their way to their next classes or to their common rooms. She had been going to accompany him to his office, but Albus pointed out that if she did that, given his pace, she would be late for her next class. After he promised to call Wilsby if he felt faint or needed help, Minerva turned and hurried toward her classroom.

When he reached his office, Albus sank into an armchair beside the fireplace and closed his eyes. Unless he decided to allow himself to be carried into the Great Hall in a Charmed sedan chair, he didn't believe that he would be attending any more meals. Time to have people believe that he had developed an intractable bronchial ailment, he thought, complicated by his age and general physical condition. He could still meet with staff and students in his office. And when he no longer could go down to his office, he could meet with them in his suite. He and Minerva had begun sleeping in his rooms a few days before. Although he could Floo back and forth to his suite from her rooms in Gryffindor Tower, it was simply easier now not to do that. His world was becoming smaller, until eventually, it would consist only of his bed.

After he had sat there for several minutes, catching his breath as well as he was able, Albus became aware that he was thirsty. Peppermint tea would be nice. He opened his eyes, and the view from the window caught his eye. It was a beautiful day. The late February sky was a pure, clear blue. He could see the mountains on the other side of the lake. The conifers were darkly green against the hillside, but it would only be a matter of weeks before the other trees began to bud and the earth sent out new bright shoots of green. He swallowed against the lump in his throat as he thought of how Hogwarts would begin this spring with a funeral. It would be difficult for the school and the students, but easier, he thought, than his original plan. Having a Headmaster die of a mysterious illness would certainly be easier than having him murdered, particularly having him murdered by a member of his staff. And if the murder were to occur, as he believed, during an attack on Hogwarts itself, the results could be devastating, even if Severus did all he could to contain the damage. Minerva had averted that, as well, with her new plan.

Draco was still not confiding in his Head of House, and Albus had never told Severus what Draco's other task was. As long as Severus kept Draco safe, Albus believed that would be sufficient to hold the Vow at bay for now. Several times a week, Albus could sense the wards being pushed and pulled, so to speak, and he could sense Draco's frustration vibrating through them as he tried to bypass the castle wards and connect the Vanishing Cabinet to its mate. Now that Severus would not fulfil the terms of the Vow, Albus had shifted from merely interfering with Draco's efforts to compromise the wards, to completely stymying them. In a few weeks, that task would be moot, he hoped, and the Order could bring Draco and his mother into hiding. Minerva had spoken to Tonks, and although the young Auror knew nothing of their plan, she had agreed to be prepared to drop everything when Minerva called on her. Only at that point would Minerva explain their plan to rescue Narcissa and Draco. Arthur and a few

other Order members had already prepared a sanctuary in Sweden, but without knowing who the refugees would be or precisely when they would arrive.

Albus sighed and pushed up on the armrest as he stood. Increasing responsibility was falling to Minerva. Although she had always been an active member of the Order, he had tried to protect her, and not only her physical well-being. That was no longer possible. She had to know all that he did and be prepared to act on it. Her physical safety was more important than ever, and not merely from a sentimental perspective. She had to remain safe to continue carrying out the plan, regardless of what happened to him, and she had to be named Headmistress. He had spoken with members of the Board of Governors in January, hinting at a retirement in the near future and strongly recommending Minerva to succeed him. Minerva had attended the last three meetings of the Governors, the first two by mere happenstance, and the most recent one, deliberately, in order to increase her visibility.

The Ministry was flailing about, taking steps that would not help and could even cause them damage in the fight against Voldemort. Scrimgeour was unwilling to admit any errors in arresting the innocent, saying that it would make the Ministry appear weak, and the last thing they wanted was to look weak. Albus had managed to keep them from hunting down and rounding up all werewolves and incarcerating them, regardless of their allegiance or any danger they might pose. It would not only have been an injustice for all werewolves who dutifully saw to it that they were confined during the full moon or who regularly took Wolfsbane Potion, but it would have been an extreme waste of resources that were already spread thin. There was no knowing what steps the Ministry would take when he was no longer there to try to check the worst of the abuses. Gertrude and Gareth's calculations indicated that there would be fewer repercussions on the Ministry's authority if he were to die soon of illness, but that they could be catastrophic if he were killed in an attack on Hogwarts. Looking at it now, saving Draco seemed an unequal trade for allowing Tom to have a greater hold on the wizarding world. Gertrude wasn't entirely certain of it, but she believed that if Albus were to die in an attack on the school, Hogwarts itself would be in danger of falling into Voldemort's hands...through proxies, no doubt, but it would still be a school run by Death Eaters.

The thought of Muggle-born and half-blood students having to attend a school run by Voldemort sent shivers through Albus. Looking ahead only to the final defeat of Voldemort, he had focussed on saving Draco, keeping Severus as a double agent, and enabling Harry to continue on his path. Now, though, faced with Gertrude and Gareth's projections, he could not ignore the other effects his death could have. By controlling the timing and the manner of his death, many of those effects might be averted. He had known that his influence was significant, but he had vastly underestimated the effect his murder would have on the wizarding world and on Hogwarts.

Perhaps Minerva was right, and he had been blinkered by his belief in the prophecy that Cassandra Vablatsky had uttered decades before, but with a sigh, Albus also acknowledged that a part of it was simply his sense of ultimate responsibility engendered by his gifts, combined with his confidence in his evaluation of the circumstances. He should have shared his knowledge of Tom and the Horcruxes with Minerva long before he did. Too many years of holding a tight rein on everything in the Order and his desire to protect those around him had led to bad habits. He knew quite well that he was not infallible, yet even knowing that, he trusted his own judgment over that of others...and usually, rightly so. He did take counsel in most decisions, weighing the recommendations of others, but for those issues most central to Harry's role in Tom's defeat...even the fact that Harry had a role determined by prophecy and by the curse cast by Tom all those years ago...those issues, he kept close. He had already begun to reveal much of it to Harry, though perhaps it would have been better if he had begun earlier, despite his desire to protect Harry's childhood...what childhood he could still enjoy.

Minerva had known that the Potters had been targeted based on information that Severus had provided Tom, but until only a few years before, Albus had not even shared the prophecy with her. He should have done that immediately after James and Lily had been killed. She might have understood better why he had left Harry with his Muggle relatives, though she had accepted the explanations he had provided at the time. When Minerva's concerns for young Harry grew after she had spent an afternoon at Arabella Figg's in her Animagus form and had seen the boy there, he had explained the blood protection that Harry had acquired through his mother's sacrifice, and Minerva had agreed that his safety was more important than whether his childhood was ideal.

It pained Albus to think of how little pleasure and love there had been in Harry's early years, but he had faith that Lily's sacrifice would also save him from the worst consequences of his deprivation, and that Harry would never become twisted and cruel. The boy was still filled with anger, but although he remained immature in some respects, he had made some close friends and had chosen them well. His manner of relating to adults, though, could certainly improve. Severus was not warm and cuddly, and Albus could understand why Harry disliked him, but his persistent distrust of the Potions master, even in the face of all that Harry had witnessed Severus do in the service of the Order and to protect him, that was something that Albus could not understand. Had Harry trusted Severus more, Sirius would likely still be alive. Of course, there were now some powerful Death Eaters who had been exposed and imprisoned as a result of the battle in the Ministry, and Voldemort's return had been publicly confirmed, but at a very high price.

Albus began up the stairs to his suite. Almost time for the yellow potion again, number three. Fever. Lovely way to begin an afternoon. The potions were predictable. Harry was less so. The projections that Gertrude and Gareth had done were never clear when it came to Harry. Gertrude said that there must be variables which they were unaware of, likely future variables, and the further out into the future they tried to project, the more indeterminate their projections became...which was to be expected, but there was a much greater effect than usual. If the Arithmancers performed very close, very narrow calculations based on a specific point in time and very well-defined variables, the picture was clearer, but those kinds of calculations were only accurate for the very near future. So many things could occur between his death and Harry's confrontation with Tom, it was impossible to create any accurate calculations, particularly considering what Gertrude had begun to call "the human wand effect." They could find no previous cases that were close enough parallels to Tom and Harry to be able to be completely sure of what would happen when they duelled. Tom would never again use his original wand against Harry, and the next confrontation would engage the two wizards themselves more than it did their wands. Albus found it heartening, however, that almost all of the projections they made ended with Harry alive and well and Tom either fully incapacitated or dead.

One thing was certain, his life had to end soon. The longer he remained in the picture, the darker the picture became. It pained Albus to think that his presence in the world could cause such darkness, but Gertrude explained that it wasn't his presence, per se, but *when* his absence occurred that was determinative. Clearly, if he wanted to save Severus and Draco, he couldn't remain in play. Time to become a pawn, he thought.

On Minerva's instruction, the two Arithmancers had performed projections of what might occur if he were to live, strong and whole, and Severus were to die from the unfulfilled Vow. In the very short-term, if he played a strong hand and held Hogwarts against Death Eaters, or if he simply prevented Draco from letting them have access at all, the picture was initially good, but the loss of Severus weakened the Order, and Voldemort's progress was stronger and faster than in any other scenario. Gertrude knew that it was Severus who was key, because when she removed the Unbreakable Vow and its consequences to Severus, the projections immediately brightened...for everyone but Draco. Gareth had pointed out that all of that assumed that Severus was actually loyal to Dumbledore and was not still a Death Eater in reality. Albus had pondered Gareth's concern and decided that Severus's motivation for turning away from Riddle all those years ago was important for the two to know in order to refine their calculations. He told them of Severus's attachment to Lily and of his horror on learning that his master intended to kill her family. Gareth had appeared sceptical, but Gertrude simply nodded and agreed that they would proceed under the assumption that Severus was loyal to Albus now and would remain opposed to Voldemort even after Albus was gone.

No matter what approach the two Arithmancers took, Severus's survival was key for the success of the Order, regardless of what happened to Albus. Albus had already believed that before learning of Minerva's plan; this was simply confirmation. He also believed that letting Harry proceed on his path alone, without him, would strengthen the boy and increase his determination. Gertrude was not entirely certain about that conclusion, but the calculations surrounding Harry were very indeterminate, in any case. She also felt that, in addition to unknown variables, the indeterminacy might have something to do with the prophecy and with Voldemort's strong belief in it. There was some sense in which Harry's fate, though intertwined with that of the wizarding world, was also set apart from it. Gertrude believed that what was most important was to focus on creating circumstances in which Harry would have the strongest chance of success, and to worry less about Harry himself and what he did. That went against Albus's instincts, but if he were to disappear from the stage, there was little he could do about it, anyway, other than continue to meet with Harry until then and share all he knew or suspected about Riddle and the Horcruxes and to plant the seeds of interest in the mythical Deathly Hallows.

Gertrude and Gareth...and Minerva, though for different reasons...did not like his plan to tell Harry about the Deathly Hallows but not tell him the truth about them, that they were wholly fictional. The calculations on that point, however, were indeterminate. It was clear that *not* telling Harry anything of the Deathly Hallows might bring the final confrontation too soon, depending on Riddle's progress and whether he abandoned the search or discovered early that it was a false trail. It was not at all clear, however, what the effect of telling Harry about the Hallows would be on himself and his path. And so Albus had begun to give the boy hints of their existence, implying that it had been a quest of his own in his youth, but one he had abandoned, though he believed that Tom was in search of them. He had left it ambiguous whether he believed in them himself, though, thinking that that was a nice compromise between affirming the lie of their existence and telling Harry outright that he had made use of an old fable to mislead Riddle and avert his attention. He disliked lying to Harry. The boy had been lied to about so many things for so much of his life, particularly by his Muggle family, but this ambiguity might provide him some protection.

Albus took his violent yellow potion then reclined on the sofa in his sitting room. He closed his eyes as he felt the fever slowly smoulder its way through his body. By the time he met with the Heads of House at four-thirty, he would no doubt wish he could simply return to bed. He would just rest there a while and keep that temptation at bay.

He had dozed for about a half hour when there was a light knock on the sitting room door. He opened his eyes and raised his head to see Robert opening the door.

"Minerva said you were unwell at lunch. I am sorry I was not here," the soft-spoken wizard said, coming over and placing his hand on Albus's forehead. He winced slightly then said, "The yellow potion?"

"Yes, but I am fine. No need for you to be concerned." Albus smiled up at Robert. "It's all as it should be."

"Have you had anything to drink? You must be thirsty."

"I am, but no, I haven't had anything. I thought perhaps some peppermint tea," Albus replied.

Robert shook his head and said reprovingly, "Uncle Albus, you should have called for some. You know better."

The younger wizard called Wilsby and requested peppermint tea for Albus and a cup of coffee for himself.

When Wilsby, looking worried and subdued, Disapparated to fetch the tea, Albus said with a sigh, "I wish you would stop drinking coffee."

"I only have a cup in my rooms in the morning. When I am at meals, I have been drinking tea." His eyes smiled. "With sugar. I think I am gaining weight."

Albus chuckled, but he began to cough, and Robert, embracing him, raised him into a sitting position and gently patted his back. When Albus's coughing fit had subsided, Robert Summoned some cushions from across the room and placed them behind Albus so that he could recline against them.

Wilsby returned with the tea and coffee, and Albus thanked her. She looked at Albus, then at Robert, then back at Albus before winking away without another word.

"She is confused and worried," Albus said with a sigh, taking his teacup from Robert. "I think I will need to confide in her, at least about certain things, and tell her that she will be moving to the island in a few weeks."

"That is your decision, of course," Robert replied, nodding. "She is clearly distressed by your deteriorating condition. It may be wise, or at least kind, to explain more to her if you do not believe that she will interfere in some way."

"Minerva and I will speak to her tonight, then," Albus replied. "I do not believe I will be attending meals any longer, so this is an opportune time."

"Do you need anything else?" Robert asked as he poured Albus a second cup of tea. "Something to eat? Minerva said you did not touch your lunch."

Albus shook his head. "No, I will take some of the nutritional potion before my meeting later this afternoon, and perhaps I will be able to eat a light supper tonight. Right now, we need to go over a few details. I thought we could use the Pensieve again, if you wouldn't mind sharing more of your memories."

"I shall fetch it from your office then. In the meantime, close your eyes and rest." Robert stood and headed toward the door, then turned and added, "I wish I could do this for you, Uncle Albus. We all do, you know, and we would if we could."

Minerva opened the door to Harry from her position behind the Headmaster's desk.

"You're late, Mr Potter."

Harry stepped in and looked around. Fawkes was sleeping on his perch, looking rather ragged, his day of rebirth likely not long off, but Harry did not see the Headmaster.

"Where's Professor Dumbledore?" Harry asked. He was late, but only by ten minutes. It had been a beautiful early March day, one of those that reminded you that spring was on its way, and he had been out on his broom.

"He is in his rooms," Minerva began, rising and coming around the desk.

"I had an appointment with him," Harry said.

"As I was about to say before you interrupted, Mr Potter, he is in his rooms, and I will escort you to see him." Minerva indicated that Harry should follow her.

Harry crossed the room to the spiral brass staircase in the back of the office and followed Minerva up them. Minerva opened the door and waved him in ahead of her.

"Harry! Come in, come in," Albus said. "Please, have a seat." He was sitting in a wingback chair, his feet up on an ottoman.

Harry looked around him, trying not to appear too curious about the rooms that the Headmaster occupied. The draperies were open, but twilight was falling fast, and around the room, there were several lamps lit. It was a cheerful, warm room, decorated chiefly in shades of red and gold, but it had an old-fashioned air about it.

Taking a seat on the camel-backed sofa, Harry said, "How are you, Professor?"

"A little under the weather, Harry, but fine, just fine."

"I will be in the study if you need me," Minerva said.

Albus smiled up at her. "Thank you, Professor."

Harry fidgeted. "Sorry I was late." He looked at Professor Dumbledore. He had looked sick the last few times they had met, but now, he looked frail, almost a shadow of himself. Harry remembered what Hermione had said a few weeks ago. She had noticed that the Headmaster wasn't eating at those meals he attended in the Great Hall and that he seemed to be losing weight. He hadn't paid much attention to her at the time, but now, he thought that Dumbledore had lost more than a little weight, and he hadn't been to a meal in days. "Are you sure you're all right, sir?"

"I am no longer as resilient as I once was, and a little ailment can be a bit more troublesome than in the past," Albus replied.

"I hope you are feeling better soon."

"Thank you, Harry. Tonight, I have a few more memories for you to view, and then I would like to discuss them, so shall we?" Albus said, gesturing toward the Pensieve on the table between them.

Harry nodded and joined Dumbledore in entering the Pensieve, but his concern lingered, remaining even after he left the Headmaster's Office. He returned to Gryffindor Tower, subdued and thoughtful, and wondering whether the curse on the Headmaster's hand was the cause of his declining health, and if so, whether Snape had deliberately botched whatever assistance he had provided Dumbledore. The Headmaster had credited him with saving his life, but maybe Snape had actually had something else in mind. If Snape had really helped him properly, maybe Professor Dumbledore wouldn't be so sick. Harry didn't trust Snape, whatever Dumbledore said, and had said repeatedly. He admired and trusted the Headmaster, but as far as Snape was concerned, he couldn't get past his own basic distrust of the git, and Harry couldn't imagine anything that would change that.

Minerva closed the sitting room door behind the departing wizards. Remus and Arthur had come to see Albus, at his request, and she had attended the meeting. The two wizards were clearly shaken by the Headmaster's appearance. In the two weeks since he had ceased attending meals in the Great Hall, Albus had wasted further, his skin appearing almost translucent and parchment-like, his eyes shadowed by dark purple circles, and his breathing increasingly laboured. He was able to move from the bedroom to the sitting room on his own only with great difficulty, but he insisted on meeting the two Order members there.

Albus revealed to the two that he was dying, if it hadn't been evident by his appearance. He impressed upon them that he had made certain plans that were to be carried out immediately following his death, and that when Minerva called on them in those hours and days, they were to do as she requested without hesitation. Unsurprisingly, they agreed.

Albus had already begun to reveal certain key pieces of information to Arthur, even before he had been struck by the curse, and had passed on more information to him in the preceding months. This meeting was less about sharing information than it was about cementing certain roles. Although they could not guarantee that Arthur become the next leader of the Order, Albus had been making it clear that he saw him as his successor. He commanded respect, and although others might say that he was not Albus's equal, they could point to no one who was. Arthur was steady, brave, and possessed good judgment. He would also listen to and take advice from others. He was a fair and honest man and was recognised as such...and he would respect Minerva and accept her direction when necessary.

They had considered both Shackbolt and Moody to lead the Order, but Moody was dismissed from consideration because of his rigidity, inability to work with Snape, and his generally narrow views. Minerva did not believe it wise even to share with Moody the precise significance of Harry's role in the fight against Voldemort, since he would be likely to try to take control of Harry's training and attempt to orchestrate a confrontation with Voldemort that would entirely undermine their own careful work and planning.

Shackbolt, both agreed, was a better candidate in many ways. He was a powerful wizard, he commanded respect, and he had repeatedly demonstrated his loyalty to Albus and the Order. He was also more measured in his responses and deliberate in his decision-making than Moody, but Albus was not convinced that when Minerva told him that some action needed to be taken or refrained from, Shackbolt would simply take it on faith and do as she requested. He would want to know the reason for it, and once given any information about their plan, he would insist on knowing all of it. Arthur, on the other hand, would be satisfied by what information they felt safe in giving him. In addition, Albus believed that Shackbolt's role in the Ministry would be increasingly important in coming months and that his efforts should be focussed there. So Arthur Weasley had been chosen as Albus's heir-apparent. It seemed that Molly was not pleased, but Arthur had told her that he would do whatever was required of him, regardless of his role in the Order, and that all of them were in grave danger. Leading the Order of the Phoenix would not diminish the danger to him, but it was unlikely to increase it, either.

Minerva returned to Albus's side. "How are you feeling? That must have been tiring."

"It was. And it was difficult to see them both so disturbed," Albus replied, somewhat haltingly as he took short, shallow breaths, tired from speaking at length with his visitors.

"Time to get you back to bed," Minerva said.

She waved her wand, raising the entire sofa and guiding it into the bedroom. She steered it to come beside the bed and level with it. Albus sat up and Minerva helped him shift over from the sofa to the mattress. Minerva sent the sofa back into the sitting room, then she helped Albus get comfortable and poured him some water, which he drank thirstily.

"Is the twenty-first soon enough, Albus?" she asked as she took the glass then wiped his face with a cool cloth. "I know that we worked out the timing precisely, but you seem so ill. My plan was supposed to include saving you from suffering, from dying an anguished death, but I am worried."

"I do not feel well," Albus admitted. "I cannot lie about that, but Melina assured me this morning that I am in no immediate danger and that other than my lungs, my organs are in generally good shape." He did not mention that the low oxygen saturation in his blood was causing some other problems that Melina was working to counteract.

"But your nausea..."

"Is indicative of nothing serious," Albus reassured her. "You know that Melina wants you to be successful and that she is concerned about my health. I truly do look much worse than I feel, my love. Honestly. To the extent that I am, um, weakening, that is as much an effect of the weight loss and my breathing difficulties as it is anything else."

"Poppy wants to see you," Minerva said. "I couldn't think of how to tell her she couldn't. I told her that she could come up this evening."

Albus sighed and nodded. "Hopefully, she will cast no diagnostic spells. If she does, we can only hope that they are not particularly probing ones."

"If she does, we will have to tell her everything. If she is at all suspicious, her suspicions could lead her in entirely the wrong direction...and if she were concerned, she might bring her suspicions to someone else."

"It is better if we avoid having her become suspicious," Albus replied.

"I think you should take some of the standard potions before she arrives," Minerva said, looking at the potions bottles on the dresser. The numbered bottles now had a home in the Headmaster's wardrobe; those on the dresser were standard potions to treat fever, bronchial congestion, kidney failure, and other conditions. They were there for appearance's sake, now that others were occasionally admitted to the bedroom.

Albus nodded. "If she does cast any charms, it would be useful to have those actually in my body."

"And you might feel slightly better, too," Minerva added hopefully.

Albus smiled slightly and reached for her hand. "Your presence is soothing enough, my dear. And on the twenty-first, you will end any discomfort I may be suffering. Less than a week. That is soon enough."

"I hope so," Minerva said. "This was my idea. If it goes wrong, I don't know how I will live with it."

"It will not go wrong. I have confidence in you. And Melina will be there...and she is monitoring me closely." Melina was now visiting daily and would soon begin staying at the castle. "Now, we need to arrange a meeting with the Heads of House for early in the week. Monday, I think. My last meeting with you all as Headmaster. Beyond the necessity of allowing the others to witness my illness, I do wish to thank them for their service and give each of them a little gift." He quirked a small smile. "I even have one for you, my dear. I put them aside in the bottom desk drawer in my study several weeks ago."

"I will remember to get them for you," she replied, ignoring the sadness rising in her at the thought of his last meeting with them as Headmaster. He had been Hogwarts Headmaster the entire time she had been teaching, indeed, the entire time that all of them had taught. Unless one included Binns, other than Slughorn, none of the current faculty had been on the staff when Dippet was Headmaster.

"Thank you, Minerva. And don't be sad," he said, brushing his thumb over the back of her hand and giving it a light squeeze. "This is also an opportunity for you. These are not the circumstances under which I would have wished you to become Headmistress, but after all of these years, it is a role that you will fill well. It is unfortunate that there will be so many additional burdens on your shoulders, but I know that you will do very well."

"I cannot see the opportunity, Albus," she said softly. "I only see the war; I only see Voldemort, Harry, and Severus, and what I need to do. I see now how you could become so sure that the path you had chosen was the correct one and so unwilling to consider any others. I worry that if I question any of my decisions, I will be wholly unable to act, and yet I also fear that if I proceed with the plan without questioning every step, I will make fatal errors."

"You will find a balance, my dear, and you have people around you to help you. You very wisely enlisted some very strong and trust-worthy people to assist you."

Minerva nodded wearily then glanced at the clock on the bedside table. "Will you be all right if I go to dinner now? I won't be long, and I know that Robert said that he would be attending dinner early so that he could come up and sit with you. He will be here soon, I'm sure."

Albus gave a short chuckle. "I will be perfectly fine. I am quite certain that I will have no unmet needs any time in the next hour or so. Go to dinner. And try to enjoy it!"

"When I return, I will bring Poppy with me. Be sure that you have Robert give you some of the standard potions before we arrive." She bent and kissed his forehead. "Call Wilspy if you need anything. I will be back soon."

"I feel well enough to see them in the sitting room, Minerva," Albus protested.

"I am sure you do, but I think the effect would be greater if you were to meet with them in here," Minerva replied, plumping his pillows behind him.

"You are right," Albus said, sighing. "It will come as less of a surprise when I die on Friday if I appear weaker."

"Do you think that Melina should be present?" Minerva asked.

"No, but it should be clear that she is staying in my guest room now."

Minerva nodded. Melina had arrived on Saturday, planning to stay the week. Rather than taking the Hufflepuff guest room, as she had on the few previous occasions when she had recently stayed overnight, she had moved into Albus's guest room. Minerva's door portrait now had a direct connection on the portrait network to the Headmaster's suite, should anyone seek her in her rooms after curfew or at any other time. So far, Minerva's Knight had only had to fetch her once. It had been Sinistra, who was aware of Albus and Minerva's relationship, so Minerva sent the Silent Knight to her with the message to meet her in the Headmaster's office. If it had been someone else, Minerva would have taken the private Floo connection between the Headmaster's bedroom and her study to return to her suite and answer the door.

"I'll tell Wilspy to bring us tea and biscuits," Minerva said.

"Very good, my dear, but after I have given out my little gifts...you may fetch them now, but don't look at the one in the gold box. That is yours."

Minerva returned with four boxes of different colours, gold, silver, bronze, and a highly reflective onyx black.

"What are you giving them?" Minerva asked curiously.

"You will find out soon enough...but I will let you peek now and satisfy your curiosity," Albus said with a grin, wanting to see her reaction to the gifts.

"This one is very heavy," Minerva said, hefting the bronze box in her hand. "I can't imagine what you are giving Filius."

"Remove the lid and see!"

Minerva pulled off the lid. Two rounded, circular stones, one larger, one smaller, the smaller one nesting in a hollow of the other.

"The Singing Stones that Malcolm gave you," Minerva said softly, gazing at them but not removing them from their box. She lifted her eyes to meet Albus's. "Are you sure you wish to part with these?"

"Filius will appreciate them, and he was fond of Malcolm. I think it is time to pass them on."

Minerva nodded. "I think that Malcolm would be pleased to think of Filius enjoying them."

After replacing the lid on Filius's gift, Minerva removed the lid to Pomona's. She frowned in puzzlement as she looked into the box, then she took out the crystal vial that rested on a small yellow cushion.

Holding the vial up to the light, Minerva asked, "Some kind of plant?"

"Indeed. It is in stasis, so do not break the seal, my dear."

"You aren't going to tell me what it is, are you?"

Albus shook his head, his eyes twinkling.

Minerva sighed, carefully placed the vial back on its cushion, and closed up the box again.

"I am quite curious about your selection for Severus," she said, removing the lid on the silver box. "Your watch! Oh, Albus, you don't want to part with that!"

"I do, and I can think of no one whom I would prefer to have it," Albus replied.

"But..."

"I am decided," Albus said.

"It is yours to do with as you wish, of course," Minerva said.

Minerva reached for the gold box, but Albus stopped her with a sharp, "Ah ah ah!" He put his hand on the box. "You must have at least one surprise. I am afraid that the significance of yours is not of the same sort as the others. It is new, for one. But I hope you will like it."

"I am sure I will," Minerva replied, placing the boxes on the bed beside Albus, kissing his cheek.

A half hour later, Minerva greeted the three other Heads of House. They had all arrived together, and their mood was subdued.

"Albus is looking forward to seeing you all, so try to put smiles on your faces...not you, Severus," Minerva joked, "or he will worry about you. But try not to look so glum. And no tears, Filius, unless they're happy ones."

The little wizard nodded and tried to put a happy expression on his face.

"Look, this is not a funeral! Albus is thinking of it as a little party, so you try thinking of it that way, too," Minerva said. "You can cry later."

Minerva's words seemed to have the opposite effect on the Charms teacher than she'd intended, but Pomona bent down and whispered something in his ear, and he wiped the tears from his eyes and looked a little brighter.

Minerva led the other three upstairs and into Albus's bedroom. He smiled to see them.

"Good evening!" Albus greeted them. "It is so good to see you. Here, Severus, you sit here beside me, my boy. Everyone, make yourselves comfortable!"

Albus's breath was wheezing in his chest, and he was pale, but his smile was bright.

After everyone had taken a chair, Severus sitting at Albus's left near the head of the bed, Minerva next to Severus, and Filius and Pomona on his right, Albus began, his words occasionally punctuated by a gasping breath. "This is my last meeting with you as Headmaster, my dear friends, and I want to express to you how very much I have appreciated your loyalty, service, and friendship over the years. You have often had to put up with my eccentricities and occasional barmy notions, you have all stood by me in good times and in hard times, and you have brought me many happy memories. I also appreciate your devotion to Hogwarts and her students, and I know that when I am no longer Headmaster, I will be leaving Hogwarts in good hands. Oh, now, Filius, old friend, no tears today! What a happy occasion it is to be able to tell you how much I value your friendship!"

Filius nodded, a tear dripping off the end of his nose. Pomona handed him a handkerchief.

"Now, I have a gift for each of you. Severus, if you would help me?"

The Potions master nodded. His expression had not altered since he had stepped into the room, and it betrayed nothing of his feelings.

"The first gift is for you, Pomona. Severus, that's the black one," Albus said.

Severus picked up the shiny black box and handed it to Pomona.

"Go ahead, my dear! Open it!" Albus encouraged her.

She set aside the lid to the box, then took the crystal vial and held it up. "Oh, Albus! Is this a Memory Plant?"

"It is, indeed. A friend was generous enough to provide it for me...Johannes, in fact. If you remove it from stasis this spring and look after it carefully, he said that it should be ready to provide potions ingredients in about two years. But even before that, it should provide some soothing aromas encouraging good memories and brightening the heart," Albus replied with a smile.

"It's wonderful, Albus!" She looked over at Severus and smiled. "You will get the first harvest of leaves, Severus!"

Severus simply nodded once, making no protest.

"And now, Severus, the gift for Filius," Albus said.

Severus picked up the bronze-coloured box and looked at Albus, who nodded.

Filius opened his gift. "Your Singing Stones!" he exclaimed.

Severus raised an eyebrow at the unpretentious grey rocks.

Albus smiled. "Take them out and give them a try."

Filius pulled out first the smaller stone and then the larger. He rested the larger one in his left hand and put the smaller one into the hollow, holding the two stones between his palms. A very soft note emitted from the stones, but it grew louder, like violins playing some song from nature, harmonious and melodious, flowing like water in a stream. Filius laughed in delight and the witches grinned. Severus looked slightly less sullen.

"Try it, Pomona!" the little wizard said excitedly. "Just put them between your palms."

Pomona took one stone in each hand then brought them together. She smiled as the room slowly filled with the sound of piccolos and flutes, the notes seeming to dance cheerfully around them. After a moment, she took them apart, ending the music abruptly, and handed them to Minerva.

Minerva's song began with a few distinct notes, as if from a harpsichord, expanding to a rippling scale, then growing to become a precise, bright, and yet increasingly complex tune. Minerva smiled and separated the stones, then turned to hand them to Severus.

"No, thank you," Severus responded to Minerva's offer.

"Give them a try," Minerva encouraged.

"Any sound they would make in my hands would drive everyone from the room, I am sure," Severus said curtly.

"Try them for me, my boy," Albus said.

Severus looked at Albus, then said, "Very well, but if nothing but a hideous cacophony is produced, it is on you."

Albus just smiled cheerfully and nodded.

Severus took them from Minerva and slowly placed the smaller one into the larger concave stone. A low, deep note sounded, sounding like a cathedral organ, then it grew and was joined by other low notes; other notes, only slightly higher, painted a slow, measured melody against the changing chords. Not a dirge, but something nonetheless unutterably sad and beautiful. Severus stared down at his hands as if transfixed, but then he abruptly removed his right hand and the music suddenly ceased.

He looked up; Pomona and Filius appeared stricken, and Filius's tears had begun to flow again, and Albus's eyes were moist. Severus shoved the stones toward Flitwick.

"I told you that you would regret it," Severus said.

"That was beautiful," Pomona said softly.

"Sublime," Filius added with a snuffle as he put the Singing Stones back in their box.

"They resonate with a person's magic, Severus," Albus explained, "and I like to imagine they also reveal a little of someone's soul."

"Hmpf!"

"And now your gift, my boy," Albus said.

Severus picked up the silver box, removed a soft pouch, and drew out his gift.

"Your watch," he said, opening the front of the case and looking at the twelve hands and myriad symbols on its face. He shook his head and said, "I can't..."

"Of course you can, Severus, and you must! If I were you, I might be a little cautious for a while in how I carried it and to whom I displayed it, but I would give it to none but you."

Severus closed the watch and looked at its ornate reverse side.

"It was a gift from my Uncle Christopher when I began my Potions apprenticeship," Albus explained. "I have tried to take good care of it over the years. The jewellers in

Diagon Alley do a good job in cleaning it and providing the occasional maintenance, but it should give you no trouble. As it's rather old, it does require daily winding, unlike the more modern watches."

Severus nodded, holding the watch in his right hand and rubbing his thumb over it as he looked down at it. "I will wind it every morning, Albus."

"Very good, my boy! And now for Minerva's little present."

Severus blinked, then he reached out with his left hand to pick up Minerva's gift as he still grasped his own tightly in his right.

Minerva opened the gold-coloured box and took out a small item wrapped in red silk. It was a brooch, a rampant dragon, its wings raised behind it and small flames emerging from its mouth. Its tiny greenish scales were perfect, and in the centre of its chest was a blood-red ruby.

"It's lovely, Albus," Minerva said softly.

"It's a representation of Mother Dragon, very much miniaturised, of course," Albus said.

"Mother Dragon?" Pomona asked.

"A dragon I once knew," Albus replied.

Just then, Wilspy arrived with tea and biscuits, and the conversation turned to other topics. Albus's breathing grew more laboured, and his hand shook as he tried to hold his own cup, sloshing some of the tea onto his sheets. He waved away Minerva's attempt to hold his cup for him, saying he would have some later, and Minerva put it on the bedside table. Fifteen minutes later, Minerva stood, and the others followed her cue. Pomona and Filius thanked him for their gifts and wished him a good-night. As Severus was about to follow them out the door, the watch in its pouch now, yet still clasped in his hand, Albus reached out and touched him weakly on his arm. Severus turned and looked down at Albus, whose chest was heaving with the effort to breathe.

"Stay a minute," Albus said.

"You should rest, Albus," Severus replied softly.

"Help me drink some tea while Minerva shows the others out," Albus replied.

Minerva looked torn, but left the room to the two wizards.

Severus cast a warming charm on Albus's tea, then he raised the cup to Albus's lips and tilted it slowly as the older wizard sipped from it.

"Good, good," Albus said with a nod.

Severus set the cup back down.

"Sit here beside me now, my boy," Albus said, patting the bed.

Severus sat as directed.

"Are you only taking those potions now?" Severus asked, gesturing to the potions on the dresser.

"They are very good, Severus."

"Not good enough," Severus replied. "Please take the other potions, Albus."

"I didn't ask you to stay..." Albus gasped, "...to talk about potions."

"Why, then?"

"To thank you for everything," Albus replied with effort, "that you have done for the Order,"

"You know why I have done that."

"It makes me no less grateful."

Severus nodded. He uncurled his fingers from around the watch and looked down at it. "Thank you for the watch, Albus," he whispered.

"You're welcome. I was going to leave it to you in my will . . . but I would rather give it to you now myself, and this way, it's just between us."

Severus nodded.

"Don't look so sad, my boy!"

Severus tried to swallow past the lump in his throat.

Albus patted his arm. "I am proud of you. I know that you will continue to make me proud of you. I have not always made the right decisions in your regard, but I hope that you will forgive me my mistakes."

Severus raised tear-filled eyes to look into Albus's. "Please stay, Albus. I should be the one..."

"Whether either of us likes it or not, my work here is done. You still have an important role. Your work is not yet finished."

"This is my fault," Severus whispered.

"No, if it's anyone's, it's Tom's...or my own, for being a dunderhead and not checking the ring for curses," Albus said haltingly as his breath wheezed more loudly in his chest.

"I don't want you to die like this," Severus said, his voice cracking.

"It's not such a bad thing, Severus, my loved ones around me." Albus patted his arm again. "Like you, my boy."

Severus looked away as his tears finally overflowed.

"You do know that I love you, don't you?"

Severus shrugged one shoulder, unable to respond around the lump in his throat.

"Dying won't change that, Severus."

Severus nodded and wiped his face with his sleeve.

"Just remember that. And I'm not dead yet!"

Severus drew in a long shaky breath as he stood. He cleared his throat. "May I use your loo?"

"Of course! Help yourself. Splash a little cold water on your face. I find that helps me," Albus said with a smile.

When Minerva came into the room, she looked puzzled. "Where is Severus? He didn't pass me."

"Just in the loo, my dear."

"Ah."

Severus emerged a minute later, looking pale and bored...his usual self.

"Good night, Minerva, Albus," he said with a nod. "I can show myself out." He stopped at the door, then turned, hesitating for a moment. "What you said, Albus . . . I would say the same to you. You know that, don't you?"

"Yes, dear boy, I know that. Good night!"

When he had left, Minerva asked, "What was that about?"

"Just a little wizard-to-wizard chat, that's all."

"I think he was pleased with his gift," Minerva observed as she pulled some potions bottles from the wardrobe.

"Yes, I believe he was."

"And I am pleased with mine," she said, turning around. "Very much."

"I thought it appropriate. You have the heart of Mother Dragon in more than one way," Albus said. "In your wand and in your spirit. You wear that and remember your strength and my faith in that strength."

Minerva nodded as she poured out his first potion, the pale purple one which would clear some of the congestion in his chest. "I do hope that I don't die with a bolt through my eye as Mother Dragon did, but if it's to save others, I suppose it would be worth it."

"I don't think you'll find any Death Eaters carrying crossbows, my dear, so I doubt that will be your fate." He swallowed the potion. "If you think it's an ill omen, I intended it as just the opposite."

"No, I don't believe that," Minerva replied, bringing a small cup with a bright blue potion to his lips. "I love it. I will wear it daily."

"I am glad," Albus said, grimacing at the potion's flavour.

"Now your nutritional potion, then Melina wants to see you, and then, I think, early to bed."

Albus nodded. "It has been a long day. It will be good when this week is out. No more of these vile potions."

"Would you like a bath first?"

"No, just a charm or two from your wand tonight, I think. Easier for us both. I'm feeling a bit better after the potions, but I am still tired."

Minerva bent and kissed his cheek. "All of your gifts were wonderfully thoughtful. I know everyone will treasure them." She smiled. "I think that Severus was quite surprised by the effect he had on the Singing Stones."

"I hope that the tune will become a little brighter after this is all over," Albus said.

"I simply hope that it isn't snuffed out completely," Minerva said with a sigh. "Filius was right, though. It was sublime. I don't think I could listen to it long without crying for the next week."

"He lives with that song in him all of the time, Minerva," Albus said softly.

"I hope we can save him. He is so very convinced he will die."

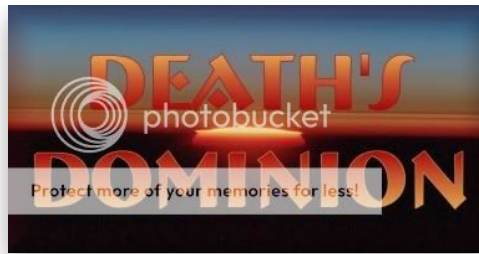
"We will do all we can to prevent that, my dear, all that is humanly possible."

Note: To refresh your memory, the story of "Mother Dragon" appears in Resolving a Misunderstanding, [Chapter CIII: Defeating Darkness](#).

Chapter Twenty-One: Under the windings of the sea

Chapter 22 of 34

The demands on Severus do not diminish as the Dark Lord prepares for his ultimate decisive offensive on the wizarding world. Severus struggles against the stresses on him as others try to help.



Chapter Twenty-One: *Under the windings of the sea*

20 21 April 1998

Severus fought the urge to scratch his left arm. His Mark was itching. He had come to believe that it itched whenever the Dark Lord was calling others to his side but not him. It had itched all morning, it seemed. After Minerva had woken him, rubbed the potion into his back, and dosed him with the others, he had risen and dressed. She had brought his clothing to him the night before, his underwear discreetly folded between his shirt and his trousers. Her house-elf had cleaned and polished his boots, and fully dressed. Severus felt more like himself than he had since the raid. Minerva hadn't brought him his teaching robes, but that didn't bother him. He had sufficient layers, and his long, close-fitting jacket, which buttoned almost to his neck, more a frockcoat than a suit jacket, gave him a peculiar but familiar sense of security.

He and Minerva had agreed that he would attend dinner in the Great Hall that evening and begin teaching the next day. She had told him that if he wanted to wait until Wednesday to return to teaching, he could, but he felt well enough to be bored now, and when he was bored, he could only think of the Dark Lord, Potter, and whether he would survive even to see the Dark Lord's attack. He wished that he could live long enough to know whether Potter prevailed, but he knew that would not happen. He had a growing conviction that the Dark Lord would discover his treachery and kill him before then. The Dark Lord would wait until he had access to the Hogwarts grounds, though, Severus was fairly sure of that.

After breakfast, Severus brought two of the journals out to the sitting room to read. Minerva and Poppy had both declared him well enough not to require a babysitter that day...though they hadn't stated it in precisely those terms...and so he was alone in the suite. Minerva had told him that if he wanted anything to eat or drink, he could either call Blampa or use the tiny kitchen that she had installed that summer.

It looked to him as though Minerva had used part of the guest room to create the kitchen, which could hardly be called that, although there was a small cooktop, he discovered when he explored it, a cool cupboard with milk, and a supply of teas, biscuits, and the like. He had no kitchen in his suite, though he knew that the other Heads of House had one, but he had never felt the lack of it. He also had no study, another standard part of the Heads' quarters, only a small nook with a one-drawer desk. When he had become Head of House, he had refused Slughorn's lavish suite, and Albus had not protested. Each year, Albus would ask everyone on the staff to submit any requests they might have for changes to their rooms, and every year, Severus would not request any. The summer before his first full year of teaching, Albus had shown up and created the Charmed window in his bedroom, telling Severus that austerity had its place, but he needed to look out on the world, as well. Albus made no further unrequested alterations to the Slytherin's rooms until the summer following Potter's first year, when Albus had insisted on improving his bathroom. Severus had allowed that, but had emphasised that he wanted no frills. He could not allow himself to become soft.

Severus picked up the Potions journal and flipped through it. He had already read everything that had interested him, so he turned to the Arithmancy journal Gareth had brought him. He scanned the table of contents and felt his eyes glaze over. It was a difficult and complex discipline, and he could understand its attraction for Hermione, but it held none for him. He remembered the Transfiguration journal he had been looking at. It hadn't been his favourite subject when he was a student, but he had been more than competent at it. There had been a couple of articles in that journal which had seemed interesting, though he had been in no state to concentrate on them before.

Back in the bedroom, he looked for the Transfiguration journal. He found one, but it wasn't the same one he had been reading before. Crouch or Minerva must have taken it back. Severus was slightly disappointed, since he had hoped to read the article on internal Transfiguration now that he was feeling better.

At ten-thirty, Minerva came upstairs, asked him if he needed anything, then left again. Severus began to anticipate Hermione's visit, and the minutes seemed to drag until there was a knock on the door just after eleven. He rose and opened the door.

Hermione smiled up at him. "You look very well this morning, Professor!"

Severus nodded once. "My recovery is proceeding."

"I'm glad."

The two sat in the matching armchairs across from one another.

"How was your morning?" Hermione asked.

"Acceptable, although I believe that I have exhausted the reading material that the Headmistress provided," Severus replied, gesturing toward the journals on the coffee table between them.

"You were reading an Arithmancy journal?" Hermione asked, spotting the cover peeking out from beneath the others.

"No. I did look at it, but it did not hold my attention," Severus said.

Hermione leaned forward and looked at the others. "Transfiguration and Potions." She grinned at him. "Not precisely light reading, but still a small holiday for the brain."

"Indeed," Severus agreed with a nod. "There was a Transfiguration article I had been reading a couple of days ago, but it's in a different journal. It was rather interesting, but now I suppose I shall forever remain in suspense."

Hermione laughed. "What a terrible state to be in! I am sure I would perish if that were to happen to me."

The corner of Severus's mouth twitched a slight smile. "I do believe I shall survive."

"What was it about?"

"Internal Transfiguration," Severus said, not admitting that he had not heard of the concept before seeing the article.

"Oh! Yes, that is interesting," Hermione agreed. "Professor MacAirt has me reading something about the theory, although I haven't attempted it. He said it requires more preparation than we have the time for now. Once everything is all over, though, that will be one of the first things he teaches me."

"Yes, I understand that it is essential in becoming a successful Animagus," Severus replied.

"You have to have a very strong sense of the Transfiguration that you wish to achieve, your own magic, and your physical body, so that is why it is an important step in becoming an Animagus. I only have a theoretical understanding of it, but I do not believe it will be terribly difficult," Hermione said confidently.

"Isn't it reputed to be the most difficult Transfiguration to perform?" Severus asked, remembering that from the introductory paragraphs of the article.

"Well, it is, but I've always been very good at Transfiguration," Hermione replied. "I am sure that once I have gone through the preparatory exercises with Professor MacAirt, I'll be able to do it easily."

Severus felt like smiling. She was so confident in her abilities that it was . . . not amusing, precisely, but something similar.

"What is your current understanding of internal Transfiguration?" Severus asked, as though he was quizzing her.

"It is a method of using one's magic internally to perform the desired Transfiguration on a specific body part. One focuses on one's magic so that it flows solely internally, not acting outside the body at all. That is the first difficult step to master. The second is the Transfiguration itself, which alters the body part from the inside out, and the cells . . . Transfigure themselves. I must admit that I don't completely understand that, but it has something to do with the caster's magic working from inside the cells rather than forcing the change from the outside in the way that an ordinary Transfiguration does."

Severus nodded. "A good explanation. And how is that related to becoming an Animagus?"

"When a person becomes an Animagus, the focus of her magic is the same as it is when performing an internal Transfiguration, but rather than the body part being Transfigured into something other than what it is...a hand becoming a hoof, for example...the entire body is affected. In addition, the Animagus transformation is an expression of a form that lies within the Animagus and each person has only one form, with a few very, very rare exceptions. Theoretically, with an internal Transfiguration, I could change my foot into a claw, a fin, a hoof, or anything else...organic and animal, of course. It doesn't even have to be homologous. I could Transfigure my hand into a tail, if I wished. I believe that the only thing that is impossible to do is to change a limb into a head, at least one with a working brain. Rather a revolting thought either way," Hermione said, lifting her lip in disgust.

"You only speak of Transfiguring limbs," Severus said. "Could you Transfigure your head or torso?"

"Yes, theoretically, although it is not at all recommended, since doing it to the head could prevent you from ever reversing the Transfiguration if you affected the brain, and doing it to the torso could kill you because of all of the vital organs. I don't believe that anyone performs the exercise on anything other than the hands and feet, or possibly the arms and legs. That's another difference between an internal Transfiguration and an Animagus transformation. If performed properly, the Animagus retains its human capabilities, including, of course, the ability to return to their ordinary form. It is a natural Transfiguration that is an expression of a form that lies within the Animagus, and so there is no danger in Transfiguring the head or other vital organs. Unless, of course," Hermione added, "someone is not properly prepared. That's when they end up in St. Mungo's. Professor MacAirt says that what they are really doing is an imperfect internal Transfiguration and not an Animagus transformation, probably because they think they want to be a specific animal, and it doesn't work that way."

"It's surprising the Pettigrew managed it," Severus said with a sneer. "A pity he didn't become trapped in some other form."

"That would probably be quite terrible," Hermione replied, "but it certainly would have averted a good many tragedies. Remus said that James and Sirius helped him so that he could become an Animagus with them."

"And he betrayed them both, like the rat he is," Severus said.

"Crookshanks knew that there was something wrong with him. We should have paid attention."

"Crookshanks? That is your cat?" Severus asked, trying to remember.

"He is part Kneazle."

"A wise animal," Severus said with a nod.

"I left him with Mrs Figg at the end of the summer. I didn't know what we would be doing this year, and I thought it was possible that we wouldn't return to Hogwarts. I think he is as safe there as he would be anywhere."

"And your parents? I understand they are in hiding," Severus said.

Hermione nodded. "But they don't realise it." She sighed. "I'd rather not discuss it."

"It is almost time for lunch in any case. This has been an enjoyable brain holiday, however, Hermione."

She smiled. "I enjoyed it, too. Should I come back this evening?"

"I will be attending dinner this evening and then returning to my own rooms," Severus said, a peculiar hollow feeling in his gut.

"All right," Hermione said. "I am glad you are feeling so much better. I'll see you in the Headmistress's library, then?"

"Undoubtedly," Severus replied as he rose to open the door for Hermione.

"I hope you have a good afternoon."

"The same to you," Severus said.

Severus settled back down in an armchair, paging through the Potions journal and reading the letters to the editor. He assumed that Minerva's Hogwarts elf would bring him lunch and that she might even join him. A few minutes later, though, there was a brief knock at the door, which alerted Severus that it was neither Minerva nor Crouch, as either of them would just enter. Immediately after the knock, the door opened, and McGonagall stepped through.

"Snape," he said with a nod.

"McGonagall." Severus returned to reading the letters to the editor.

"It's lunchtime. I thought I would join you."

Severus raised his eyes from his reading and grunted.

"I'll call Blampa, then," Gareth said, accepting the grunt as an acknowledgment. "Anything in particular you would like?"

"No."

Gareth called Minerva's house-elf and asked her to bring them both lunch, whatever was being served in the Great Hall, then sat down to wait. A few minutes later, lunch appeared on the small dining table across the room.

Gareth put down the Arithmancy journal he had been perusing and went over to the table.

"Coming, Snape?" he asked as he sat down.

"I am not hungry."

"You should still eat." Gareth took a bite of his sandwich and looked over at Severus. "You're practically skeletal. I'm surprised your body could take the beating you received the other night."

Severus ignored him.

"If you don't eat, Minerva will know, and Poppy. She'll be up after lunch to treat your back. They might want to keep you here another day. Force nutritional potion down your throat. You don't want to challenge those two witches."

Severus got up and sat down across from Gareth. Potato and leek soup. He ate without looking up from the bowl then pushed back from the table. Gareth shoved a platter under his nose.

"Have a sandwich, Snape."

Severus glared at Gareth. Gareth shrugged and put the plate of sandwiches down next to Severus.

Severus looked at the sandwiches. There was a half of an egg and olive sandwich left, a half of a chicken sandwich, one tuna sandwich, and one cheese and mixed pickle. No roast beef. He picked up the half of the chicken sandwich.

"What was that sigh for?" Gareth asked.

"I did not sigh," Severus replied, pulling back one of the slices of bread to look at the chicken.

"Something wrong with the sandwich?"

Severus shook his head and took a reluctant bite, chewing slowly. Gareth poured him a glass of apple juice and handed it to him, setting it down on the table when Snape didn't take it.

"Would you prefer pumpkin juice? There's a pitcher of that."

Severus shook his head. He set his sandwich down, took it apart, pulled out his wand, and cast a spell, removing half of the mayonnaise, then carefully reassembled it. He bit into it. Marginally better.

"Would you like a different sandwich? There's egg and..."

"I saw what was available, McGonagall."

"Did you want something different?"

Severus put down the sandwich and took a swallow of apple juice. "No." He looked at the platter. "Was there a roast beef sandwich?" he asked, thinking it would be just like McGonagall to eat the best sandwich himself.

"No. I took half of the chicken and half of the egg and olive, leaving the other halves for you in case you liked them. Did you want roast beef?"

Severus didn't say anything. He just picked up his sandwich and took another bite. His mouth felt dry as he tried to chew it.

"Blampa!" Gareth called.

The house-elf popped in a moment later. "Yes, Master Gareth?" She gave him a toothy smile.

"Lunch was very good, Blampa, but we would like roast beef sandwiches on . . ." Gareth looked over at Snape, trying to imagine his preferences. "On rye bread. Bring a range of condiments on the side, please."

"Happy to serve!" Blampa said, popping away again.

"You didn't need to order anything else," Severus said, but he put down the chicken sandwich in anticipation of the roast beef.

"No, but it sounded good to me, too."

When two roast beef sandwiches arrived, Severus took an entire sandwich and slathered it heavily with horseradish on one side, then flipped it over and put mustard on the other side. Gareth picked up a half sandwich and added a little horseradish to it.

Gareth ate the rest of his meal quietly, watching as Severus ate almost the entire roast beef sandwich.

"More soup?" Gareth asked.

Severus shook his head.

"Juice?"

Severus shook his head again.

"Time for tea, then," Gareth said, reaching for the teapot and pouring two cups. "Milk or sugar?"

Severus took the tea. "No."

Gareth ate a chocolate biscuit.

"There have been no explosions in the Potions classroom," Gareth said. "And I haven't heard that anyone has been poisoned or anything else, either."

"There is still the afternoon," Severus said flatly.

Gareth laughed.

Severus looked over at Gareth. "You are wearing your Graphornhide tunic."

"I am. I have been demonstrating it and the gauntlets to the students. They have found it quite amusing. Generally, anyway."

"Generally?"

"I told the students what kinds of spells they could cast...Stinging Hexes, ticklers, light jinxes, and such...and warned them not to cast them too strongly, but one of the Ravenclaws thought that it would be funny to send a more strongly cast Stinging Hex. It rebounded. The girl was not amused. In another class, a Slytherin named Goyle tried a Stunner, which I had explicitly told them not to cast. Graphornhide is quite good at absorbing and deflecting spells, depending on the type, but I don't like to stretch its capabilities simply for the sake of practice, so I countered the spell and then knocked him on his arse with a Stunner of my own. Only knocked him out for a few

seconds, but he was unhappy."

"That was not a prudent move on your part, although I understand why you did it. Goyle is not very bright, but he has a mean streak and his family is devoted to the Dark Lord."

Gareth shrugged. "Although it is possible that he will try to attack me here in Hogwarts, it is not likely, and when I am not here, I am unreachable."

Severus snorted. "If the Dark Lord wants to find you, you are not unreachable."

"My mother has been for years." He chewed his biscuit and looked at Severus appraisingly. "You are loyal to Aunt Minerva."

Severus glared at him. "Are you questioning that?"

"No, just . . . thinking out loud, I suppose. Have you ever heard of Thousand Year Wards?"

"Heard of, yes." Believed in, no.

"Where we are, there are Thousand Year Wards. Even Vol even Riddle cannot break them, even if he were to have the slightest idea where to look. And even knowing the approximate location, he could never find the island. It's unplottable and undetectable. Without any maintenance, after several centuries, the wards might begin to disintegrate, but you and I and he will all be long gone. Dust to dust."

"Are there others there on the island?" Severus asked curiously.

"Mother lived there alone with her house-elf until I joined her last January," Gareth said.

Severus nodded, remembering what he had said about his mother having become peculiar. "Does your brother visit?"

"He did visit. Things have changed, as you know," Gareth said. "Well, this has been pleasant, Snape, but time for me to entertain another class! Perhaps I will see you later."

Severus nodded and watched McGonagall leave. He had the sense that he would not see the younger wizard again, not unless he saw him in the Great Hall for dinner that evening. Time was growing short. He envied McGonagall his island, isolated and safe. The Dark Lord could sweep through the wizarding world, and that little island would remain a haven for whomever was there. He would tell Minerva that she should join them, but he knew that she would refuse. Others had gone into hiding in the last year or two, though he doubted that any of them were hiding anywhere as secure as the island sounded to be. He didn't believe in the Thousand Year Wards, but even ordinarily warded, if the island was unplottable and undetectable, it would be safe for them. If the Dark Lord were victorious and Minerva survived, he hoped that she would go live there and not stay and try to fight him. She would only suffer, and that thought made Severus ill.

At dinner, Severus behaved as though he hadn't been absent for the past three days, striding up the length of the Great Hall, a slight sneer on his face. He took his place beside Minerva and ate as he usually did, which wasn't very much. As dessert appeared on the tables, he grimaced, but was able to keep himself from grabbing his left arm, although it did jerk as his Mark burned.

Under his breath, Severus said, "Minerva, I am being called. I have to leave within the next half hour or he will be angry."

"Again? And on a weekday?" Minerva asked, trying to hide her alarm. Severus was almost never summoned during the week.

"I must go," Severus said.

"Come to me as soon as you return, regardless of your state," Minerva said. "I will worry until you do."

Severus nodded. His Mark had ceased burning, but he knew it would begin again in fifteen minutes if he didn't appear, and then again fifteen minutes later, and then it wouldn't stop until he arrived at the Dark Lord's side. He knew that the Dark Lord regularly tormented Lucius in Azkaban by activating his Dark Mark. Whenever he was bored and had tired of abusing those nearer at hand, he would begin to summon Lucius, who, of course, was powerless to respond or to end the burning. The Dark Lord had become particularly vindictive after Narcissa and Draco vanished without a trace. Even Bella, his favourite, had suffered. He did not believe that Bella knew anything about it, but he was angry that she hadn't and that she had allowed her sister to disappear right out from under her nose.

"You know what you will tell him about the weekend? And your absence from teaching?"

"Yes. The usual, that I spent the weekend alone in my rooms, that when I wasn't at meals on Saturday, you checked on me and had Madam Pomfrey provide treatment, except that I will add that she insisted that I not teach today."

"But how did you return?" Minerva asked. "You don't want him searching you for Portkeys in the future."

"No. If he asks, I will tell him that I woke in the middle of the night and Apparated to the gates. He has no idea I was too injured to Disapparate."

Minerva nodded. "You ought to go now."

Severus stood and left the Great Hall just as he had entered it. He deliberately avoided looking at the Gryffindor table, not wanting to see any worry on Hermione's face. Minerva masked her expression well in public; Hermione did not, at least not to his eye. He hoped that the Dark Lord was in what passed as a good mood for the megalomaniac; he did not think he could withstand even a *Crucio* very well that night.

Two hours later, a weary Severus stepped through the door to the Headmistress's Office. Minerva was standing in front of her desk. There was a wizard standing at the window, though not the one he had expected to see.

"Severus! Are you all right?" Minerva asked.

He nodded shortly, but sank into one of the chairs by the fireplace. Remaining upright did not seem an option at that moment.

"Where's Crouch?" Severus asked.

"There was an altercation. He and MacAirt are dealing with it."

"Were Slytherins involved?"

"Yes, but we can talk about it later. I didn't expect you back this soon."

"He did a lot of raging but little pontificating." He took a glass of water that Gareth handed him. His hand shook, but he managed to drink without spilling it on himself. Gareth took the glass from him when he was done. "And only a little punishing."

"I will excuse myself," Gareth said.

"You may stay if Severus doesn't mind," Minerva said.

Severus shrugged one shoulder. "There are some matters touching on the special items," Severus said.

"He is aware of them," Minerva said.

Severus looked up at Minerva. "You are not as . . . secretive as Dumbledore was. I do not know if that is a good thing or not."

"I am not Albus," Minerva replied. "There are times when I require assistance. I am still secretive, as you put it."

"Mm." Severus did not care to discuss it. He wanted to take his potion, have a bath, and go to bed. "As I said, the Dark Lord was angry. After the Cup was stolen from the Gringotts vault...a most unobtrusive theft. When stealing a wizard's Horcrux, it is probably best not to wreak public havoc in the process. After it was stolen, he decided to gather the others and hide them in new locations. I had thought that the locket was at the Black house because it had been given to one of them to guard, perhaps to Regulus. Apparently not. Regulus became disenchanted with the Dark Lord and stole it...I do not know how...and substituted a copy for it. I also do not know how the Dark Lord knows that Regulus stole it, but he does. He wants me to kidnap Kreacher and bring him to him so that he can find out what the house-elf knows about it. He also has directed me to search the Black house for it."

"But isn't the house protected by the Fidelius?" Gareth asked. "How does he know about it?"

"The Black family and others are perfectly aware that there was a family house, and they have not forgotten what neighbourhood it's in, but the precise location is masked by the Fidelius. Even if they were able to remember the address, they wouldn't be able to see it. They also know it was inherited by Potter," Severus explained impatiently. "But that is not all. He wants me to go to the Room of Requirement and find the diadem for him. I claimed to have no knowledge of the Room of Requirement, and he didn't believe me at first, but then I convinced him that I now understood how Potter's group could meet in secret when Umbridge was here. As you can see, I have a problem."

"We have a problem, Severus," Minerva replied.

"Hmmpf. We." Severus took in a breath. They were not the ones who would have to respond to the Dark Lord's summons and bear his punishment for failure. "That is not the end, however. He is going to attack Azkaban to liberate the incarcerated Death Eaters. He is planning the attack on Hogwarts, and he needs every single Death Eater he can gather. He wants me to brew a poison potion that one of the guards can smuggle into the prison and poison the other guards with. You know that there are safeguards to keep anyone from bringing in things like that, so it would have to be one that was undetectable."

"That is a more difficult problem. Do you know what guard will be doing it?"

"No. It's either someone who doesn't bear the Mark but is loyal to him, someone under *Imperius*, or someone on whom he is placing unbearable pressure. A threat to his family or something of the sort. It really doesn't matter to me." Severus looked up at Minerva. "I have had to kill, you know that, kill victims of the Dark Lord. But that has always been under other circumstances, when I was there and it seemed better that I kill them fast than someone else kill them slowly, and when refusal to participate would reveal me as a traitor. But this is different. I cannot brew a potion that will kill several wizards who are only doing their jobs, who happen to have the wrong duty shift, and then free dangerous Death Eaters in the process, Death Eaters who will kill others. I simply can't."

"But you cannot compromise your position yet, Severus."

"Why does it have to be a deadly potion?" Gareth asked. "Couldn't you say that the only way to create a potion that wouldn't be detectable would be to make it nonlethal?"

Severus thought a moment. "I could, although that would still leave them vulnerable to being murdered as they lay incapacitated. Hardly much better. And there is still the question of the prison break itself. Freeing more Death Eaters will make the final confrontation more violent when it comes."

"When does he want the potion?" Minerva asked.

"He is impatient. He wants it in a week."

"A week? That's hardly any time at all."

"I tried to explain that, but he wasn't listening, and I was only punished for my efforts," Severus said. "He wants me to begin looking for the diadem immediately, and he wants Kreacher just as quickly."

"Kreacher is easily dealt with. It is hard to kidnap a house-elf. As much as I do not want you to be punished for your incompetence, you could say he got away and apparently went to Harry."

Severus put his head in his hands. "There will be too many things going wrong for me all at once. He will see through it. And the diadem..."

"We still have it. You will simply have to return it to him as it is. He will be angry, but you will have obeyed him," Minerva said. "His punishment may be no less, since he will see that it was destroyed, but at least it will look as though you tried."

Severus nodded. "I should actually find it in the Room of Requirement again, ruined as it is. It will be much easier to convince him when he looks into my memories if that memory is completely authentic. I will remove any other memories of the Room of Requirement and the diadem before I fetch it so that there will be no strands of memory tying the new memory to the old ones. It should be convincing, although as you say, he will be furious."

Gareth had been quiet for a while, but now he spoke up. "Why not let him capture Kreacher? I know that it would be handing him over to possible torture, but if Harry is his master now, couldn't we get Harry to tell him to pretend allegiance to Bellatrix? We could tell Kreacher precisely what to say. Then Severus could say that he needs to return Kreacher to Hogwarts so as not to arouse any suspicions."

"I like that idea," Minerva said.

"If we can get Potter to do it, and if Kreacher is reliable, and if Bella doesn't decide she wants to keep him herself anyway...there are many variables," Severus said flatly. "If we do this, Kreacher will know that I am working against the Dark Lord even if all I do is kidnap him and bring him to the Dark Lord. He could betray us all. And there is no guarantee that once he was there, even if he cooperated with us, he wouldn't be tortured just because it would please Bella to do so...or the Dark Lord."

"Harry will simply have to exercise his binding. Although I would prefer that Kreacher cooperate of his own free will, it will be safer for us if Harry orders him through the binding. And as much as I dislike the thought of Kreacher or anyone else being tortured, we have to remind ourselves of how much worse it will be if the toe-rag succeeds," Minerva said.

"What story will he tell?" Severus asked wearily.

"Something as close to the truth as possible," Minerva replied. "Possibly everything except for the fact that he told Harry about the locket. And Kreacher did tell Harry that Regulus stole it. He was with Regulus when he did it. We didn't tell you because that part was nothing you needed to know and was just more for you to have to hide from the toe-rag."

Severus sighed, but then thought a moment. "I think that when I return him to Hogwarts, we should kill him...not literally, but I can tell the Dark Lord that I poisoned him so that he couldn't reveal anything to anyone. Have his body found, then he can go live at Order headquarters."

"How would we have his body found if he isn't dead?" Minerva asked.

"You are the mistress of Transfiguration. Surely you can do something that will withstand a superficial examination."

"It would have to be a very superficial examination, Severus," Minerva said. "That is not as simple as Transfiguring an actual corpse into something else. I don't think I'm capable of it."

"It is quite possible that the Dark Lord will ask me to kill him, anyway, even if I tell him I should return him to Hogwarts. People go missing all of the time. He doesn't care who sees and notices. And if he wants me to do it while we are in his presence, I will have no choice. I do not like this."

"If you are able to think of another plan, one that doesn't require you to fail to bring Kreacher to him, I will be pleased," Minerva said.

"I don't think there is any other option," Severus replied. "I will try to keep him safe, but I cannot guarantee it. There is also the matter of Potter. He has to meet with Kreacher. He shouldn't come here, so Kreacher will have to go to him, which will give Kreacher more knowledge of Potter's whereabouts."

"I will bring him to headquarters. Miss Granger will have to arrange a meeting. I will speak with her in the morning," Minerva said.

"And Azkaban?"

"Think about nonlethal potions that might appear to satisfy the toe-rag's requirements, aside from the lethality. I will have Robbie think about it as well. If the Dark Lord insists on a lethal potion, I will tell Robbie to brew it. And it will be lethal and I will give it to you. We will bear the guilt with you. It may not ease your own, but it is what I can do for you."

"Couldn't we warn them?" Gareth asked. "If they checked the guards more carefully, beginning tomorrow..."

"It would seem a suspicious coincidence," Minerva said, "and we would also have to convince the Ministry to do it. Even using Order members in the Ministry, it would take time to have them implement new procedures, and they would want a reason for it. It is impractical even if it wouldn't be suspicious to the toe-rag."

"I will think about the potion," Severus said, pausing as his voice trembled and a brief spasm rippled through him. He swallowed. "Crouch will not have to brew it. I will. It is my role."

"Is there anything more that you need to tell Aunt Minerva tonight? If not, I think you should take some potion, have your back tended to, and get to bed." Gareth looked over at his aunt. "Would it hurt for him to spend another night here?"

"I need to go to my own rooms," Severus said.

"You don't have to, Severus," Minerva said. "I am sure that if your prefects look for you and don't find you, they will go to Sinistra. They are accustomed to doing that now. Or they will seek me if it's a larger problem. Sinistra has already settled them into their dormitories following the altercation. And you do need to have your back treated. Poppy was going to do it for you before you went to bed, but we can do it here. All your potions are here. You can take something right away."

Severus was torn, but finally took the path of least resistance, and nodded. He was trembling, his legs felt weak, and he had a headache the size of Ben Nevis.

"Do you mind going up on your own, Severus?" Minerva asked. "I need to go see what is happening with the students who were involved in the fracas. I had thought that Robbie would be back by now."

Severus nodded. "I am fine. I will need to know what happened."

"Yes. As soon as I know, I will tell you," Minerva said. "I'll put your potion on your back when I return."

"I can do that, Aunt Minerva," Gareth volunteered. "If Snape doesn't want to wait for you."

Minerva stood and waved her hand dismissively. "You two decide. I will return when I return."

After Minerva had left, Gareth said, "Want to go up now, Snape? I could bring you that potion of yours first."

Severus nodded, and when he made no move to rise, Gareth assumed he wanted his potion. A minute later, he brought him the bottle of thick brown potion and a spoon.

"I use a cup, not a spoon," Severus said.

"Sorry, be right back," Gareth replied.

"Just hand me the bottle."

Gareth watched as Severus took a couple gulps of the hot, thick potion and handed it back to him. He waited a few moments, then said, "Ready to go up, Snape?"

Severus pushed up on the armrests as he stood. The potion was beginning to take effect, and he was able to cross the room without stumbling or holding onto the furniture, though he did use the handrail up the stairs to the Headmistress's suite.

Once upstairs, Severus sat on the bed while Gareth measured out a dose of Headache Potion.

"This one first, I think," Gareth said, "and then I think you have only one other potion you're still taking, other than the one for your back."

"Why are you giving me that?" Severus asked, although he accepted it.

"If you haven't got a headache, I would be amazed," Gareth replied. "Besides, you look like you have one."

"Hmmpf."

"Now this one." Gareth handed him a small spoon with a red potion in it.

Severus swallowed it.

"I'll fetch you a nightshirt. You can undress. I'll be back with it in a tic, and then I'll put the potion on your back," Gareth said.

Severus looked at the door to the loo. "I'd wanted a bath."

The guestroom only had a shower.

"Can't have one, anyway. An *Impervius* wouldn't withstand a bath. But I'll cast one on you if you want a shower."

"No," Severus said, scowling. "I wanted a bath."

"That could affect your wound. You might scar."

"In case you are completely oblivious to my situation, McGonagall, I will spell it out for you: I will be dead within weeks. A scar is hardly a concern right now, even if I cared about such things, which I don't."

"It still might affect the healing. You need to be as fit as possible in the next weeks, particularly if you are to have any chance at surviving it all."

"You are a dunderhead," Severus said.

Gareth shrugged. "Get undressed. I'll be back."

When he returned, Severus was sitting on the bed in his shorts, looking dejected and surly.

"Lie down and move the shorts so that I can reach the entire burn," Gareth said, handing him the nightshirt.

Severus pulled on the nightshirt before lying down on his stomach. He pushed the waist of his pants down.

Gareth sat beside him and said, "I need to move your clothes a bit more."

Severus grunted.

"I've been thinking," Gareth said as he began to apply the potion in small circles.

Severus grunted again.

"I think I know how you can take a bath, if you want one. I'm sure that Aunt Minerva wouldn't mind your using the bath."

Severus didn't respond.

"Are you interested in my idea or have you gone off the notion of a bath?"

Severus shrugged. The potion felt nice going on. He had hardly been aware of the irritation until the potion began to relieve it.

"I thought a Bubblehead Charm, but cast on your back. I think it would work. It would feel a little strange, particularly when you lean back, but you could have a bath."

"Hmmpf."

"Shall we try it? I can cast it then leave you alone to take the bath. I'll be in the sitting room, and you can call me if you need me."

Severus nodded. It wouldn't be the same as having complete privacy, but it would be nice to have a bath. His muscles all still ached.

Gareth finished applying the potion, then pulled Snape's pants up and pulled the nightshirt down to cover him.

"I'll go draw the bath. You want something in it? There's sandalwood bath oil."

"Fine," Severus said. He sat up and looked at the potions, then reached for one.

"If you want to take the muscle relaxant, only take a half dose. I don't want you to fall asleep and drown on me," Gareth said.

"I wouldn't mind. Rather a good idea, in fact. Sounds peaceful."

Gareth ignored him and left the room. When he returned a few minutes later, he said, "Your bath is ready. How much of that potion did you take?"

Severus glared at him.

"I just want to know whether I have to go in and sit with you while you take the bath to make sure that you don't slip slowly beneath the water and meet that peaceful end you talked about, or if I can give you your privacy," Gareth said.

"Interested in saving the pet Death Eater?" Severus asked, standing.

Gareth looked at him a moment. "No, I'm not. I don't see a pet Death Eater here."

"Your precious spy," Severus said with a sneer.

"Yes, our precious spy. And very precious you are, Snape," Gareth replied evenly.

"Saving me to spy another day," Severus said, opening the door and starting toward the bathroom.

"Yes, saving you to spy another day," Gareth agreed, following him into the bathroom.

"And to murder and..."

"Snape, enjoy your bath. Don't make yourself more miserable than you already are," Gareth said with a sigh. "Besides, Aunt Minerva hopes you will live beyond your days as a spy. I will do what I can to see that she is not disappointed in that hope."

"You are a font of human warmth and generosity, McGonagall," Severus said sarcastically.

"Get those bloody clothes off so I can cast the charm and leave you to be miserable all on your own," Gareth said, his patience at an end.

Severus pulled off the nightshirt and put it on the bench, then turned his back on Gareth.

"Do you bathe in your undershorts?" Gareth asked sharply. "Because you'll have to if I cast the charm now."

Severus scowled, but removed his underwear, holding it in front of him even though he was facing away from Gareth.

"Ready?" When Gareth received no response, he shrugged and cast the spell. An iridescent bubble appeared around the slightly pink area covering the lower half of Severus's back. "Let me try to flatten it a bit...it's quite bulbous. I don't think you could lean back as it is." Gareth passed his wand over the bubble. He nodded. "It will feel odd, and I don't know how long it will last, but it should be long enough for you to take your bath."

"Good. Leave."

Gareth left.

Severus got into the bathtub. It was huge, and the sides seemed to be the perfect angle for reclining. The taps were all along one side so he could lean against either end without them being in the way. He closed his eyes, leaned back, and sighed. The bubble did feel strange and added a peculiar buoyancy to his back, but it also created a kind of cushion. The water was the perfect temperature, and McGonagall had put in just enough bath oil to soften the water and add a pleasant scent without it being overwhelmingly perfumed.

The potions were doing their work, and his aches and pains were melting away. Severus tried to blank his mind, but he was tired, and the potions that relaxed him and removed his pain were also making it difficult for him to concentrate. He tried to think of something other than death and murder, killing Kreacher, killing Azkaban prison guards, the Dark Lord's fury when he brought him one more ruined Horcrux, and having to hide from the Dark Lord, even in the midst of torture and weakness, that he knew of the Horcruxes, that his loyalty lay with Minerva, and that he loathed his false master. Silent tears began to roll down his cheeks. Even not thinking of all of those things, he still felt them and he still felt his despair. It was as he had told Hermione weeks before: he was being slowly destroyed from within. He only hoped that he could survive long enough to be killed before he crumbled.

Severus groped for the flannel that Gareth had put on the edge of the bath. He wet it and wrung it out over his face, then he placed the cloth over his eyes. Muggles gave men blindfolds before they went before a firing squad. A peculiar bit of humanity in a barbaric practice. He wished he could wear a blindfold. He saw all of it coming. He wasn't frightened of death any longer; he was more frightened of what he had to do while still alive. He did not want to die painfully and ignominiously, but it was inevitable that he die, and it would likely be both painful and shameful. He had believed in his fate from the day that he first turned to Dumbledore to beg his help to save the Potters. And then the old man failed. Albus had tried, but he hadn't conceived that their Secret Keeper would betray them. So he was still here, spying, dealing in death, and ready to die himself.

Somehow, good would come from all this evil and the Dark Lord would be defeated, Severus told himself. He had to believe that. He would triumph even as the Dark Lord recognised his treachery and killed him. He was not just a spy. He was a master spy. He was still fooling the Dark Lord, still tricking the most powerful Dark Wizard in history, his Occlumency stronger than the Dark Lord's Legilimency. He was having his triumph even now. Every time he returned from the Dark Lord and the Dark Lord still believed him a loyal little Death Eater. Every time he told him a lie about Minerva or Potter or the Hogwarts defences, he had another triumph. He was the greatest Slytherin of any Slytherin since Salazar himself. Maybe even greater than he.

Severus took the flannel from his face and used it to wash, then he slid beneath the water to wet his hair down. He'd get his Shed-Stop in the morning before breakfast. As he sat back up, he remembered Gareth's words about making sure he didn't drown himself. Gareth hadn't had to do anything to help him have a bath, particularly after he'd been as surly as he was, yet he had. But the wizard couldn't imagine what it was like for him. A few potions and a bath wouldn't fix anything.

Severus got out of the bath and started it draining. He looked around for his wand. He closed his eyes and shook his head. He had left it in the bedroom with his clothes. If he were that forgetful and sloppy the next time he met with the Dark Lord, he would be dead and the Order's ability to steer events would die with him.

He dried off with a large, fluffy white towel, then put the nightshirt on. There was a dressing gown folded on the bench and slippers on the floor next to it. Severus assumed that McGonagall had put them there for him, so he put those on, as well, though he didn't tie the sash because the charm was still in place. He stuck his pants in the pocket of the dressing gown and went out to the sitting room.

Gareth looked up. "I made us tea, if you'd like it. Minerva's still not back."

Severus hesitated. After the way he'd spoken to McGonagall before his bath, he hardly wanted to ask him to do anything for him.

"Want me to lift the charm for you? Or were you going to do it yourself?" Gareth asked.

"Very well," Severus said, turning. He felt the bubble disappear and the nightshirt settle against his back.

Severus sat down. He looked at the teapot, then decided a cup wouldn't be amiss. He poured it out. The aroma was strong.

"What is it?"

"A blend. I bring it to Aunt Minerva from the island. Made from different ingredients that grow wild there. Except the mint, though that's practically wild now," Gareth said. "Has dried berries, herbs, and other ingredients that I don't know. It tastes good, though, and I find it has a gently soothing medicinal effect."

Severus set his cup down, no longer thirsty.

"I can get you some peppermint or catnip or something instead," Gareth said. "But it really is quite nice, even if it sounds peculiar."

Severus looked at the cup. McGonagall had done that on purpose. Made him his mother's tea. A petty revenge. Severus looked up at Gareth, undisguised contempt on his face.

"I don't want anything from you, you cowardly bastard," Severus spat, standing with such force he almost knocked his chair over. "Think you're clever, don't you? All innocence because you can't take your vengeance openly. You're no Slytherin, so don't try to be an underhanded sneak with me. You won't succeed."

Severus marched off to the guestroom, but as he tried to slam the door behind him, it was caught by Gareth's hand. Severus turned, his anger still blazing.

"Listen here, Snape," Gareth said in a low, hard voice. "I said, listen!" he said more loudly as Severus opened his mouth. "You have had a shit day after a shit weekend and your life is generally miserable. But that does not give you any excuse to speak to me that way. I'll put up with your moods and basic nastiness, but there is no call for you to attack me like that. I fix a pot of tea for myself and think that just maybe you might like to have a cup, so despite the fact that you have been a complete prick since we came upstairs, I put out another cup for you. You don't like it, Snape, you don't have to drink it, but just because you're a narrow, nasty, sly snake, who takes pleasure in petty cruelty, doesn't mean that everyone around you is. I have tried to be decent toward you, and you make that as difficult for me as possible. It's as if you want to prove to yourself that everyone else is out to make your life worse and that no one could possibly ever do anything for Severus Snape unless they have some ulterior motive that goes against your interest in some way. I honestly don't know how Hermione puts up with you...or Minerva or anyone else who cares about you."

Gareth turned and left the room.

Ten minutes later, Severus came out to the sitting room. He stood there a moment, then said, "Minerva's not returned yet."

"No."

Severus looked at the coffee table. His teacup was gone. He went into the little kitchen and found a mug and some peppermint leaves. He put the peppermint tea in the mug, ran water into it, then waved his wand to heat the water. Some of the leaves floated on the top. His Muggle teabags were pathetic, by wizarding standards, but they did contain the leaves.

Severus returned to the sitting room with his mug. When Gareth didn't look at him, he sat down on the couch, holding his mug in front of him, trying to sip the hot liquid and avoid the leaves. Gareth glanced over as he was wiping a leaf from his lip with his finger.

"Peppermint?" Gareth asked.

"Mm," Severus said with a nod.

"There was a teaball. You could have used that. Strains out most of the leaves," Gareth said.

Severus hadn't even thought to look for such a thing.

A few minutes later, Gareth asked, "Good bath?"

"Yes."

"How's the back?"

"The charm worked. It didn't get wet," Severus replied quietly, then added, "Thanks for that. Clever idea."

Gareth nodded. He let out a sigh and looked at Severus. "Look, Snape, we have our histories. Where they intersected before, when we were both young . . . that was bad. No denying that it was bad. But I told you how I felt about it, and I told you that I would not be able to forgive it, but that we could . . . start fresh, that I would do my best not to hold it against you. And I am. I'd like to think that I'm also trying to see you as a person apart from those events. But you make it damned hard. I think it's partly because even if I managed to accept your contrition, you are still holding on to the guilt yourself. But that's you and your business, Snape. Don't blame me for it. I know you say you find it hard to forgive, but do you think you can forgive me?"

"For what?"

"For being a reminder. I can't help it, you know. I am who I am, and I drink tea that my mother blends, and I do it whether you are here or not."

"That is foolishness," Severus said scornfully. "What kind of thing is that to ask of me?"

"Isn't it true? If not, then tell me. If I have done something else to you, I want to know it. It didn't occur to me, even when you were having that fit, that giving you that tea would be a problem. I'd only hoped you'd have a few minutes of peace while you drank it. But if it was something else that I did, tell me."

Severus shook his head, letting out a long breath. "You were right, McGonagall," he said softly. "My life is miserable and it won't get any better. Maybe it's simply easier to accept it if it is unrelenting, if there is no moment when I feel . . ." He shook his head again, closing his eyes.

Gareth drew his wand and cast a spell. "Drink your tea, Snape. The leaves will stay at the bottom of the mug now, but the charm doesn't last long."

Severus drank his tea. "Do you know what happened with the students?" he asked.

"There was some kind of argument, some name-calling, and then someone pulled a wand, and by the time Alroy reached them, several students were suffering from hexes of varying degrees of severity, there was a hole in a classroom door, a suit of armour was fleeing after it lost its head to a stray spell, a portrait was damaged, there was a flood, and it was general chaos."

"Who was involved besides Slytherins?" Severus asked.

"A few Gryffindors and Hufflepuffs. Some Ravenclaws were curious bystanders, but apparently got out of the way once the hexes started flying."

"Do you know which Gryffindors were involved?"

Gareth shook his head. "I think one of them was the Weasley girl. Hermione wasn't there, if that concerned you."

"I needn't guess that it was Slytherins against the Gryffindors and Hufflepuffs," Severus said.

"Any other scenario would be unlikely, but I understand...and I may be wrong...that one of the Slytherins actually came to the defence of a Hufflepuff, and that was part of what triggered the entire altercation," Gareth replied.

"Really? Which Slytherin? Which Hufflepuff?"

Gareth shook his head. "I don't know. I don't know any of them well enough and I wasn't there."

Severus could not withhold his sigh.

"I'm sorry, Snape. I know you don't need more difficulties in your life." Gareth paused, looking at Severus, and when there was no reply, he said, "Having your House openly divided at a time like this will pose problems, but it may also be a positive thing."

"It would be if I could actually persuade more students that being Slytherin does not mean being a follower of the Dark Lord, that a Slytherin does not need to be a blood purist to be a good Slytherin, that being a Slytherin means so much more. But I cannot do that. I have been barely adequate as Head of Slytherin because of the restrictions my role places on me, and now there will be those with whose care I am charged who will likely die, or at least suffer, because I cannot perform my role as I see fit. It would have been better for the world if I had never been born."

"I doubt that, but true or not, you were, and you live," Gareth replied. "Look, why don't you go to bed? Take a little more of that green muscle relaxant and get some sleep. If Aunt Minerva returns in the next half hour, I'll send her in to you, otherwise, you might as well wait until tomorrow morning to learn the details."

Severus nodded and stood.

"Just leave your mug. I'll take care of it," Gareth said.

Severus put the mug down. When he reached the guestroom door, he turned. "McGonagall? Sorry about the tea."

Gareth grinned and gave a small shrug. "It isn't to everyone's taste. Good night, Snape."

Severus woke in the dark. There was someone there with him. He reached out to cast a wandless Stunner in the direction he felt the person standing and groped for his wand with his left hand.

"Snape, it's me."

"McGonagall." Severus relaxed. "Do you have a death wish?"

"No. I wanted to wake you gently," Gareth said, flicking his wand and lighting a lamp. "Aunt Minerva is back. She is freshening up, but she needs to talk to you. I thought you might prefer to talk to her in the sitting room rather than lying in bed."

"What time is it?"

"One o'clock." Gareth left him to put on his dressing gown and slippers.

One in the morning. That was worrying. That it had taken so long to take care of and that Minerva would want to wake him to talk to him about it rather than waiting until morning were both clear indications that the situation was more grave than student altercations usually were.

Severus paced the sitting room as Gareth fixed his aunt some chamomile and catnip tea. Minerva emerged from the bathroom, ready for bed.

"I am sorry to have to wake you, Severus."

"Did someone die?" Severus asked.

"No, no one is dead. Have a seat."

Gareth brought Minerva her tea then went back toward the kitchen and slouched against the wall, listening.

Minerva took a sip of tea. "There was physical damage, clean up, trying to sort out what actually happened...Robbie and Alroy managed that quite well...and Madam Pomfrey has treated all of the students who were hit by spells. Only three of them need to stay in the infirmary overnight...one Hufflepuff, one Gryffindor, and one Slytherin. Miss Bones and Mr Creevey both require observation and further treatment. Even if it were not medically necessary for the Slytherin to remain in the Hospital Wing, we would still keep him there for his own safety. Blaise Zabini is perceived by his fellow Slytherins to have taken the wrong side in the altercation. He had the worst of the hexes. I fear for his safety if he returns to his House."

"Fuck." Severus looked up at Minerva. "Sorry."

"Do not concern yourself. I understand the sentiment."

"What was it about?"

"Mr Crabbe called Susan Bones a Muggle-loving blood traitor and her companion, Eleanor Branstone, a Mudblood who would have to be taught her place. Zabini told Crabbe to move along, Crabbe asked him if he was a Muggle-lover or just a Mudblood-lover, then Mr Goyle suggested some rather nasty things about Zabini's relationship with Miss Branstone, and from there, it escalated. By the time Alroy arrived, eleven students were involved, seven of them from your House, including Mr Zabini, who sided with Miss Bones and Miss Branstone. Miss Weasley and Colin Creevey joined in the fray because, according to Miss Weasley, the other three needed their assistance. I have no doubt that is true, yet despite that, I did take points from Gryffindor. I cannot be seen to be condoning violence by any of the students. The most points were taken from Slytherin, I am afraid to say, though I did award Mr Zabini twenty points for standing up for his principles and exercising his authority as prefect to attempt to avert the confrontation."

"Who cast the first spell?" Severus asked. "Were they able to determine that?"

"Goyle cast one at Branstone, Zabini countered it, and after that, we have determined what spells were cast by whom and which ones met their marks, but not the order in which they were cast. There is no doubt that Zabini was targeted more than any of the others."

Severus sighed and shook his head.

"I think you should speak to him, Severus, and better to do it now if you wish to do so in relative privacy," Minerva said. "I told him he should think about leaving school, but he didn't want to consider the idea."

"I will dress and go down now, then return to my own rooms," Severus said with a nod. "I will also look in on Slytherin. If even one person isn't in bed, every single Slytherin will regret it."

"Gareth, I would like you to return tonight. I know you wanted to stay a little longer, but I need you and your mother to work on this...particularly on the problems that the little toe-rag has given us tonight, but also on the impact this open strife between Houses might have, and whether Zabini's position might have some use to us, or might be a detriment."

Gareth nodded. "I'll fetch my things from Robbie's rooms and leave immediately." He started toward the door.

"McGonagall!"

Gareth turned.

Severus hesitated. "May I speak with your nephew a moment, Minerva?"

"Of course," she replied, then she realised that he had meant he wished to speak with him alone. "I will be in the study."

Gareth looked at Severus questioningly.

"I don't believe we will meet again unless you return from the island very soon," Severus said. He hesitated, unsure of how to proceed. "I want to tell you that I appreciate your approach to life. It is not one I could ever take, but I appreciate it. I regret that our lives were not such that we could know each other better."

"I share your regret, Snape. But I do hope that we will have that chance in the future." Gareth quirked a slight grin. "You're still a miserable bastard, and I don't particularly like you, but I think I could. You grow on a person. Take care of yourself, Snape."

"One other thing, McGonagall."

"Yes?"

"Minerva...if things go badly, if the Dark Lord prevails, save her. Bring her to your island. Don't let her make a meaningless sacrifice. Promise me."

Gareth nodded. "I will try."

"And Miss Granger, if you could get her to safety, persuade her to join her parents wherever they are..."

"You have my promise that I will do my best for them both if I am alive and the worst comes to pass." He saw Severus's expression. "I promised my mother I would stay out of the Order and try to avoid becoming involved in the war. That does not mean that I will abandon others to do the fighting when the end finally comes." Gareth smiled at him. "Don't look so bleak, Snape. I believe Potter will succeed. I even think there's a good chance that you will live to see that day. Good night, Snape, and good luck."

Severus watched the younger wizard leave, then he returned to the guestroom to dress and prepare to see Zabini in the infirmary.

Severus sat in his office, his eyes closing involuntarily. He had to get to dinner, but it had been a long day. By the time he had returned to his rooms after speaking to Zabini, it was four-thirty, then at six-thirty, Poppy was at his door ready to apply the potion to his back. He'd managed a total of almost four hours sleep, which was actually more than he often got, but as Gareth had pointed out, his body had taken a beating, and then he'd been subject to *Crucio* the evening before. He was exhausted. Through force of will, he believed he had successfully hidden his fatigue from the students, but that effort in itself had been enervating.

He considered whether to take an Invigoration Draught. He avoided most artificial stimulants, other than tea and coffee, because there were dangers in their overuse and they never made him feel completely normal. Invigoration Draught was mild, though. At this point, he might be able to take Alert Elixir or Invigilatus Potion. It wasn't as though he needed to worry about dependency, addiction, or rebound effect. He'd be dead before any of that could happen.

There was a knock on his door. Severus straightened and waved his wand to open the door.

"Good afternoon, Professor Snape." Robbie closed the door behind him.

"Crouch," Severus said with a weary nod. He didn't even have the energy to snap at him and try to discourage his presence. The wizard had only called on him in his office on two previous occasions, so he assumed he had some legitimate business, perhaps a message from Minerva.

Crouch looked at the door. "May we speak privately?"

Severus waved his wand and cast an *Imperturbable* and a *Colloportus*. "Sufficient?" Severus asked.

Crouch hesitated, then cast another spell, causing the walls, the floor, and the ceiling to glow a pale blue. "If anyone attempts to use an eavesdropping spell, the colour will shift," he said.

"I don't know that one," Severus said, frowning.

"I will teach it to you sometime, if you wish. It was a popular spell in the forties, though unsubtle and rarely used any longer, since the glow is visible from any windows. You have none, so this is an ideal location for its use," Crouch replied. He placed an old, small, very worn book on Severus's desk. "I believe I have a solution to one of our problems."

Severus looked at the cover, but only the letters "abd" were legible. Crouch opened the book, finding a page almost at the end. He turned it so that Severus could read it. The text had been neatly transcribed by hand, but the writing was crowded and old-fashioned; most of it was in English, but it was sprinkled liberally with both Latin and Greek potions terms. The spelling was irregular, and Severus judged the text to be at least a few hundred years old, though the transcription might be more recent. He blinked. His head ached.

"What is it?" Severus asked.

"It is a potion that I believe will suit our needs," Crouch said softly. "Properly prepared, it is lethal. Improperly prepared, it is not. It consists of two separately brewed potions, neither of which should be detected by Azkaban security as dangerous...alone, they do nothing. When combined, they create a deadly potion. It must be delivered to the victim within twenty minutes of completion or it becomes inert again. That means that the guard would have to combine them himself, after going on duty, and find some means of having the other guards ingest it. Once the potion is finished, it can be mixed into almost any beverage and retain its potency. If put into an alcoholic beverage, however, it is harmless."

"I see only that this meets the Dark Lord's needs," Severus said bitterly.

"As I said, it must be properly prepared to be lethal. A Potions master understands that the brewing of a complex potion is more than just stirring ingredients together. It is doubtful that the Azkaban guard will be able to combine the components properly. Intent, Professor Snape, intent," Robbie said with a smile.

"And not merely the intent to kill, either," Severus said, a half-smile appearing on his face. His headache forgotten, he began to scan the text, turning the page to read the final part of the instructions. He nodded. "Yes, this will do." His frown returned.

"What is wrong?" Robbie asked.

"He will want to test it. He will want proof of its lethality."

"Then you will prove its lethality, Professor. It is unpleasant and regrettable, but you will show him how simple it is to mix a few drops of one potion into a spoonful of the other, administer it, and kill someone."

Severus's eyes were dull and blank, but he nodded. Whomever the Dark Lord chose to test the potion on would already be marked for death. This potion was, according to the text, fast-acting, perhaps more humane than other ways the victim could be killed.

"When improperly prepared, the potion will, at most, induce gastrointestinal distress, possibly some disorientation, but it is most likely that it will have no effect at all," Robbie said. "It will appear to Riddle that the guard did not do what he was supposed to do. That means, too, that the attack on Azkaban will encounter resistance. Perhaps it will not be successful."

"Perhaps," Severus said flatly.

"I will brew it for you tomorrow. When you bring him the diadem or Kreacher, you can tell him you are still trying to find the perfect potion for him, or that it will take time to brew it, that the ingredients are rare."

"He said he wants it in a week," Severus said. "I can postpone it no longer than that."

"Very well. If I brew it tomorrow, it will be ready for you whenever you need it."

Severus looked down at the book, not seeing it. "I am capable of brewing it."

"I have no doubt you are, but I will do this. I can do none of the rest for you, but this, I can do. It is also Minerva's wish."

Severus looked back up at Crouch. "Have you ever killed a person?"

"I have attempted to avoid it. However, I have been responsible for more deaths than I care to discuss. I am sure you can understand that sentiment."

"Mm. You fought Grindelwald."

"Yes. It was a long time ago, though, another lifetime."

"Did you poison people then?"

Crouch shook his head.

Severus closed his eyes. He felt on the edge of collapse, but he could not, not yet. He only had to last one second past the Dark Lord's decision to kill him. Then he would be dead and he could collapse.

"Dumbledore said you were a competent Potions master," Severus said, opening his eyes.

"I would like to believe that I am at least competent."

"You will brew this and it will work?" Severus asked.

"I will brew it and it will work...in the hands of another competent Potions master," Robbie replied.

"I should brew it," Severus said.

"There is no way that Riddle will be able to tell who brewed it. You will deliver it and you will perform the final phase of brewing, demonstrating its efficacy."

Severus nodded. "Very well, but if there is a flaw in the potion, I will likely not live to tell you about it."

"There will be no flaw."

Severus shoved the book back at Crouch. "When you have it brewed, deliver it to me."

"I will. Have you decided what you will do next?"

"The diadem. It's easiest, although he will be angry, but he will still want Kreacher, so I hope that his anger will be tempered by his desire to have me healthy enough to kidnap the house-elf. In addition, I do not know what Potter's response was. We may have to change our plans."

"I have not seen Minerva since she returned, so I do not know, either. When will you deliver the diadem?"

"I will borrow Minerva's Pensieve and do it tonight after curfew, then deliver it immediately."

"You look like death, Professor. You need to be in bed tonight. Dreamless Sleep would not be amiss."

"He will be angry that the diadem is destroyed..."

"His anger will not be improved by your haste."

"Delay is pointless," Severus said.

"If it were only for the sake of delay, perhaps, but you need to be fit when you see him, Professor. He will try to learn whether you had a hand in destroying it. Even with the memories deposited in the Pensieve, there may be traces remaining. You know that. Shadows only, but if he presses and you are not fit, he might detect something and keep pressing. You are a powerful Occlumens, but you have been under physical, mental, and emotional stress. You can beat Riddle, you can outwit the Dark Lord, but not if you are exhausted. Be at your best and you will find your triumph."

"I will decide after dinner," Severus said reluctantly, but already decided. He would wait. He would sleep. He would take Dreamless Sleep and forget the world for one night.

"I understand that you did not prevail upon Mr Zabini to leave school."

"No. He will remain in the infirmary for the time being, though he'll begin attending classes and meals again tomorrow. I told him I would fetch him all of his things. I will do that this evening. Most of his family has already left Britain and are staying with relatives in Morocco. Only his father has remained to continue overseeing the family business. I tried to hint to Mr Zabini that his father might be well-advised to take a long vacation. It was difficult to say enough without saying too much. Obviously, I could not betray my true allegiances."

"We will do our best with him, Professor, and Poppy said that she will sleep in the infirmary for as long as he is there."

"She is hardly an Auror," Severus pointed out. "The sentiment is admirable, but foolish. Hufflepuff foolishness."

"Perhaps, but she might surprise you...particularly if others share your underestimation of her. A badger has sharp teeth and a lot of mettle."

"I hope there will be no occasion on which she has to prove that," Severus replied. As far as he had some measure of respect or affection for any of his colleagues, Poppy Pomfrey was not the least of them. But she would probably die when the Dark Lord attacked Hogwarts. Any of his colleagues could, or all of them. And he would be the one permitting the Dark Lord entry. He was their murderer. He shoved the thought from his brain.

Severus stood. "If you will get rid of the lightshow, we can leave for dinner."

Crouch nodded once, drew his wand, and the blue glow vanished in an instant.

Severus opened the door. "Thank you for your report, Professor Crouch, and for supervising my classes in my absence yesterday."

"Certainly, Professor Snape," Robbie replied as he followed Severus out the door. "I am always pleased to assist a fellow Potions master."

The two wizards joined the flow of Slytherins on their way up to dinner in the Great Hall.

Chapter Twenty-Two: Split all ends up

Chapter 23 of 34

Severus continues to do what he must, and the Dark Lord is pleased with him. Zabini returns to Slytherin, Longbottom learns a lesson, and Potter finds an example to follow.



Chapter Twenty-Two: *Split all ends up*

21 25 April 1998

Severus stared at the stack of parchments on his desk. It seemed absurd to even ponder reading them. Foolish. Futile. Farcical. He would give no more written assignments. He had scarcely the time and energy to eat and breathe, let alone sleep. He glanced at each one, not bothering with any of his usual comments, not even the

most amusing of them, but simply crossing out the most idiotic sentences, putting checks next to the correct points, then writing the grade at the top. It was bizarre, surreal, almost laughable, if he were able to laugh and if it weren't all so desperately pathetic.

He needed a holiday, but there could be none for him or for anyone else. Even the Easter holiday had been cancelled earlier that month because of the dangers posed to the students who would be taking the Hogwarts Express. Class schedules had been modified for the week, and he had only had to teach his NEWTs and OWLs classes, with the other students being given organised activities and revision in the library, but that had hardly been a holiday. And the Dark Lord certainly didn't take holidays. Severus rubbed his eyes.

After curfew, he would deposit all his previous memories of the Room of Requirement and the diadem into the Pensieve, then he would go to the Room of Requirement, walk back and forth trying to get it to give him the room in which things were hidden, and then look for the diadem. He was not entirely sure how he would do that. Hermione had used an *Accio*, but he believed that the Dark Lord would want to see that he had spent time looking for it.

There was a knock on the door, two hard, distinct raps. Severus opened the door from his desk.

"Mr Zabini," Severus said with a nod.

The young man's face still bore faint traces of bruising, and his hair was so close-cropped that it looked like soft black velvet. When Madam Pomfrey had used a shaving charm to remove the jinxed hair, she had offered him a potion to speed its regrowth, but Blaise had declined. She had managed to restore his missing teeth, and when he had reason to smile, Blaise would once again flash straight pearly whites.

"Professor Snape," Zabini said, closing the door behind him, "I wish to return to Slytherin tonight, sir."

"That would not be prudent," Severus replied.

"Prudence is not the only consideration, sir."

"Your safety may be at risk. In classes and at meals, there are others whose presence can offer a measure of protection. You will be alone in your dormitory."

"I will not be alone, sir." He tilted his head slightly and shrugged. "Alone in my year, perhaps. But I am Slytherin and I need to be in my House. If I am not, there is no point in remaining at Hogwarts, and I will not leave."

Severus drew his wand and cast an *Imperturbable* and a *Colloportus*.

"Mr Zabini, listen to me carefully. If you return to the dormitory, you must be more Slytherin than anyone around you. Do you understand me?"

Zabini nodded. "I will take you as my example, sir."

Severus repressed a snort. "I do not believe that would be wise."

"Not in all things, sir. But I will be the better Slytherin."

"You will still be in danger when you sleep."

"I know a few tricks, sir. And I need to be there...because *I am* Slytherin."

Severus looked at him silently for a moment, then said, "Look after the other Slytherins, then, Zabini."

"I will." He hesitated. "There have been rumours that something will happen soon and that it may involve Hogwarts."

"Rumours?"

"Goyle, actually. His father told him to expect something big. He has been telling others."

"Both of them are idiots," Severus said disdainfully.

"Yes, sir," Blaise agreed.

"If something 'big' happens, keep the other Slytherins close. Do you understand me? Keep them close and protect them."

"We will do what we must, Professor."

"As will I," Severus replied. He raised his wand and ended the spells. "Good luck, Zabini. And five points to Slytherin."

"For what, sir?"

"For understanding and exercising the multitude of characteristics that a true Slytherin possesses."

Fifteen minutes after Zabini had left, there was another knock on the door. Severus opened it.

"Good evening, Severus," Minerva said as she stepped into his office. "I ran into Mr Zabini just now. He had his bags. He informed me that he is returning to Slytherin."

Severus flicked his wand and, with a sigh, sealed the door and cast another *Imperturbable*.

"He came to me a little while ago and informed me of his decision. He may be neither the Muggle-lover nor Mudblood-lover Crabbe accused him of being, but he has a greater understanding of what a future under the Dark Lord would mean, and he recognises that the traits most essential to a Slytherin do not include a distorted notion of blood purity. He is ambitious and clever, and he wants a world in which he can exercise those traits and truly achieve something for himself with no ties to a psychopathic megalomaniac."

"He told you all that?" Minerva asked.

Severus sighed. "Of course not. Not in so many words. But it is clear. He did say, explicitly, that he is not alone in his House. There are others who will stand with him. I told him to keep them close, particularly if anything happens."

"You told him about that?" Minerva asked in astonishment.

"No, he told me. Goyle is a complete dunderhead. He shared some information with his son, who, also being a dunderhead, has told others in his House," Severus said.

Minerva sighed and sat down in Severus's guest chair. "Do you know when it will be?"

Severus shook his head. "Soon, but I do not know how soon. It will clearly happen after the Azkaban prison break. It is possible that it will occur the next day, but doubtful. I believe that the Dark Lord is planning a simultaneous attack on the Ministry."

"Simultaneous with the attack on Azkaban or Hogwarts?" Minerva asked.

"Hogwarts. It may not be precisely simultaneous, but fairly close."

"You did not mention it before."

"Our concern is the Dark Lord. He will be here because he believes that Potter will return to defend Hogwarts. And I have no definite information about a Ministry attack. It is mere speculation."

"Mention this at the Order meeting on Saturday, though," Minerva said. "I trust your speculations. Those at the Ministry will need to be prepared."

Severus nodded. "I believe that he hopes both to keep any help from reaching us from the Ministry and to finally assassinate Scrimgeour. He is most unhappy with the repeated failures at kidnap. The last attempt was supposed to be an assassination...he has given up on the kidnapping plan and no longer believes it necessary...and he wants there to be a power vacuum in the Ministry, all ready for him to step into after he has killed Potter and taken control of Hogwarts."

"We must simply see to it that he can do none of that," Minerva replied. "To that end, I have brought you something." She reached into her pockets and withdrew two potions bottles, one larger than the other. "Your poison for the toe-rag. Robbie said that if you would like to review the instructions again before you deliver it and finish compounding it, he has left the book for you in my library. It's on the bottom shelf of the last bookcase."

Minerva held the bottles out to Severus, who looked at them with loathing but took them from her.

"He said to tell you that he brewed them in perfect proportion," Minerva said.

Severus nodded. "I will secure them."

"I thought that you could deposit this memory in the Pensieve, as well. I left it in my office for you."

"Thank you." Severus tamped down the anxiety that threatened to creep over him in anticipation of that night's task.

"Everything else is ready for you."

Severus nodded his acknowledgment. "And your visit to Potter this afternoon?"

"It was long, longer than I had thought it would be, given that we had already met and spoken yesterday," Minerva said. "But Kreacher will go with you. We have worked out what he will say and what he will do. He will allow you to Stun him in order to bring him to Riddle. He knows almost nothing about the plan except for his own part in it. He does know that he may not live. Strangely, it did not appear to perturb him."

"What are his instructions?"

"We told him that when you try to Stun him, he is not to resist. When he is questioned by the toe-rag, he may tell him everything that he told Harry, but that he may not divulge that he ever told Harry or anyone else about the locket. He will also say that someone stole the locket from his den where he had hidden it when Sirius was discarding family heirlooms, but that he does not know who stole it or where it is. That is all true, so it should be easy enough for him. If he wishes to resist answering your questions or Riddle's and only answer Bellatrix, that would be best. However, if Bella is not there, we did not want to see him tortured into answering, so he may answer either of you if you place pressure upon him. We also placed a few other restrictions on what he could and could not reveal."

"It is quite likely that he will be tortured in some manner even if he answers Bella's questions readily, and I do not trust him not to reveal more than he should," Severus said. "He has not proven himself reliable in the past. He turned on Black. If he had not colluded with Bella and Malfoy, the Dark Lord's ruse to draw Potter to the Department of Mysteries may not have succeeded. I do not trust him."

"He has obeyed Potter in the past, and Potter ordered him as his master. It is still possible that he could find a way to betray us, some piece of information that he could impart that we did not think to restrict, but Kreacher's life has improved since he came to Hogwarts, and he did cooperate with Potter when he questioned him about the locket in September."

"And if the Dark Lord...and Bella...allow him to be returned to Hogwarts? What is he to do then?"

"Remain here and say nothing to anyone about his excursion with you unless Harry calls for him."

"Hmmpf. That leaves me uneasy. I think he should be sent back to Potter. I can say I killed him and hid his body."

"After having told the toe-rag that he must be returned to Hogwarts to avoid suspicion? I think not. Just bully him in front of the toe-rag...threaten him with whatever you must in order for it to appear that he has been cowed by you and will not talk." Minerva saw the expression on Severus's face. "I know that it is an imperfect plan, but other than actually killing Kreacher...which I hope we can avoid...I do not see any other way of dealing with him afterward."

"And if Bella wishes to keep him?"

"He has been told to make a show of acquiescing, and then at the first opportunity, he is to escape and return directly to the house, not returning to Hogwarts first."

Severus sighed. "Very well. I will likely stage the kidnapping on Friday after dinner. Just find some reason to have him alone every evening...in some part of the castle where we are not likely to be disturbed."

"Have you forgotten that you are the Deputy Headmaster, Severus? Call for him. He will come to you just as he comes for me. When he arrives, Stun him."

"I will bind him after, perhaps Petrify him." Severus closed his eyes and shook his head. "I am surprised that Potter agreed to this. He must believe that I have some other plan in mind."

"One reason it took as long as it did was that I taught Potter how to use his Patronus to send messages and how to retrieve our messages to him, but the other reason was the number of questions he still had before he would give Kreacher his orders. However, Potter does still have dreams in which he sees some of what the toe-rag sees, and he recently saw a Death Eater tortured within an inch of his life and then left in a wood in the cold rain. It disturbed him. I told him that the reason you were in that position was not because you were incompetent, as the toe-rag apparently was shouting in this dream, but because you deliberately botched the raid and saved the little boy from death in that fire. Potter is coming to appreciate some of the difficult situations you have been in and the choices you have had to make. I also told him that you have been aware that he has made the house their base since the beginning, that you look after Miss Granger when she Apparates back and forth for their meetings."

"So when is he moving out?" Severus asked with a sneer.

"He is not. I also informed him that you were the one who checked the goblet and the locket for curses, and that you assisted Miss Granger in retrieving the basilisk fangs and destroying the diadem. I believe that he trusts you not to betray us."

"Well, isn't that generous of him! As if I hadn't been saving his sorry hide from the moment he arrived at Hogwarts," Severus said bitterly. "Now we only have to hope that the Dark Lord doesn't learn anything about me from Potter...though it does seem that he has not intentionally attempted to break into his mind in well over a year, and I have the sense that he himself does not dream. He certainly rarely sleeps. Whatever he has done to himself, his body is not human."

"It will be over soon, Severus, if you are right about the attack on Hogwarts. You will not have to continue hiding everything from him for very much longer."

Severus nodded. He dreaded that day, and yet he longed for the end of it all. To die would be liberation, final liberation. Until then, he would do what he must.

Minerva stood. "Be careful tonight, Severus."

"Of course."

At the door, Minerva turned back. "Please come see me immediately when you return. I will have your potion for you in the office, if you need it."

Severus nodded, lifted the wards, and watched her leave.

He would do and not think. He would do what was necessary. He would not anticipate. He would simply do what he had to do when he had to do it. Like the man who walks out unaided to stand before the firing squad, he would take one step after another. He would not anticipate . . .

Severus took the cup of potion from Minerva and swallowed it down. He waited for the tremors to subside as the potion took effect. If he were subject to *Cruciatus* very many more times, he would have a tremor that would never leave. It didn't matter. A permanent tremor for him would only last a few weeks, if that.

"I take it he was upset when he saw the diadem," Minerva said.

"Enraged," Severus said, his voice still trembling from the after-effects of the *Crucio* despite the potion. "Utterly furious. He wants me to bring him Kreacher immediately. I convinced him that I need at least one more day, but that I was making progress on determining a potion that would meet his needs ...and he has moved that up, too. He wants it by Saturday. I believe the attack on Azkaban will be sometime on Sunday. Either very early that morning or late that night, possibly early Monday morning, but most likely very early Sunday morning."

"Did he believe that you found the diadem as it was?" Minerva asked.

Severus nodded. "He did subject me to intensive Legilimency in between bouts of *Crucio*, trying to break down any Occlumency I might be practising." He smirked. "The Dark Lord believed he saw all that there was to see, and he only saw exactly what I wanted him to."

"Well done," Robbie said softly. "Well done, indeed."

"Did he ask about the wards again?" Minerva asked.

Severus shook his head. "But we discussed them only two days ago, and I believe he was more upset about the cup and the diadem tonight. Too upset to harass me about the wards again. I am still puzzled by the sense I get from him that he wants to enter the Hogwarts grounds by himself, undetected, prior to the actual attack. He has questioned me about the possibility of such a thing, but he would be vulnerable, I would think, and I do not know what he believes he could achieve...unless he plans to kill me at that time, but then I wouldn't be able to drop the wards and let the Death Eaters onto the grounds. I had believed that he wanted to search for the diadem, but he had me do that."

"The Headmaster's tomb," Robbie said. "He no doubt wishes to retrieve the ring and wand."

"He knows the ring was broken, that the Headmaster was fatally cursed when the Horcrux was destroyed...unless he still believes its stone to be one of those Hallows. He has not mentioned anything to me related to that search in at least two months. I believed he had abandoned it."

"The ring might interest him mildly for that reason," Robbie replied. "But I believe he is more interested in taking the wand that was buried with the Headmaster's body. He has no doubt concluded, just as Uncle Albus had planned, that that wand is one of the Hallows. He will believe that he can defeat Harry...or anyone...with it, that he will be invincible."

"He wants to desecrate the Headmaster's tomb to steal his wand?" An expression of distaste crossed Severus's face. "I do not like that."

"It was a part of Uncle Albus's plan, Professor. It is why he wished to be entombed on the grounds and why he desired to have the wand placed within the tomb. Do not concern yourself with worries about the grave. It was always intended to be so."

"And the wand? It is not one of these Hallows, but is it possible that it could enhance the Dark Lord's power? Was there something special about it?"

Minerva shook her head. "No. It was Albus's secondary wand. Perfectly serviceable, something he obtained after the war with Grindelwald because his other secondary wand had been broken some months before, but it has no special properties. Albus's primary wand is quite secure. That one does have special properties, but none which could be turned to use by the little toe-rag, and Albus was its original owner."

"If the Dark Lord believes that the Headmaster was buried with Grindelwald's wand and that wand is the Deathstick, is any of that true?"

"Oh, no," Minerva replied. "Albus presented Grindelwald's wand to the Ministry after the war. There were some plans to display it at one time, but then Albus dissuaded them, saying that it should not become a kind of holy relic, a focus of pilgrimage or inspiration for other Dark Wizards. Perhaps someday, in the correct context, it could be displayed. The one in the grave is of mistletoe and dragon heartstring."

"Not even the proper materials," Severus said with a grimace. "He will know it is not the Deathstick. He will know that the clues I fed him were so much flim-flam."

"He will not know it immediately," Minerva said. "We do know someone with a wand with a Thestral hair core, but its wood is ivy and she is still using it. It seemed pointless to try to replicate the one from legend if we could not do so exactly. He may never discover its materials if events move quickly enough. What he may discover is that it does not function very well for him."

"The Dark Lord has had Ollivander make him three different wands, but he has not been pleased with any of them. Poor wretch," Severus said, thinking of the wandmaker, his filthy clothes hanging off his shrunken body. "The Dark Lord wanted me to steal one of Fawkes' tail feathers, but by the time he ordered me to do it, the Headmaster was dead and Fawkes was no longer available."

"Clever...make a third wand, and the brother effect dilutes, becoming insignificant," Minerva said with a nod.

"I was unaware that you knew so much about wandlore," Severus said questioningly.

"I made something of a study of it when I was younger...before you were even born," Minerva replied with a smile.

The three looked up, distracted from their conversation by the appearance of a fox Patronus flying through the window. The Patronus flew straight to Minerva and seemed to fly into her ear, disappearing as it did. Minerva closed her eyes for a moment, wincing slightly, but then she opened her eyes and looked at Robbie.

"He has Xenophilius Lovegood. The Dark Mark was cast above his house a half hour ago and Lovegood is nowhere to be found."

Severus reacted first, sitting up straighter. "What? I had no information about this..."

"If Riddle has not pursued any questions regarding the Deathly Hallows with you," Robbie said, "that does not signify that he has abandoned the quest. He may have feared that you would realise what he was looking for and begin the search yourself. He may underestimate you, but he is not so blind as to believe you truly unintelligent. It is likely that when speaking with you, he has deliberately avoided any topic touching on the Hallows."

"But why Lovegood?" Severus asked. "I never mentioned him."

"Riddle is aware that his daughter is Harry's companion and that they have been seeking the Hallows," Robbie replied. "It is common knowledge that Xenophilius is a great believer in many things that the rest of the wizarding world believes to be mere fantasy or legend. It may be that Riddle has determined that Xenophilius is their source for information. Harry obtained some of the information from Miss Granger, but most of it from Miss Lovegood. Miss Granger was supposed to convince Harry that the Hallows were a fraud. Uncle Albus was unaware at the time he told Harry of the original legend that Harry would become so focussed on the Hallows that he would give more credence to Miss Lovegood's belief than to Miss Granger's."

"Lovegood had those faked documents," Minerva pointed out. "If Potter saw them, that, combined with Lovegood's own conviction, could be sufficient for him to believe that Miss Granger was incorrect. And I do believe that some of the hints that Albus gave him just a few weeks before he died were enough to make Potter believe that Miss Granger was wrong."

"I...I believe that Uncle Albus only told him that Riddle was seeking them and what Riddle believed they could do for him. I do not believe that Uncle Albus wished Harry to believe that he himself believed in their existence or their power," Robbie said.

"That is neither here nor there," Severus said impatiently. "The Dark Lord now has Lovegood, and likely his papers, as well. I do not know what to make of it."

"Perhaps he only wishes to obtain confirmation of what he already knows, or to discover what it is that Xenophilius has told Harry and his daughter," Robbie said.

"Or," said Minerva, "the toe-rag wants to confirm whatever it is he believes about the wand in Albus's tomb."

"I wish Albus were here," Severus whispered. "He would know what this means and what to do."

"We will do the best we can," Minerva said.

Severus looked up and met her eyes. "What if he can tell that Lovegood has had his memory altered? That would tip him off that everything I have told him has been planted, too. He could simply kill me. He certainly will if he believes that I knew of the hoax."

"Not if he wants you to lower the wards," Minerva said.

Severus shook his head. "If he believes me a traitor, why would he believe I would allow him access to the grounds? He could believe that my usefulness is at an end. With sufficient brute force, he could enter the grounds through the Forbidden Forest. The wards are weakest there, and he knows it. It is how he has gotten people onto the grounds before. They just walk in."

"It is one thing for one or two people to get in that way and quite another to bring in enough to mount an attack. The Forest itself provides a barrier on both sides of the wards," Minerva replied.

"They could fly in...there is no protection against invaders on broomsticks, and he himself does not even require a broomstick, nor do some of his inner circle," Severus said with some agitation. "They only need me because the Dark Lord wants the Anti-Apparition wards down. Apparating in will add to the surprise and they will not be as vulnerable as they would be if they flew in, but they could nonetheless easily invade from the air. On a moonless night, an aerial invasion could be as much of a success as one with the wards dropped."

"One must not only be able to invade, Professor," Robbie said softly. "One must also have a clear route for retreat, even if just to regroup, or one can find oneself trapped. Having the Anti-Apparition wards fall would allow that. It would also allow them to Apparate from place-to-place on the grounds or in the castle. Quite an advantage for them if you were really to break the wards. And an advantage for us if you do drop them as we have planned, since we will be able to raise them again. Riddle's understanding of Hogwarts warding is very rudimentary, and it is good that it has remained so."

"But the fact remains that if he does not believe that I will help him with the wards, he will kill me immediately," Severus sighed. "But I suppose that at this point, whether my death occurs tomorrow or after the attack on Hogwarts matters little. I have accomplished almost all that is required of me."

"I do not believe that Riddle will be able to discern that Lovegood has had his memory altered, but if you can discover where he is being held, the Order can attempt a rescue, for both your sakes," Robbie said. "Your life is worth more to us than simply your value to us as a spy, Professor."

"My life is nonetheless forfeit. There will come a moment when he knows with complete clarity that I have been a traitor all along, and he will kill me."

"Not yet, though, Severus, and we will try to avoid it altogether," Minerva said. She looked over at Robbie. "We should move up the Order meeting. Tomorrow night is too soon, but I think Friday night. Severus can deliver Kreacher tomorrow and learn what he can, then report on it at the meeting."

"I think we should meet tomorrow night, very late," Robbie said. "Professor Snape can come directly from his meeting with Riddle if he kidnaps Kreacher immediately after his last class."

Severus felt a peculiar sense of hysteria creeping up on him. Waiting for his own murder. Planning a kidnapping around Hogwarts classes. Delivering deadly poisons on the weekends. It was all so absurd. So pointless. Minerva and Robbie stared at Severus in alarm as he began to laugh, choking laughter mingled with tears.

"Must not neglect my classes, now! Couldn't have that!" Severus said, gasping. "I should just kill them all, one class after another. They step into my classroom and I mow them all down. That is what I will be doing, letting him into Hogwarts. I should just poison everyone's pumpkin juice, have a Great Hall filled with corpses. *Avada Kedavra* my colleagues as they sit down to eat. Let poison gases fill Slytherin House, drown the Hufflepuffs in their warren. . . ." His words and laughter subsided as he held his head in his hands and tried to regain control of himself, his breath still coming in shaky gasps.

Robbie and Minerva looked at each other. Robbie got up and went upstairs to Minerva's suite. Minerva pulled her chair closer to Severus's. She put her hand on his shoulder.

"It is hard," Minerva said softly. "I am a Headmistress of a school that I know will be the primary target of an attack by Death Eaters. I do not close the school. I have worked here and loved the students here for more than forty years. But I look at all I love in the wizarding world and know that it cannot be saved by doing what would ordinarily be the right thing. We have plans in place to shelter the younger students, bring them into the tunnels, take them into Hogsmeade, if it is safe there, but even if that plan works perfectly to save them all from the attack, we must prevail in the fight or they will still suffer, and many will suffer greatly, and any who are Muggle-born will suffer most...yet we continue to admit and educate the Muggle-borns just as we always have. What we are doing is almost impossible. To run a school as though that was all we were doing, and then at night, plot to defeat a Dark Wizard using methods that are at odds with what we do during the day. But we must. We did not choose that the little toe-rag become fixated on Hogwarts and on Potter...we did not create his belief that Harry would return here to defend the school but that Harry would not emerge to defend the Ministry or any other location. That is what we are given. We must use it against him. Find a way of turning it all in our favour."

Severus, now more in command of himself, nodded. He looked up just as Robbie came back down the stairs.

Robbie poured out a small spoonful of a pearlescent purple potion. "Here, take this. You will feel better," he said softly, extending the spoon toward Severus.

"Draught of Peace?" Severus asked.

Robbie nodded.

"Where did you obtain it?"

"I brewed it some time ago," Robbie replied.

"Have you administered it to anyone else?"

"One dose, yes," Robbie said with a nod.

"I presume the person did not die or you would have discarded it," Severus said. "Nonetheless, I do not require a potion."

"You may not require it, Severus," Minerva said, "but you may be more comfortable. The stress you are under is unimaginable. Any other wizard would have crumbled already. Just take one dose. It will help you sleep, too. If it makes any difference to you, he brewed it for me. I only took the one dose, but it helped me to regain my equilibrium."

Severus took the spoon and swallowed the potion. Within moments, he felt its effect. He closed his eyes, savouring the sensation that flowed through him. Perhaps this was what death would be like. His stomach no longer felt twisted in a knot, he could feel the tension in his chest dissolve, his muscles relaxed, but best of all, he had a sense of mild euphoria, that all was well, that all was as it should be. Everything made sense and everything was all right. He was happy and well. His euphoria grew.

Severus opened his eyes. "You should not have given the potion to me."

"Why not?"

"I am a Potions master. I can brew it myself. I do not need the temptation." His eyes fixed on the bottle. "I could take it over and over again. It's very nice. Nicer and nicer."

"And as a Potions master," Robbie replied, "you also know that the effect diminishes if you take it repeatedly, and you have to increase the dose until finally it is no longer effective at all, and then you will feel worse than you felt before you took the very first dose."

"But right now, it is very . . ." Severus took in a deep breath and let it out slowly, a slight smile on his face. "It is lovely. Mmm. Lovely."

"Good," Minerva said. "Do you think you can concentrate?"

Severus looked at her with a smile on his lips. "I can always concentrate on you, Minerva."

She looked at him for a moment, then she nodded and said, "All right. Here is the plan. Severus, you will deliver Kreacher tomorrow night. Robbie, we will move up the meeting, but only to Friday evening. Severus needs to be able to take his time tomorrow and not rush to the Order meeting. I also want Severus to teach Miss Granger how to send and receive Patronus messages tomorrow evening...it is long overdue. I taught Potter today and he will teach Weasley and Lovegood. And although it might be instructive for others in the Order to see Severus after one of his meetings with the toe-rag before the benefit of his antispasmodic potion, I believe we should allow him to retain his privacy with regard to that. At the Order meeting, we will discuss what Severus manages to learn about Lovegood and anything he knows or believes about the attacks on Hogwarts and the Ministry. We will inform only a few of them about the attack on Azkaban and our role in it. Weasley, Shackbolt, Tonks, and Remus. I do not feel comfortable divulging it to anyone else, including Moody. Any comments?"

"I would share the information on the attack on Azakaban with no one but Weasley, but if you wish to discuss it with the others, that is your decision," Robbie said. "I also think that we should ask Harry to attend the meeting. It is important that he knows what the Order knows right now, particularly about the attack on Hogwarts and our preparations for it."

"It all sounds perfect to me, Minerva," Severus said, a relaxed smile on his face. "Completely perfect."

Minerva hesitated, then she said, "I would like to see you in the morning...come to me before breakfast. I would like your opinion uninfluenced by the Draught of Peace."

"Of course, Minerva," Severus replied placidly. "But you are always utter perfection. You will be just as perfect in the morning."

"Now, do you think you can restore your memories from the Pensieve in your condition, or do you want to wait until morning?" Minerva asked him.

"Leave 'em there till after I give the Dark Lord the poison." Severus laughed, almost a giggle. "Wish I could really give him the poison. If he's human enough to be poisoned. He's one ugly son of a Crup. Revolting. D'you know that Bella worships the ground he walks on? She always has. He used to be handsome. Now he's repulsive. Inhuman. He might not even have a dick anymore. But Bella still finds him attractive. I think she likes him more, in fact. Every time he punishes someone, you can see her excitement. I'm surprised she doesn't start masturbating right there in front of everyone. When he was punishing me after the failed raid, you should have seen her face. She must have really enjoyed it when he crushed my testicles, though by that time, I couldn't see anything. Wonder how she'd like to see her Dark Lord die a painful death, in the same agony he deals to others. Give him some awful poison to kill the snake in him, watch him wriggle and die slowly." Severus laughed again. "I'd like to see that. And to see the expression in his eyes when he knew that he was dying. When he knew I had killed him. I would like that. That is a happy thought." Severus gazed glassy-eyed into space, smiling as he imagined murdering his false master.

Minerva took in a deep breath. "Robbie, would you see Severus down to his rooms? Severus, will you remember to come see me before breakfast?"

"Of course I will," Severus said. "Come on, Robbie. I'll show you my secret hidey place. Do you have a secret hidey place? I put your poison potion in my hidey place. It's a very clever hidey place. You'll like it."

"Well, if you want it to stay secret, son, you might not want to show it to anyone," Robbie said kindly as he took Severus's arm. "I am impressed, though. You truly are clever to have a secret hidey place here in the castle."

"Yes, I am, very clever," Severus agreed with a happy nod. "Good night, Minerva!"

"Good night, Severus. Sleep well," Minerva said. "Robbie, did you give him too much potion?"

"I apparently failed to fully account for his depleted physical condition, so perhaps it was a little too much. But he will be fine," Robbie replied.

"Yes, I will be fine, Minerva! Don't you worry about me!" Severus added cheerfully. "I'll be fine right up until the Dark Lord kills me, and then I'll be even better. So don't worry!"

Minerva shook her head as she watched Robbie guide Severus out the door to the moving staircase, grief in her heart. The potion was well-intended, and Severus had taken it willingly, but she doubted that he would enjoy remembering his behaviour in the morning. Still, it was better than the almost hysterical state he'd been in earlier. She hoped that he could withstand just a little more. Just a little longer, Severus, she thought. Just a little longer.

Severus Apparated into a stand of trees just outside of Hogwarts gates. He looked around him, listening carefully. He heard nothing but the whispers of the night. He bent and deposited his burden on the bed of dry pine needles, then he knelt and waved his wand, and the bonds that held his prisoner curled into a tight bundle vanished. He carefully straightened Kreacher's legs, but the house-elf gave no sign of awareness, his head lolling back, small muscles throughout his body twitching.

Severus removed his cloak and wrapped the house-elf in it so not even a hair was visible, then he picked up the creature and stood. He opened the gate, closed it behind him, then walked up to the castle, carrying Kreacher over one shoulder. The house-elf was not heavy, but by the time Severus reached his dungeon rooms, he was tired from exerting his overtaxed body.

He laid Kreacher on the couch and unwrapped him, tossing his cloak on the chair behind him. The house-elf's eyes fluttered open, then closed again.

"Stay here. Do not attempt to move," Severus said, though he believed that the words were unnecessary.

He returned a minute later. He put his arm under Kreacher's shoulders and lifted him, moving him to recline against the cushions at the end of the sofa. Kreacher's eyes were half-open and his breathing was weak.

"I have not made a study of house-elves or their physiology," Severus said as he uncorked a bottle, "but I do not believe that this will hurt you and I hope that it will help. It is very hot going down. Do not choke on it."

Severus tilted the house-elf's head, one hand behind his neck at the base of his skull, and slowly poured some of the thick potion into his mouth. Kreacher grimaced involuntarily and jerked away from the bottle, but Severus held his head firmly. He waited a moment, then poured more potion between Kreacher's lips. Severus watched the house-elf for a few minutes. It seemed the twitches and spasms were subsiding, so he poured just a little more potion into the house-elf's mouth.

Five minutes later, Kreacher opened his eyes fully and looked at Severus. His eyes were dull and blank. He had been surly but cooperative when Severus had summoned him to his rooms a few hours before, and he had allowed Severus to Stun him. Once at Malfoy Manor, he had performed convincingly. Even when Bella first cosseted him and then punished him, he remained the subservient but unpleasant house-elf that Bella and the Dark Lord expected to see, and even under the *Crucio*, he told the same story to them that he had before, and he added nothing that he should not have.

"Is there any elixir that would speed your recovery further?" Severus asked.

Kreacher seemed to snarl slightly, but he said, "Butterbeer."

Severus doubted that Butterbeer would speed the house-elf's recovery, but if it was what he wanted, he would not deny the pathetic creature.

Severus went over to his fireplace, lit a small fire, barely a spark, and tossed in some Floo Powder. He stuck his head in the fireplace and called for the Headmistress's Office. When Minerva appeared, he said, "We have returned. He wants Butterbeer."

Minerva nodded and disappeared. Severus pulled his head from the fireplace and went back over to the couch and stood looking down at the house-elf, whose muscles still rippled occasionally, but who otherwise looked much recovered. A minute later, Minerva Flooed through, a bottle of Butterbeer in her hand. Severus took it from her and uncapped it.

"Sit up and you can drink your Butterbeer," Severus said.

Kreacher opened his eyes again, then he swung his legs around so that he was sitting on the edge of the couch, his feet dangling. Severus held out the bottle and Kreacher beckoned with a finger. The bottle floated from Severus's hand into his own. He drank thirstily, the bottle not leaving his lips until he had drained the last drop.

"How are you?" Minerva asked, addressing Kreacher.

"Kreacher be's Kreacher," he replied sullenly.

"Are you saying that you are recovered?" she asked.

Kreacher looked at his toes.

Minerva sighed and looked at Severus. "I see you are both alive and here. May I presume that it went as planned?"

Severus nodded shortly. "Unpleasantly so, but better than I had expected."

Minerva turned back to Kreacher, who still appeared to be examining his toes. "I will inform your master that you have performed well. You have been an excellent and brave house-elf and you served your master as he required. I will see that he knows that."

Kreacher raised his eyes briefly. He nodded, then a peculiarly wicked expression crept across his face. "Mistress Bella doesn't know her master is a filthy half-blood." A wheezy, rusty, high-pitched, chirping laugh squeezed itself from the house-elf's throat.

"If you feel sufficiently recovered, you may return to your duties in the kitchens and continue to behave just as your master, Harry Potter, requires of you," Minerva said.

Kreacher raised his hand, snapped his fingers, and before the sound had reached their ears, he was gone. As soon as he was, Severus let out a tired breath and sat down on the couch. Minerva sat beside him.

"You said that it went better than expected," Minerva said questioningly.

Severus nodded. "Hubris is a dangerous trait for the one who has it. Both Bella and the Dark Lord are so convinced of the inferiority of house-elves and of Kreacher's original blood-tie to the Black family that they did not test his sincerity or his truthfulness in any meaningful way. They did *Crucio* him to see whether he would tell the same story he had revealed when Bella first questioned him, but his story did not waver. He was even clever enough not to tell it in precisely the same words. It did not sound rehearsed. Of course, it may not have been cleverness, but it was convincing. I was required to place pressure on him, to instill fear of what I might do to him if he were to tell anyone where we had been, and that meant casting the *Crucio* on him again, but I did not cast it forcefully."

"And you?" Minerva asked.

"The Dark Lord pretended to be pleased...that is to say, he was pleased that I had brought Kreacher to him, although he did not like what he learned, and he pretended to be pleased with me personally. There were no dubious 'rewards' this time, only insincere words of praise and encouragement for me to continue to perform well for him and not fail him. I believe he thought the lack of torture was reward enough," Severus replied.

"And his reaction to Kreacher's story?"

"I am to go to headquarters and search for the locket. I told him that because I need to work on the potion for him and get that to him on Saturday, I would search for it on Sunday. He was unperturbed by that. I believe he has some other plans, but I do not know what they may be," Severus said. "I will go to Grimmauld Place on Sunday and search. I am not going to expend much time on it, however. I will simply manipulate my memories so that it appears that I searched fruitlessly for hours. We will need to inform Potter that he and his friends will need to clear out while I am there and remove anything that I might see that indicates they are staying there, and I will remove any other memories that connect them with the house before I return to the Dark Lord. I do not want any threads that might lead to some memory I did not think to remove, however, so I must not see anything that might indicate they are living there."

Minerva nodded. "We can speak with Potter about that at the meeting tomorrow night...or I suppose it is tonight already. We will arrive early...you, Hermione, Robbie, and I will all go together. We will Disapparate from a point in the Forbidden Forest rather than from outside the gates."

Severus nodded.

"Miss Granger said that your lesson was effective and she now can send Patronus messages."

Severus nodded again, but frowned. "I need to inform you . . ." He swallowed nervously. "I must inform you that the shape of my Patronus has changed."

"Changed? When? To what?"

"I do not know when. I have not cast a Patronus for more than a year. I only ever used it to communicate with the Headmaster and never cast it in the presence of others." He raised his eyes to meet hers. "It is not the easiest spell for me to cast, in any case. I did wonder whether I would be able to do it this evening when I demonstrated it to Hermione. The first one was indistinct, like a wisp of smoke, and I did not immediately notice the change, but when I cast the second, it was almost fully corporeal and it clearly was no longer a doe."

"What was it? If ever you send me a message, I must know," Minerva said.

"It was some kind of cat. A large cat." At her raised eyebrows, he added, "It was not a tabby. It is unlikely to become confused with your Patronus."

"Cast one now," Minerva directed.

Severus did not stand, but merely took a breath, closed his eyes a moment, tried to conjure a happy memory, a happy moment, and Hermione's smile when they took their first "brain holiday" flashed through his mind. He took hold of the memory, opened his eyes, raised his wand, and cast.

"*Expecto Patronum!*"

To say that the Patronus was a cat would be like calling a massive wild boar a little piglet. Severus directed it around the room, then it zoomed toward Minerva, its jaws open, its large fangs exposed, and it flew into her ear.

Minerva smiled slightly. "Interesting message, Severus. 'The greatest Slytherin will never be recognised.'"

Severus shrugged. "If one is truly accomplished and cunning, one's Slytherin nature will be obscured. Perhaps by taking the form of a cat." Perhaps by dying a shameful death.

"More of a jaguar, I would say. Some type of panther, anyway," Minerva said. "I will inform Robbie in case you need to send him a message."

"I would not. I would send one only to you."

"If I am dead or otherwise unavailable, you may have to," Minerva replied.

"What is his Patronus?" Severus asked, ignoring Minerva's statement.

"Some kind of bird, I think," Minerva said. "I have not seen him cast one in a long time."

"It is unsafe to send me messages, anyway," Severus said. "The company I keep would be curious, to say the least. Who sent the message yesterday? The fox?"

"Moody."

Severus nodded in acknowledgement. He was not looking forward to seeing the Auror at the Order meeting. Perhaps Moody might manage to keep a civil tongue in his head, at least.

"Good night, Severus. You did well tonight. Try to sleep. You look worn out."

"Twenty-hour days do not invigorate," he replied. "Good night, Minerva."

When she had left, Severus left his rooms and went to his office. He waved his wand, unwarding his private Potions cabinet. He reached behind some desiccated Flesh-Eating Slug larvae and felt for a squat, globular bottle. He removed it, re-warded the cabinet, closed up his office, and returned to his rooms.

Before he got into bed, Severus placed the potion bottle on his bedside stand next to his watch.

Severus quietly raged through the corridors of Hogwarts. His mood had been on edge all day, not improved by the Invigilatus Potion he had taken when he'd woken at five-thirty after three hours sleep and again at noon before he went to lunch. But he was awake and his muscles no longer felt leaden, and that was all he wanted from the potion. He dreaded going to the Order meeting that night...very likely his last meeting before the end, and that provided a slight consolation...but he hated it, what Minerva would say, what he would be required to report, the eyes of the other Order members on him, Potter's eyes this time, too. Lily's eyes, accusing him, pitying him, despising him. Gods, at least when he was dead, he would never have to look into those eyes again. Wherever he was going after death, he doubted that Potter would ever follow and Lily certainly was not there.

He rounded a corner and saw Nott flick his wand. Severus's eyes moved to the object of the spell. Longbottom. The bottom of his book bag disappeared. All of his books and what appeared to be a crock of dirt fell to the floor with a crash. Neville turned, seeking his tormenters. Nott and his friends now had their backs to him, apparently deep in conversation. The young man knelt and began to pick up his books. He blinked hard as he tried to gather the shards of his crock and the dirt that had scattered.

"Longbottom!" Snape barked. "What are you doing! What is this mess?"

"My...my bag, sir..."

"Don't you know how to cast a *Reparo* yet?"

"No magic in the hallways, sir," Neville said softly.

Severus narrowed his eyes. "I have not known a Gryffindor yet who thought that rule applied to them. You are coming with me, Longbottom!" Severus flicked his wand. The shards gathered themselves together, the crock made whole again. Another flick and all of the dirt was packed into the crock.

"Pick it all up! Now!" Severus was aware of the amusement of the Slytherins behind him.

Neville scrambled to pick up the books and the crock. His bag was useless as the bottom had entirely vanished, so he held the books in his arms in front of him, the crock carefully balanced on top and held in place by his chin.

Severus began walking at a fast clip toward the staircase. "Keep up, Longbottom!"

When they'd gone down a half a flight and reached a landing, Severus turned, waved his wand, and restored the bag. "Put the books in it! Fast! I don't want to have to wait for you when you trip over your shoelaces."

Neville put his books back in the bag, but seeming not to entirely trust it, he held his crock of dirt cradled to his chest. Severus sneered.

Neville trotted behind Severus all of the way to the Potions masters' office. When they got there, Severus slammed the door behind them, then sealed it and cast an Imperturbable.

"Sit." Severus pointed at a chair.

Neville sat.

Severus took his place behind his desk and stared at the young wizard for a long moment. Neville's Adam's apple bobbed as he swallowed nervously.

"Do you think that I am evil? Do you believe that I am your greatest nightmare, Longbottom? Do you truly fear me?" Severus asked, his voice low and dark. "If you do, then you are a greater fool than I ever took you for. I am a nasty, miserable bastard. I am a killer and I am cruel. But I should not be your greatest nightmare, Longbottom. I know about your Boggart. You should hope to everything that any Gryffindor holds sacred that I am no longer your Boggart. If I am, there is no hope for you." Severus paused. Neville's eyes were large, but he was attempting to hold his fear in check, and he still held the crock of dirt in front of him.

"What's in the urn, Longbottom? The remains of one of your dearly beloved?" Severus asked with a sneer.

Neville shook his head. "Charmed earth from a river delta in Africa," he replied seriously. He glanced down at the crock. "I hope I haven't damaged it. It's for a project for Professor Sprout."

Snape stared. "You have a toad, do you not?"

Neville nodded.

"What was that?"

"Yes, sir."

"Fond of the amphibian?"

"He's my pet. I've had him for years," Neville said softly.

"Do you remember disembowelling horned toads for me, Longbottom?" Severus asked.

Neville nodded. "Yes, sir," he added when Snape stared at him, awaiting a verbal response.

Severus smirked. "At the time, I found it amusing. Very amusing." He detected no change in Neville's expression at that admission. "I am not a nice man, but I should not be your Boggart. There are far worse things that you will confront. Remember those lizards, Longbottom. Disembowelling them may have served my amusement and your torment, but you must remember them. If you can disembowel horned toads, you can do worse. Do what you must. One of my students told me of a rumour that something will happen here at Hogwarts. I do not put credence in rumours and I do not spread them, but if something happens, remember the toads and do what you must. Do not be a victim, Longbottom."

A small muscle beneath Neville's right eye had begun to twitch and his grip on the crock had tightened.

Severus waved his wand and in one sweep, he lifted the wards. "Get out. And if you tell anyone what I have said, you may discover new reasons to fear me."

Neville nodded, picked up his bag, and scuttled toward the door, his pot of earth hugged to his chest. At the door he paused, one hand on the door knob. He turned very slowly, he looked at Snape, and his expression changed, passing from nervous apprehension to puzzlement to dawning realisation.

"Thank you, sir," he whispered, then before Snape could reply, he was out the door, pulling it to but not latching it in his haste, and Severus heard Neville's hurried footsteps fade as he rushed to leave the dungeons behind.

Severus was thankful when Minerva declared an end to the meeting. She asked Arthur, Shackbolt, Lupin, and Tonks to remain for a few minutes. Severus pushed away from the table, his cup of tea, untouched, sloshing into its saucer. He looked at no one as he turned to leave the kitchen, but he was aware that Hermione was watching him as she stood and that Moody was lingering, hoping, no doubt, to be invited to remain and hear what was being shared with the other four. Severus had very deliberately avoided looking at the old Auror throughout the meeting, even when Moody spoke. He was nothing. He was a void, unworthy of his attention. Severus heard and stored away every word Moody said, but wore an expression of supreme boredom, as though he were asleep with his eyes open.

Severus had agreed to wait in the library for Minerva and Crouch. Hermione would be Apparating back with them, and he anticipated that she would wait with him. Before the meeting, they had spoken with Potter, Weasley, and Lovegood, and they had agreed to vacate Grimmauld Place on Sunday. All three had attended the full Order meeting. Lovegood's eyes were reddened from crying, but she appeared otherwise composed and said nothing. Of the three, only Harry spoke, though he declined to answer any questions from anyone on any topic. He had cooperated with Minerva earlier, though, and that was sufficient for Severus's satisfaction.

Severus entered the library and closed the door behind him. He did not wish to see anyone else. He wanted to return to Hogwarts and sleep. He hadn't dared risk another dose of Invigilatus before the meeting, and he felt shaky and tired.

He sat down in a wingback chair and waited for Hermione, trying to keep his eyes open. His start when the door opened indicated to him that he had begun to fall asleep despite himself. On seeing who entered, he did nothing but look away, a clear sign of his fatigue. The door closed.

"Snape."

"Potter."

"You look like shit."

"Imaginative vocabulary, Potter. If you are looking for Miss Granger, she is not here. I do not know where she is, but if you find her, remind her that she must not keep the Headmistress waiting."

"I sent her to talk to Ron and Luna." Harry sat down on the couch.

"What do you want?"

"To thank you for looking after Kreacher." Minerva had told him that Severus had brought the house-elf back safely, taken him to his rooms, and dosed him with potions. Severus would have preferred that she had simply said that he had returned the house-elf to Hogwarts.

Severus shrugged.

"I saw you," Harry said softly. "Last weekend. Friday night. What he did to you. When I woke up, I did not know whether you were alive or dead."

"Sorry if you were disappointed, Potter."

"You keep going back."

"Brilliant observation," Severus said with a sneer.

Harry looked at his shoes a moment, then he looked up at Severus, examining his face as if he had never seen it before and never was anything so fascinating.

Severus was uncomfortable. "What is it?"

"Never thought I'd say this, but . . ." Harry seemed to bite his lower lip, and he held himself stiffly, as though he didn't dare even breathe, then he said softly, "If you can do that, I can do what I have to do. I've been . . . afraid. I haven't told anyone. Not afraid of what would happen to me in the end, but afraid that I couldn't go through with it. I think I know . . . Do you know I . . . I don't know how I can be the one to survive, but I can't allow us both to live, I figured out that much, and he must be defeated. That's why I hoped the legend of the Hallows was true, that they might help me survive. But I've been thinking all week about you, Snape, about you and your bravery. If you can do that, keep going back, I will find the courage, too."

Severus nodded. "I have no doubt of that. You always act when you believe it necessary. It is your greatest weakness and your greatest strength."

Harry laughed. "Hermione told me you had said something like that to her about me, but I didn't believe her. She was in one of her *Professor Snape, Harry!* moods."

"You are going to try to go after Lovegood, aren't you?" Severus asked.

"Professor McGonagall said that the Order would attempt something next week," Harry replied.

"You are not good at evasion, Potter. You should stick to outright lies." Severus frowned wearily. "If you do it, bring others with you...the three of you alone will achieve nothing but your premature deaths. And if you do defy McGonagall and Arthur Weasley's express wishes, you should do so on Sunday morning. Very early. Sometime after midnight but well before dawn."

"Are you saying we should do it?" Harry asked sceptically.

"No. Simply that if you are going to blunder in, I believe that would be the best time. If other events unfold as I believe they will, the Malfoy Manor will be only lightly guarded that night. Of course, getting through the wards will be difficult, if not impossible. They supposedly have wards that detect Muggle-borns, but they fool themselves." Severus snorted. "That is not possible. The only way to learn whether a witch or wizard is Muggle-born is to learn who their parents are. Idiots."

Harry nodded. "Not that we would do anything the Order disapproved of, but hypothetically, as Hermione might say, if someone did mount a rescue, would there be a better or a worse way to approach the house?"

"The front door. One person, possibly two, if you have enough, to the front door as the others approach from the garden at the rear," Severus said. "There is a large Muggle estate bordering Malfoy's to the south. A small group flying in on broomsticks...Disillusioned...could come from the south. You can fly in quite low from the front, but the wards in back extend much higher. Good brooms should be able to manage it, though. There are other trip wards at intervals and more at each entrance. I suggest that the two of you at the front...who will be accosted before they reach the door...act as though they have some reason for being there, although at that hour, no ruse will buy very much time, but they might be able to distract them for a few minutes from becoming aware that anyone is at the back of the house. And, hypothetically speaking, if anyone should attempt such a raid, they might wish to find old Ollivander, too. The poor wretch is being kept in a bedroom on the second floor, in the east wing, in marginally better circumstances than Lovegood, who is in a windowless room in the cellar. There is only one entrance to the cellar, so that will be the riskiest part. Do not get trapped down there or you will be joining Lovegood, and you will be killed. Don't get yourself killed, Potter. You need to be at Hogwarts at the end."

"If I get myself killed, does it matter where? Or when?"

"It does. You know that. You must confront him at the right time, and you must defeat him, as you say. And there is still the matter of Nagini. Trust the Headmistress's timing. I do not know her full plan, but I believe there is more than either of us know."

"You really do trust her. You do as she asks, whatever it is," Harry said with some wonder in his voice.

"As should you."

There were voices in the hall outside the door.

"Thanks, Snape...*Professor Snape*," Harry said with a cheeky grin.

"Mmph. You remind me too much of your father, Potter. Except for your eyes." A spasm crossed his face. "Just get out and leave me in peace."

The door opened and Moody came in. Severus stared at nothing.

"Good night, Professor."

Severus nodded. "Potter."

Harry left the door open behind him, but Moody closed it. Severus stared at nothing and tried to control his breathing, calm his heartbeat. The old coot might be mad, but not mad enough to curse him right there at headquarters.

"Snape," Moody said, sitting down with a grunt at the other end of the couch from where Harry had sat. He began to rub his leg near the stump. "Gettin' old."

Severus sat and stared at nothing. He was alone in the library.

Moody took his eye out, spat on it, then rubbed it on his shirt. The door opened. Severus almost let out a sigh of relief.

"They're still not done in the kitchen?" Hermione asked.

"Evidently not, Miss Granger," Severus said.

"They should have me in there. Need the advice of an experienced Auror," Moody said. "I'll talk to Tonks after."

"Did you have a good visit with your friends, Miss Granger?" Severus asked solicitously, still ignoring Moody. "Please, have a seat."

Hermione looked slightly puzzled at his tone, but came around to sit in the armchair across from Severus.

"It was all right," Hermione said. "Luna is understandably distressed about her father."

"Understandably," Severus said with a sympathetic nod.

"I think we should go after him soon...tomorrow. No sense in waiting," Moody said.

"I hope that you were able to reassure her about his current condition," Severus said, ignoring Moody.

Hermione blinked. "Yes, er, I think you did that at the meeting." A peculiar expression crossed her face. She stared at Severus as though he suddenly had three heads, then she looked at Moody, and her lips parted, then her eyes widened, and she took in a sharp breath. "You," she whispered.

"Eh? What?" Moody said.

"Miss Granger, shall we go down and see whether the others are done meeting?" Severus said, standing.

She stared at him, then she shook her head slightly as though clearing her vision, but stood. "Yes, sir."

"They'll come for you when they're done," Moody said. "Shouldn't interrupt them."

For the first time that evening, Severus acknowledged Moody's presence. "Oh, Miss Granger and I are already fully briefed. In fact, they may have questions for us. Come, Miss Granger."

"Ah, Snape, I'd wanted a word," Moody said.

Severus looked at Hermione. "Wait for me in the hall."

She nodded. "Yes, sir." She looked back once when she opened the door, concern on her face, but her eyes met Severus's and she nodded once and closed the door quietly behind her.

Severus stood and waited for Moody to speak.

"Yes, Snape. About last week. It was, um, an error," Moody said gruffly.

"What was an error?" Severus asked, implacable.

"That spell I cast."

"Spell?"

"Curse, then. Won't happen again."

Severus swallowed and his jaw worked. He wanted to curse the man into oblivion, what he should have done to begin with. He should have told everyone in the Order that Moody had cursed him in the back when he was trying to save the child from burning to death in a fire, see who they thought the nasty, treacherous wizard was now.

"Aren't you going to say anything?" Moody asked.

"An error. It was an error," Severus said, his eyes boring into Moody.

"I was wrong. I shouldn't have done it. I wouldn't do it again."

Severus felt as though he would choke, but then he heard a voice in his head, one with a mild Scottish burr, talking about forgiveness, apologies, starting fresh, leading a humane life. But he was not Gareth McGonagall. He was Severus Snape, and Severus Snape answered every injury with another of his own. He could not change who he was. A sharp pain seemed to cleave him in two. Time slowed as Moody raised his eyes to meet his.

"See that you don't," Severus said, his voice tight. He turned on his heel and left.

Minerva looked down at Severus with concern. When he hadn't reported to her after she saw him returning to the castle, she waited an hour, then sought him in his rooms. He hadn't responded to her repeated knocks, so she finally let herself in using her Headmistress's password. His Death Eater robe was in a bundle on the floor next to his front door, his cloak in a heap halfway across the sitting room, and one boot was just outside his bedroom door, which was ajar. Just inside the door, she avoided tripping over his other boot.

She could scarcely make out Severus's form on his bed. He had lit no lamps, and only faint light filtered through the curtains over his Charmed window. Minerva lit a wall lamp and crossed the room. Severus was staring up at the ceiling with unseeing eyes.

"Severus," she said softly. "Severus . . ." She caressed his brow, but he did not move. "Severus, did he injure you?"

Minerva drew her wand and cast the few diagnostic spells she knew. No fever, his blood pressure was somewhat high, but not alarmingly so, and his pulse, at eighty, was faster than his normal resting heart rate. He didn't appear to have any swelling anywhere, and no broken bones. Perhaps there was neurological damage. She would have to call for Poppy, perhaps owl Melina.

"Severus, it's Minerva," she said. "I need to know if you were hurt."

Severus's eyes moved to meet hers, then he shook his head slightly and closed his eyes.

"I'll be right back," Minerva said.

A moment later, she returned and put one arm under him and raised his shoulders, then pulled another pillow under his head.

"I brought you something to drink, just some cool water," Minerva said gently. "Here, now, sit up a bit and drink."

When Severus did not respond, she sat and put her arm around him, raising him into a sitting position.

"Drink, Severus."

She held the glass of water to his lips and he drank, though some of the water simply spilled and ran down his chin. Still, he drank, and when she put the glass down on his night stand, he lay back down and rolled slightly away from her, tears in his eyes.

"Severus, what happened?"

"I did as we planned. It went as expected. The Dark Lord was pleased. The attack on Azkaban will take place early tomorrow morning," Severus said, his voice flat and slightly hoarse.

"And you?"

"I am tired. Leave me."

"Did he curse you? Punish you in anyway?"

Severus shook his head. "Go."

"Severus, your report is incomplete," Minerva said.

"It is as complete as required," Severus whispered. "You know all that is necessary."

"No, I don't. I don't know why you are in this state," Minerva replied.

Severus said nothing, merely turning further away from her, his eyes closed, a few tears on his cheeks.

Minerva moved over to the other side of the bed, knelt next to him, and caressed his face, combing some of his hair back.

"Severus, tell me," she whispered. "Tell me what happened. Did he have you test the potion?"

Severus squeezed his eyes more tightly closed and nodded once, seeming to hold his breath.

"Tell me what happened, please," Minerva said.

He shook his head. "I can't," he said hoarsely. "I can't." If he did, he knew that he would never be able to continue. He had to defeat it, beat it into submission, cordon it away with all of the other memories that didn't bear remembering. And right then, all he wanted was to take a double dose of Dreamless Sleep and not think.

"Should I call Poppy?" Minerva asked.

"No," he whispered. "Just go."

Minerva touched his cheek gently once more, then she stood.

"I will be back in a few minutes," Minerva said.

She went into the sitting room, lit a fire, and tossed some Floo Powder into the grate, then called through to her office. Robbie was not there, so she called through to the Hospital Wing. Fortunately, Poppy was in the infirmary.

"Poppy, I need you to find Robbie and have him meet me in Severus's rooms. It's urgent."

Poppy nodded. "I'll find him...do you need me?"

"Not at the moment."

Minerva returned to Severus's bedroom. "I've called for Robbie."

Severus did not respond. Minerva walked over and looked at the potions bottle on his bedside table. It was unlabeled. She uncorked it and waved her hand over it, wafting some of the vapours toward her. She still didn't know what it was. She spilled a little out onto one finger. Coppery. Not Dreamless Sleep or any other sleeping potion she knew of, but she still didn't recognise it.

"What's this potion, Severus? Have you taken any?" Minerva asked, wondering if that could account for his state.

"Invigilatus."

Well, he clearly hadn't taken any recently, although the elevated blood pressure and pulse might be a result of having taken some earlier in the day. She heard a knock at the door and hurried out to the sitting room.

"I don't know what to do," she whispered as soon as the door was closed. "Severus is back, but he isn't speaking. He would only tell me that Riddle was pleased, the attack on Azkaban will be early tomorrow morning, and that he had to test the potion. Can you talk to him?"

Robbie shook his head. "If he won't speak to you, he won't speak to me." He looked at her a moment, then said, "Have him show you the memory. You aren't a Legilimens, but bring him the Pensieve, have him restore his previous memories and put the one from this afternoon in it. If he cannot talk to you, he can show you. He will do that."

Minerva told Severus that she would be back, and a half hour later, she returned, Levitating the Pensieve in front of her. She cleared his night stand, sending its few objects over to the dresser, and set the Pensieve down on it.

Severus sat up. "My watch." He reached for the bedside table.

"I put it on your dresser," Minerva said.

Severus frowned and Summoned the watch, catching it in his right hand.

"The memories you deposited a few days ago are still in here. You need to restore them."

Severus drew his wand, swirled it in the Pensieve and drew out a cluster of memories, then held his wand to his head and they flowed back in. He repeated the process three more times, then he lay back down, his wand held loosely in his right hand, his watch, tightly in his left.

"One more thing, Severus," Minerva said, "I want to see your memory of your meeting this afternoon."

"No, you don't," Severus said.

"I do. Please put it in the Pensieve."

An expression of pain flickered across his face, but Severus sat up, raised his wand to his head, closed his eyes, and drew out a long silvery strand of memory, then let it run into the Pensieve. He stood.

"I am going to shower," Severus said. He started toward the bathroom, then stopped and looked back at Minerva. "You should reconsider viewing the memory, Minerva."

When he had disappeared into his bathroom, Minerva dipped into the Pensieve. The memory proceeded much as she had expected it to, unpleasant, but dull. The toe-rag required the usual grovelling, he pontificated a bit, asked Severus about the potion, and Severus explained that it was a two-part potion, lethal when mixed in a four-to-one ratio, but otherwise completely harmless and inert twenty minutes after it was mixed, and that it would become useless if mixed with alcohol. Severus told him everything but the fact that it would take a Potions master, or at least someone very good with potions, to properly combine the two components.

Voldemort seemed pleased, but sceptical. As expected, he told Severus he needed to see that it worked. He beckoned to an older Death Eater who was standing by the door...Minerva thought he looked vaguely familiar, but she didn't recognise him. None of the Death Eaters, including Severus, were wearing masks. The older Death Eater opened the door and nodded.

A young blond wizard, bound by wide, black bonds, stumbled into the room, Bellatrix Lestrange following him. The wizard fell to the floor, face down.

"Have you enjoyed playing with your toy?" Riddle asked Bella as she came to stand beside him. "I am afraid we will have to find you a new one."

"He was becoming boring, my Lord," Bella said. She licked her lips and looked over at Severus, a hungry expression on her face. "Are we going to have fun with him now?"

"Severus has brought us the potion for tomorrow morning. We will see whether it is adequate to our purpose," Voldemort said, his voice sending shivers down Minerva's spine. Voldemort looked at Severus. "If not . . . we will see what other entertainment you might enjoy."

At Voldemort's nod, Severus called for a glass of water. The older Death Eater stepped out of the room and returned with it a moment later. Severus carefully measured the two potions and mixed them together in a small jar he had brought for the purpose. Less than a teaspoon it looked to be. He poured it into the water, then bowed to Voldemort.

"When you are ready, my lord," Severus said.

Bella went over and kicked the prone wizard. "Get up, you sack of Thestral crap." She kicked him again, and the wizard tried to get to his knees. She pointed her wand at him and cast the Cruciatius, causing the young man to fall to the floor again, writhing in agony. "Get up!" she shouted.

"My lord, in the interests of not wasting the potion and having to mix more, may I suggest speeding this along by removing the bonds?" Severus suggested obsequiously.

Voldemort slashed a finger through the air, and the bonds disappeared. He flicked his finger again, and the wizard was raised to his feet. He swayed, but remained upright. Minerva gasped. Terence Higgs. He had been the Slytherin Seeker. He left school only a few years before. The young wizard's eyes were swollen and his face was discoloured, but his identity was clear.

"This wizard has changed his mind, Severus. Decided he wanted to leave the country. We believe he was planning a holiday in Greece. As if we could not find him there," Voldemort said scornfully. "You may still be useful to us. One last use." Voldemort turned to Severus. "Give him the potion."

Minerva could see Severus looking into the young man's eyes, and she could see the fear on Terence's face. Severus was expressionless. He held out the glass of water.

"Drink!" Severus commanded.

Terence raised a shaking hand, but then dropped it and tried to step back.

"Drink!" Severus said once more.

When the young wizard made no move to take the glass, Severus said, "Drink the water!"

Tears ran down Terence's face, and his mouth silently formed the word, "Please."

Severus stared at the Slytherin, and Voldemort slashed his wand through the air. The boy's mouth was now open, and his head back.

"Just pour it down his throat," Voldemort said. "This is becoming dull."

Severus stepped forward and, without touching the younger wizard, poured the water into his open mouth. Terence's eyes widened momentarily, then he seemed to go slack. Voldemort released whatever spell was keeping the boy upright, and Terence collapsed in a heap. Bella stepped up, cast a spell, and shrugged.

"He's dead." She looked disappointed, probably because he hadn't died writhing in agony.

Minerva scarcely paid attention to the rest of the meeting. Terence's corpse lay on the floor the entire time. Severus nodded and spoke at the right times, Voldemort dismissed him, telling him he had done a fine job and that he expected the same in the future, and as Severus crossed the room to leave, passing the young Slytherin's corpse, the memory ended.

Minerva sat on the edge of the bed. She tried to imagine what she would feel if she were told to poison any of her former students, and she couldn't. It was one thing to know that in a battle, she might have to defend herself against students she had taught, and possibly injure or kill them, and quite another to think of having to poison one, one still so young, brought bound, helpless, and terrified before her, and pouring poison down his throat.

Severus came out of the bathroom, wrapped in a long dressing gown, his hair damp with Shed-Stop Potion.

"You viewed the memory," he stated.

"Yes."

"You can take it away with you."

"No, you need to restore it."

"The shadow of the memory is bad enough, the intellectual knowledge of it . . ." Severus looked at her angrily, took out his wand, drew the memory from the Pensieve, and allowed it to flow back into his head, gritting his teeth as it did so. "Now get out."

"Severus, let me help."

"I am going to bed." He walked over to his wardrobe and pulled out a nightshirt.

"It's only five-thirty in the afternoon," Minerva said.

"And I am going to bed."

Minerva sighed. He hadn't been getting enough sleep...neither had she.

"Call for dinner later, Severus. You need to eat."

Severus said nothing. His back to her, but as though she wasn't even in the room, he took off his dressing gown and tossed it on the chair beside the wardrobe then pulled on the nightshirt. Minerva took the hint, picked up the Pensieve, and left.

She stopped at the door. "I'll be back in a few hours to check on you, Severus."

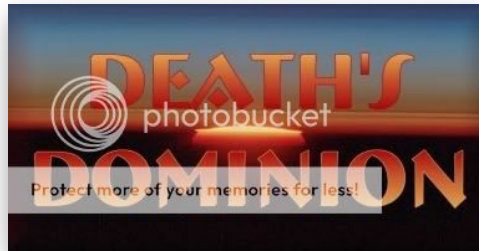
He said nothing. He was already on the bed, lying on his back, staring at the ceiling.

Minerva hesitated a moment, but not knowing what to say, she left him alone, though her heart clenched thinking of how very alone Severus was and how much pain he bore.

Chapter Twenty-Three: They shan't crack

Minerva summons Severus. Severus searches Grimmauld Place at the behest of the Dark Lord, and Lupin surprises him. An unexpected event disrupts a staff meeting.

Note: There is a mention in this chapter of the death of a minor canon character who has not appeared in the story.



Chapter Twenty-Three: *They shan't crack*

25 26 April 1998

True to her word, Minerva had returned to see Severus at eight-thirty to check on him and make sure he had eaten. She used her Headmistress's password to enter his rooms when he did not respond to her knocks, thinking that either he was asleep or simply didn't wish to answer the door, but he was not there. When she didn't find him in his rooms, she sought him in his office. Severus opened the door to her and greeted her with a nod.

When the door was closed and warded, Minerva said, "I was concerned about you. Have you eaten?"

Severus shook his head. "I am not hungry."

"Did you sleep?"

"No, but I rested. I collected myself," Severus replied, closing a notebook he had been looking at.

Minerva thought that he looked grey, and his affect was flat. "You don't look well."

"That is unsurprising."

"Would you eat something now? Soup?"

"If I can," he said wearily.

Minerva called her own house-elf, Blampa, and asked her to bring soup and sandwiches for them both.

"I did not eat very much dinner, myself," she admitted to Severus.

When Blampa returned with the light meal, Minerva conjured a small table for herself, and the two ate their vegetable soup. Minerva ate a tuna sandwich, but Severus took one bite of a roast beef sandwich and was unable to eat any more.

"Do you want to talk?" Minerva asked as she waved her wand and sent the remains of their meal back to the kitchens.

"No. Not about what you want to talk about," Severus said.

"I don't know how you managed to do that...I don't mean the poison, but to do that and then continue to appear normal while you were talking with the toe-rag," Minerva said.

"The death would have been pointless if I had reacted to it in any way, and my own position would have been compromised. If I had reacted, at best, I would have been punished for weakness and sentimentality, and at worst, I would have been killed myself. As Crouch pointed out, my task is not yet complete. All of that provides incentive to maintain an outward calm." He looked at her intently. "I believe you could do it, if it were required of you. You have mettle."

Minerva sighed, looking away, her gaze becoming unfocussed, then she looked back at him. "You are probably correct. I almost wish you weren't. But I believe you are. That does not change what you must feel about it now, how you felt when you returned to the castle. You should talk about it."

Severus shook his head. "If I do, I will not be able to continue. You said to me once that you were no longer unhappy about the *Adfectus*, that you believed that there were consequences of it that were positive. I must say that I feel precisely the opposite." His jaw tightened. "When I think of it and what it did to me...and to you...it angers me, and it angers me more, knowing the subsequent consequences. If it weren't for the *Adfectus*, the Headmaster and I would have carried out his plan. It would have been hard on you, but no harder than his death was this way...easier, perhaps, as he would not have lingered, and certainly you would have had more time with him, several weeks, at least. And I . . . I may have been condemned by carrying out the Vow, but I knew my role, I was bound by my role, I inhabited it. I harboured no illusions about redemption and hoped only to repay a debt and take revenge on the Dark Lord. Since the *Adfectus*, I have had illusory glimpses of humanity, of friendship and camaraderie, and they have only made me weak, given me pain. Even the worst that was demanded of me before the *Adfectus*, and which would have been demanded of me after fulfilling the Vow, would not have been as painful as what I must do now, even had the Dark Lord had me kill dozens of innocents. I resented it often, I hated it, and I disgusted myself, but it was not this difficult. I knew my role and my nature, and I accepted the evil I had to commit even as I despised it. Now, I commit evil and condemn myself, and I know that with each act, I become less worthy of any humanity or friendship, the glimpses of which have only taunted me. The *Adfectus* made me weak, Minerva. You see me in that memory, and you may see strength, but if you could use Legilimency, you would only see my weakness. My weakness and my evil."

Minerva looked at him thoughtfully for a moment. "There is something that you do not know about Albus, Severus, and I should not tell you, but I will. One reason that he had come to be at peace with the Unbreakable Vow and the prospect of having you kill him was that he believed a prophecy that was made more than fifty years ago. Personally, I don't put much store in most prophecies, and I think it was his belief in the prophecy that helped bring the circumstances about. He was told that he would either meet death at the end of the wand of one whom he loved and who loved him or he would die a painful, agonizing death. He believed you loved him, you see, and he loved you, so your Vow and Draco's task fit with what he believed the prophecy said. There were other factors, too, of course, but I believe that was a strong psychological motivator for him."

Severus frowned slightly. "And so he thought that dying of the curse would be fulfilling the prophecy in the other way?"

Minerva nodded. "But I could not allow that . . . seeing him in pain at the end. If the curse had been allowed to take its natural course, he would have been in blind agony. I could not allow that."

Severus's frown grew. "The curse . . . you . . ."

"We must all do what is difficult, what may seem impossible, Severus. And we carry on."

His eyes widened. "You killed him!"

"I did not say that," Minerva said. "But I do understand taking difficult circumstances and, despite the pain it causes us, using them for a greater purpose. We take a death and we give it meaning. As you say, if you had not administered the poison, you both would have been killed, and he would have been just as dead as he is now, but you would be, as well. Or if you had killed him but had shown any 'sentimentality' and lost your position with the Dark Lord, his death would be meaningless. Higgs's death, as much as either of us may wish it weren't so, did serve a purpose, even if he was not a willing sacrifice."

Severus stared at her, still trying to comprehend her previous statement. "You said it once before, but I did not understand. You said I loved him too much to kill him, but you loved him more."

"I ought not have said anything at all. My point is that the *Adfectus* was good for both of us...and for Albus, too. I am glad you did not murder him and run off to join the Dark Lord, reviled by the world, or joining him to increase his power and his stature. I am glad that you have had the opportunity to see that there can be more for you in life...and it may seem like illusion to you, but it is not. And as much as I hate to see you in pain, I am glad that you can feel something other than hatred, resentment, anger, and resignation. If you cannot talk about your feelings, I understand. But know that I love you now just as much as I did before I saw the memory, and I feel pain and sorrow for both you and Higgs. You aren't completely alone, Severus, even though I am sure it must feel that way. Those glimpses of friendship were no illusions. I hope that you can find strength in that, and not believe it is weakness only."

Severus shook his head slowly. "You are remarkable, Minerva. I am certain that others in the Order, despite my usefulness, find me and my very existence repugnant."

"Remus likes you," Minerva said.

Severus barked a laugh. "Highly doubtful, but kind of you to think that of him."

"Well, perhaps 'likes' is not quite the right word, but he cares about what happens to you and he respects you. I know he would be distressed if anything were to happen to you. And Arthur and Molly both respect you, and I know that Molly worries about you."

"That is what Molly does," Severus said.

"Hermione certainly likes you. She respects you, she cares for you, and she is fond of you."

"She is the wizarding world's patron saint of the downtrodden and the despised," Severus retorted, trying to scoff. "If she really knew me, truly understood what I am and what I do, what I have done, she would feel sorry for my victims and waste none of her pity on me."

"I do not believe it is only pity she feels for you, Severus, and I think that she cares about you beyond the things you have done...and I am sure she has some notion of what those things are. She knows about Gertrude Gamp, and that knowledge did not diminish her affection for you."

"Hmmpf."

"And Gareth..."

"Has told me himself that he does not like me," Severus interrupted.

"Oh, I think he likes you fairly well, considering how he believed he felt about you only a few weeks ago," Minerva said. "But I was not going to say that he likes you. He does care about you, though, and he wants no harm to come to you and would lend you a hand if ever you needed it. And that is surely friendship."

"Or some bizarre sense of obligation," Severus said with a sneer.

"And Robbie cares about you," Minerva said, ignoring Severus's ability to reject everything she said.

"He cares because I am the Order's spy and because you care, otherwise, I don't believe he would spare me a thought," Severus said.

"No, Severus. You may not have known Robbie long, but believe me, he does care about you beyond that," Minerva said.

"Have you told him about the meeting?" Severus asked.

"Only the barest details. I did not tell him who the toe-rag's test subject was."

"It wouldn't mean a thing to him, anyway," Severus said. "It could have been anyone."

Minerva was silent.

"I would rather Crouch didn't know," Severus said after a minute. "For anyone to know. I . . . he . . . Higgs . . ." Severus shook his head slightly, closing his eyes. "I cannot speak of it. But he is free, at least, of Bella. She was a sadist before she was imprisoned. Azkaban only made her worse, more depraved, more imaginative. I would prefer death to being her entertainment."

Minerva sighed. "You have saved others, Severus. You cannot save them all. But when it's all over, he won't be able to kill anyone else. Remember that. That is what we are working toward."

"I thought Amelia Bones . . . that was horrific, especially once I realised that no one was coming. No Aurors, no one from the Order. But this was worse." A spasm of pain crossed his face. "Please leave, Minerva."

Minerva stood, but hesitated. "Severus..."

He shook his head. "Go."

"Get some sleep. And if you do want to talk, you can come up, no matter what time it is," Minerva said.

Severus nodded in acknowledgment, and Minerva left, closing the door quietly behind her.

Severus lay in bed, wakeful. Every time he closed his eyes, he saw Terence's swollen, bruised face, saw his fear and saw his plea. Severus didn't have favourite students, though there were some for whom he allowed himself to feel less disdain. Terence had never stood out particularly one way or the other, but he had been a Slytherin prefect and Seeker on the House Quidditch team for four years. Severus had come to know him better than many of the students in his House. But even if he hadn't, Terence had been a student in his care for seven years and had only left school a few years before. And he had poured a lethal potion down the young wizard's throat in order to maintain his own safety.

Severus knew that it was not only for his own safety, but for the sake of what his safety meant for the future of the wizarding world. Right at that moment, though, that meant little to him. He was not even sure whether he believed it. If he were to die, or to disappear to somewhere more imaginative than Greece, would the cause of the Order really be compromised?

His eyes burned. If only Albus were there. Albus had known what to say to strengthen his resolve and to convince him that his role was important, as unpleasant as it was. But that had been before the *Adfectus* had hit him. After that, Severus had decided that Albus was wrong about the Unbreakable Vow, and nothing that Albus said, whether in anger or in compassion, could persuade him that he should fulfill it and kill Albus when the time came. And that time never came, yet still he lived and Albus had died. At least Draco had been hidden by the Order. He hadn't minded his punishment when the Dark Lord learned that Draco had been spirited from the castle. That part of his Vow he had been happy to fulfill, even if he hadn't known that was what he was doing when he delivered the boy into Minerva's hands. He had trusted Minerva completely, despite her coolness toward him. Even now when he disagreed with her, he would obey, whatever it was. It was a steadying point in his life, this obedience, something he could hold onto, not to expiate his own responsibility for his actions, but to keep from sinking or from losing his way. He trusted her. He had trusted Albus, except at the end, with the contention between them about the Vow. He knew that neither was perfect or infallible in their judgments, but they were the arrow upon which he flew, and he knew that the arrow would hit its target. He had to believe that.

Severus got out of bed and shoved his feet into his slippers. Almost two o'clock. The Dark Lord was likely discovering that the potion hadn't killed the Azkaban guards. Severus doubted that the Dark Lord would abort the attack. He was bent on retrieving the imprisoned Death Eaters. The Ministry claimed that there were seventy-two Death Eaters in Azkaban. In reality, the number was closer to thirty, with the others innocent...innocent, at least, of being Death Eaters. One of them, Severus knew, was not being liberated. Lucius Malfoy was a prime target of the raid, but the Dark Lord wanted him only to punish him and use him as a living example of what would befall a Death Eater who failed him and whose family betrayed him.

Severus felt a twinge thinking of Malfoy's fate. Ironically, Malfoy was a consummate Death Eater. He clothed himself in pureblood ideology, he sprang to the Dark Lord's side at his return, he was cruel, arrogant, and imaginative, and he was willing to kill without compunction. But he had failed in the Department of Mysteries, and then his family had disappeared. Whatever else Lucius Malfoy was or did, he loved his family, although he often had unusual ways of showing it, and he had been very hard on Draco. He would spoil Draco one minute and the next, be cruel and unfeeling toward him. But even if Lucius had the slightest idea where Narcissa and Draco were, which he didn't, he would not betray them to the Dark Lord, knowing what their fates would be at his hands.

There would be nothing that Severus could do to help Malfoy, he knew that, but he did not look forward to maintaining his usual indifference when, as the Dark Lord no doubt would, he had Malfoy dragged out for an entertaining torture session. It would be particularly unpleasant when he was invited to participate, but he would participate, just as he had poured poison down young Terence's throat. At least Malfoy was more culpable for his current situation than Higgs had been. Higgs had given in to peer pressure, no doubt, and had suffered under some misguided idea of what being a Death Eater could bring him, but he had clearly sickened of it and attempted to escape. He wished the boy had trusted him before he had tried to hide. Had Higgs come to him, he might have found some way of keeping the boy alive and safe. By the time he begged for help, there was nothing he could offer the young wizard but a quick, painless death.

Severus went out to his sitting room and opened a cupboard. He stared at an unopened bottle of firewhisky for several minutes, then sighed and shut the door. He could not afford to lose his senses to drink. The effect of the Draught of Peace the other night had been worse than alcohol, but it had also been stronger, and perhaps the trade-off had been worth a few hours of euphoria, which faded to a sense of general well-being before disappearing and leaving him in his usual misery. And the Draught of Peace did have an antidote.

There was a loud knock on the door, a banging, more precisely. Severus scowled and stomped over to the open it. His scowl did not lift when he saw who was there.

"Minerva wishes to see you, Professor," Crouch said in his usual soft voice.

"At this hour?"

"I would not have come to tell you now if she wished to see you later."

Severus's scowl grew.

"It is rather urgent, Professor. May I suggest simply donning a teaching robe over your nightshirt?" Crouch said.

"Mmph. Come in," Severus said. "Wait here."

Severus returned a few moments later, dressed as Crouch had suggested, in his longest, heaviest teaching robe, with hooks from the neck almost to the ankle.

"What is this about?" Severus asked. "The Azkaban break?"

"Partially," Crouch replied softly.

Severus followed Crouch through the castle and up to the Headmistress's Office.

Minerva was standing in the middle of her office when they arrived, fully dressed and even in her formal Headmistress's over-robe, which she had worn only at the Welcoming Feast and the Headmaster's one-year memorial.

"Robbie, I will speak with Severus alone."

Robbie barely hesitated, but acknowledged her implied order simply by leaving, going up to the Headmistress's private suite. Minerva waited until they had heard the door closed behind him before she spoke.

"Did you know about tonight?" she asked, her voice hard.

"Azkaban? I told you...was the target different? Did something go wrong? Was the potion effective?" Severus asked, confused by her steely gaze, then remembering the other raid planned for that night.

"I do not speak of what the Death Eaters planned." She looked at him, and Severus, if he had not known better, would have thought that she was reaching out and taking knowledge from him, performing surgical Legilimency to draw something from his mind. "You did," she said.

"I..."

"You did know and you did not inform me. Did you encourage them?" Minerva asked.

"I do not know what you are talking about," Severus replied stiffly. He would wait to defend himself until he knew what he was being accused of.

"I have known you since you were eleven, Severus. I may not be a Legilimens, but I do know you." She closed her eyes briefly, her mouth a tight line. "Sit." She looked at him as he remained standing. "I do not care to repeat myself."

Feeling like an errant first-year, Severus sat.

"Did you think that because you were not directly involved in this ill-considered scheme that you did not need to inform me of it?" she asked sharply, but then she sighed and sat down in the chair opposite him. "Arthur, Kingsley, Remus, and Tonks had organised a raid on the Malfoy Manor for this morning. They had enlisted three others to assist them, and Kingsley stayed behind, coordinating from his office at the Ministry. They waited for the Patronus signal that Azkaban was under attack, and the six Order members Apparated to the edge of Malfoy manor. Imagine their shock and surprise when they discovered that there was already a raid on the manor underway. One that, while successful in finding and releasing three prisoners of the Dark Lord, was going badly. Not only were the three prisoners in danger of being recaptured, but so were those who had come to rescue them. With the assistance of the newly arrived Order members, all but one of them did succeed in escaping. They all returned to the Burrow, rather than to headquarters, because of your search tomorrow. Unfortunately, one of the original party was lost, and two were injured, one of them very badly. One of the second party was also injured. It was pure chaos, and it was sheer dumb luck that Potter was not captured and that the Dark Lord himself was not there."

"Who was caught? And injured?" Severus asked, hoping that Hermione hadn't been one of those enlisted by Potter, that she hadn't left the castle that night.

"Not caught, Severus, killed," Minerva said wearily. "Mundungus Fletcher. In the end, he found some valour, and he stayed behind to enable the younger ones to escape with the freed prisoners. The last thing that Weasley...George...saw, was Mundungus being struck by a Petrificus followed by a blasting hex that shattered a hole in his chest large enough to ride a broomstick through. George's description, not mine. Tonks was Petrified and Stunned, simultaneously, but Bill got her out. She should recover fairly quickly. Ronald Weasley caught an extremely nasty and unidentifiable curse on his right leg. It's as though it's become gangrenous and had a large chunk taken out of it, as well. They don't know what it is, but it's painful and getting worse. Angelina Johnson received massive internal injuries caused by a *Massuilius* hex to her abdomen...fortunately, cast verbally so it was easily identified. If she hadn't had prompt attention, she would be dead now. She may still die. I sent Poppy directly to the Burrow, and Alroy is meeting Bill in McTavish Street so that they can fetch Melina and Bill can bring her to the Burrow."

"The spell that struck Weasley was likely the *Conruptus*. It is favoured by Stearns. He's infirm and doesn't move very quickly, and he was likely one of those left to guard the manor. It's an old spell and not often seen. It will assist Melina if she knows which curse it was," Severus said.

Minerva nodded. "I will let Arthur know."

She gathered herself quickly and cast the Patronus spell at the closed window. Her tabby Patronus, a snarl on its face, its hackles raised, and its tail bushed-out, sprang from her wand, shot through the window, and disappeared.

"Are there any other unauthorised missions which I should be aware of, Severus?"

He shook his head. "I was unaware that the Order was planning the mission for that time."

Minerva took in a carefully controlled breath and let it out. "That is precisely why you needed to inform me of what Potter was planning. I cannot believe that you encouraged this."

"I didn't. Not precisely. I was concerned that they would rush off and attempt a rescue sooner and that it would be a complete disaster. I told him that if he were going to do it, early this morning would be best. I also told him to bring others with him. He did not say they were going to do it."

Minerva closed her eyes and shook her head. "Severus, imagine that Potter and his friends had arrived in the middle of the Order's raid rather than the other way around. I cannot tell you more than to say that we have certain knowledge of Malfoy manor, certain . . . family secrets, that Potter does not. You can imagine how we obtained them, though I will not go into detail. The Order's raid relied upon stealth. It could have been exposed too soon if Potter's group had blundered in at the wrong time. As it is, they were unable to use their knowledge to their advantage, and there were unnecessary casualties. We are fortunate that Potter was not one of them. Whatever protection his mother's sacrifice may still afford him now that he is of-age, he is not invulnerable. I may be sceptical about the prophecy itself, but there is no question in my mind that Potter and Riddle are bound, that their fates are joined together, and that Potter's success is essential for Riddle's defeat. But aside from that, I requested that you tell me what you were planning so that I could adjust other plans or inform you of them so that you could alter yours. I see that I trusted too strongly that you would not construe this request narrowly to include only those activities in which you were directly involved. I am, frankly, disappointed. But I will put it down to a momentarily lapse in judgment on your part, perfectly understandable under the circumstances." Minerva looked at him sadly. "Please do remember this incident in the future."

Severus sat stonily. He was no happier than Minerva with the narrowly averted disaster, but he did not like being blamed for it.

"Severus?" Minerva prompted.

"It is not my fault if Potter rushes about doing as he wishes," Severus said crossly.

"Of course not, and I am not blaming you for that. It is a grace that Potter didn't attempt the rescue yesterday, and your suggestion that they do it this morning likely saved it from being a greater disaster than it was. But if you had told me, we could have planned around it...informed Potter, at least, of the Order's plans and asked that he not interfere." Minerva sighed again. "I should have known that he acquiesced too readily yesterday when Arthur said that the Order would deal with it."

"You know Potter has a saviour complex. That is what Riddle is counting on when he attacks Hogwarts. It is what *you* are counting on, in fact. Of course, Riddle also wants control of Hogwarts and is impatient that he does not already have it, and the continual failure to take over the Ministry has angered him, since he believes that would enable him to have me installed as Headmaster...as his puppet, of course. But you should have anticipated that Potter would pull something like this."

Minerva narrowed her eyes. "That would have been much easier if my Deputy had informed me of what he knew."

Severus looked down.

"Never mind, Severus. It is unlikely that a similar such occasion will arise again between now and the attack on Hogwarts, but if it does, I hope that you will inform me," Minerva said. "I trust you, Severus, more than you can probably appreciate. And I do believe this was simply a lapse. I am sorry if I was unduly harsh."

Severus snorted. "Sometimes, Minerva, you sound like a fool, and you are not one." He lifted his eyes to meet hers. "Harsh. Unduly harsh. I do not believe you know what that would really entail. You could punish me, even use the Cruciatius on me, and you would scarcely be harsh, and it would be deserved."

"You are the one who sounds like a fool now. I would never do such a thing, and you certainly do not deserve it, especially not for something of this sort. And you know as well as I do that physical pain is not the only kind of pain that can be inflicted, though you have far too much experience with that sort of pain. You do not deserve such punishment."

Severus looked away. He did deserve it. Every ounce of pain that was doled out to him in punishment. Perhaps not for the reasons the punishment was given, but he deserved it. And it might cleanse him of the evil he had done and continued to do. The potion . . .

"What of Azkaban?" Severus asked.

Minerva shook her head. "I only have a little information. They did proceed with the attack, despite the fact that the guards put up a fight. The toe-rag's guard did manage to lower the primary wards, so there was some success. How much, I do not yet know, although I understand that the toe-rag himself was not there. Kingsley has been somewhat busy, as has Arthur. I am sure that I will hear something soon. I was surprised that the toe-rag was neither at the manor nor at the attack on Azkaban."

"Mm. The Dark Lord no longer spends very much time at Malfoy manor, using it for meetings, interrogations, and such. He prefers not to be in residence at the same location where he keeps most of his prisoners. Most of his time, I believe, is spent at Goyle's and at that Riddle mansion. Gods, that place is a hell-hole," Severus said, his nose wrinkling in disgust. "There may be other places...indeed, I believe it likely that there is at least one location unknown to anyone but himself and, perhaps, Bella...but I am only acquainted with those three. As for the attack on Azkaban, I believe he assumed that it would be a walk in the park. He is also looking forward to the attack on Hogwarts, and he believes that his presence at Hogwarts will be more impressive and fearsome if he is not seen before that."

"He's still a little toe-rag," Minerva said scornfully. "A murderous, powerful, dangerous little toe-rag, completely without conscience, but nonetheless . . . we will not be impressed or driven by fear. He and his gang will suffer more opposition than they imagine."

"Doubtless," Severus said, "but do be careful, Minerva. They'll need you when it's over. Everyone will. You have already done so much."

"I will not allow others to do my killing and dying for me, Severus. When the time comes, I will defend Hogwarts and her students if it takes my last ounce of magic and my last breath. I pledged it more than forty years ago, and time has diminished neither my commitment nor the devotion I feel toward all who are in Hogwarts care."

"You were Head of Gryffindor. Only now are you Headmistress," Severus said, remembering his own pledge upon becoming Head of Slytherin, the pledge to his House.

"Call me a fool again if you like, Severus, but I did not commit myself only to the care, nurture, and protection of those in my own House even then. It did not wait until I became Headmistress, and my role as Headmistress merely reinforced the pledge I had already made."

"Still, Minerva, you are not young..."

"And neither am I yet old, but even were I twice my age, I would not stand in safety while my school was under attack, and especially not now, when I have had a hand in bringing these very circumstances about."

"You are merely guiding the torrent, Minerva, and not even that. You're just making small diversions in the current, important ones, perhaps key diversions, but you did not create the flood," Severus said.

"Albus always says...*said*, he wanted to keep me safe, but I know he would never sacrifice Hogwarts or the wizarding world for that safety, and I will not, either. It is futile for you to say another word on the subject, Severus." She smiled at him. "I do appreciate your concern, but I am not untalented, you know. I believe I can hold my own against most others."

"You are not ruthless, Minerva. The Death Eaters, most of them, *are* ruthless. As am I. You are not, and you are at an automatic disadvantage because of that."

Minerva made a small, noncommittal shrug. "We shall see, Severus, we shall see."

Severus stumbled groggily toward his door. He had come back to his rooms at four o'clock after learning that the Azkaban prison break had been only somewhat successful. Several Death Eaters had been freed, four guards had been killed, but in the attack, not by the potion, and the island fortress now had large, gaping holes in its walls, and the Ministry was concerned that the entire physical structure had been compromised. Much of the prison had been held together through force of magic, and that had been compromised as well. The remaining prisoners had been herded into a part of the structure that had been untouched and deemed safe from collapse. Only temporary Anti-Apparition wards had been raised, and Scrimgeour was considering moving all of the prisoners to other locations, though that presented the Ministry with a logistical nightmare. The Anti-Apparition wards were scarcely needed, given the phobia most witches and wizards had about Apparating long distance over water, though it was a foolish and unfounded fear. Any distance that a witch or wizard could normally Apparate, she or he could Apparate just as well whether it was over land or water. Severus did not know where the superstition arose, but it seemed medieval nonsense to him.

The pounding on his door did not abate, and his visitor unbalanced slightly when Severus opened the door.

"Sorry, Severus...I assumed you were asleep."

"I was," Severus said grumpily, but admitting Poppy Pomfrey to his rooms. "What is it?"

"I just returned from the Burrow and I wanted to apply the potion to your back before I went to bed myself. I looked for you last night to do it for you before you retired for the night, but I could not find you."

"I was on rounds," Severus said. He had walked the corridors until midnight. It had not helped him to sleep when he returned, but it had provided some temporary distraction, then Crouch had fetched him a couple hours later to bring him to Minerva.

"Please be available tonight. It's the last time you'll need to have the potion applied, but I like to be thorough," Poppy said, heading toward his bedroom.

Severus sighed. There was no point in protesting, and although the area no longer burned, only tingling peculiarly at times, it did feel nice when the potion was rubbed into the skin.

Poppy removed the lid to the tin of shiny white salve and waited for Severus, his back turned to her, to take off his nightshirt. He lay down on his stomach on the bed and closed his eyes, not bothering to cover his legs. She had seen everything there was to see, after all, and his rail-thin body was hardly an object to ignite female desire, even if Poppy weren't the consummate professional she was.

He felt her sit on the edge of the bed, and then he sighed as she began to apply the potion using small circular motions and just two fingertips. He could feel the slight tingle of magic as she applied it, and paid attention to it this time. It seemed to ebb and flow in a way it hadn't with Gareth, building slightly in intensity, then receding before she moved on to the next spot. Gareth was untrained, relatively speaking, and that likely accounted for the difference. Poppy had greater control.

"Do you do very much wandless magic?" Severus asked, his voice slightly muffled by his pillow.

"No, not much. Just the usual. Summoning my wand, occasionally Levitating or moving something wandlessly. I Summon my bath towels that way every morning. But that's the extent of my talents in that area."

"Mm. You don't know that you're doing wandless magic now?" Severus asked.

"This is different," Poppy replied.

"Not really. You have very good control of the magic flowing through your fingertips. You could probably become quite adept at other wandless magic," Severus said.

Poppy smiled. Severus Snape, offering praise. That was an unusual occurrence.

"Perhaps that's something I can practise when I have more time for such things. This summer, if the current situation is resolved. Would you help me?"

Severus sighed almost imperceptibly. "If the current situation is resolved, as you put it, I will likely be 'resolved,' as well. How were the patients at the Burrow?" he asked, changing the subject and unsure whether he wanted the answer.

Poppy paused a moment, dipping her fingers back into the tin to get more salve, then she said, "I was able to halt the spread of the curse on Ronald Weasley's leg, and after Arthur received word about which curse it was, Melina was able to reverse the spell and treat it. He will likely always have some trouble with that leg, though. Nymphadora is quite well. I saw her last, as she was already conscious and complaining about Remus's fussing when I arrived. The others were only suffering from minor hexes, nothing that required immediate attention. Angelina Johnson . . . I had never encountered the *Massuelius* hex, though I had learned about it during my training and recently refreshed myself on the treatment of unusual curses and hexes, including that one. I did my best to treat her. When Melina arrived, she took over. It was, unfortunately, insufficient," Poppy said softly, "and she died of massive internal haemorrhaging an hour ago. I used the countercurse, we tried to repair all of the damage to her organs, gave her Blood-replenishing Potion, and we did our best, but our best was not good enough. If we had been able to treat her immediately, perhaps that would have made a difference, but it took them several long minutes to escape with her, and then for us to learn of it and me to get to the Burrow . . ."

Severus couldn't suppress the shudder that passed through him at her words. If he had warned Potter off . . . or had told Minerva what the boy was planning. Another death laid at his feet, and this one, preventable.

"I'm sorry, Severus," Poppy whispered.

He nodded, unsure why she was telling him she was sorry. His jaw tightened, and he gritted his teeth. Poppy was almost done applying the potion to his back. Severus could feel tears rising, and he beat them back. Exhaustion, desperation, sorrow, guilt, whatever it was, it was not useful, and regardless, he could not let Poppy see that weakness. She had seen too much of his physical weakness as it was. Whatever McGonagall had said to him about there being no shame in tears, Severus knew better than he did; he knew well the shame of tears, and he knew the weakness they displayed.

Severus heard Poppy replace the lid on the tin, but she did not rise from her position beside him.

"Do you have any of that potion of yours...the dark one, for external use?" the mediwitch asked.

Severus nodded silently, his eyes still closed.

"Could you Summon it for me?"

Severus, not questioning her, raised his right hand and Summoned it both wandlessly and nonverbally, taking only slight pride in it as he caught the jar. He felt Poppy take it from his hand, then a few moments later, he felt her rubbing it into his shoulders, magic tingling through her fingertips.

"I have not been subject to *Crucio* today," Severus said, pushing up slightly.

"Shh, shh, just lie there," Poppy said softly, pressing him back down. "You are strung so tensely, you feel as though you might snap at any moment, Severus. Your muscles are bunches of knots. It is my professional opinion that you need this, so you will allow it unless you wish me to call Minerva and wake her and have her tell you to submit."

Severus gave in...more easily than he wished, but it felt good, and there was some comfort in her touch that went beyond the loosening of muscles and the unknotting of tension. Unfortunately, as she slowly, methodically kneaded the muscles in his shoulders and upper back, he could feel his tears rising again, and he seemed powerless to stop them. He only hoped she wouldn't notice as they overflowed his lids and began to trickle down his cheeks.

Poppy began to massage his left arm, beginning near his shoulder and working her way down, and as she did, she began to hum lightly. It was a sweet, soft humming of an old-fashioned tune that seemed familiar to Severus, though he did not recognise it. As she hummed, he felt his tears flow faster, and he knew that Poppy could not be unaware of them, but she said nothing, merely continuing with her slow, relaxing massage, humming her haunting melody filled with grace notes that seemed to add a melancholic edge to the otherwise bright tune. Severus let out a shuddering breath, and Poppy continued her massage, reaching his left forearm and paying no attention to the hideous brand there. To his shame, as her fingers moved gently over the Dark Mark and then to his wrist, he sobbed, choking it back but unable to completely suppress it. Poppy gave no sign that she noticed, merely moving on to massage the palm of his hand and each finger.

When Poppy moved over to his right arm, Severus could no longer fight his body, and his tears and his wrenched sobs continued unabated. He tried to bury his face in the pillow, and Poppy gave the first indication that she noticed his tears. As her right hand continued to knead his upper arm, she brushed aside his hair with her other hand and, with gentle pressure to his jaw, urged him to turn his head to the side. She wiped at his tears with the back of her hand, the strong, fiery potion still on her fingers and palm. Her humming paused for a moment, and Severus feared she was going to say something, but she did not. As she began to rub his forearm with both hands again, she resumed her humming, this time a more cheerful melody, one that Severus did not recognise at all.

When she had finished with his right arm, Poppy finished massaging his back, though she skipped over the area where he had been injured by Moody's curse. Severus was slightly nervous that she was going to massage his buttocks next. He found that an intimate area to be massaged, and it could be quite arousing for him under ordinary circumstances, though the stress of the last year had killed whatever libido the Dark Lord's return hadn't already smothered, and it would be unlikely that he would react at all to such a massage. Nonetheless, he hoped she would not touch him there. His concern was allayed when she moved down to his feet and began working her way up his legs. Severus found his tears subsiding and his breathing coming slowly and regularly. As she reached his thighs, he felt quite sleepy.

Severus was barely aware of her casting a cleansing charm, probably on her hands to rid them of the strong potion, then he felt her fingers on his neck. He flinched slightly, but then he relaxed as she massaged the muscles in his neck and then moved up to the back of his head. His tears began, inexplicably, to flow again, but this time, gently, and he also felt his nose begin to run. He reached to wipe it, but Poppy stopped him.

"Shh, shh, leave it. We'll clean and freshen everything when I'm through, and you can use a handkerchief then," she said softly.

It was a relief just to relax and not think, to let his body just be, and to let Poppy's touch, her kind touch, give him comfort and not pain. She even massaged his ears, and when she reached his earlobes, he felt himself smiling involuntarily, and that felt good, as well.

Finally, she said, "Now, I need to roll you over, so I'm going to pull the sheet up for you, all right?"

"Mhm." Severus would have agreed to almost anything at that moment. If the Dark Lord really wanted his cooperation, he could do worse than follow Poppy Pomfrey's example, he thought, trying not to laugh.

"What's funny?" She had moved off the bed and was pulling the sheet up to cover his legs and buttocks.

"Just thinking that if the Dark Lord really wanted more power, he could take a lesson from you," Severus said, not suppressing his smile.

"Putty in my hands, are you?" Poppy asked with a chuckle.

"Not quite," Severus said. But almost, he thought to himself.

Severus had to exert no effort at all as Poppy rolled him over onto his back, using a combination of magic and her own muscle. He sighed as she stroked over the scant muscles on his chest, barely there between his skin and his ribs, and then the front of his shoulders. This time, he expected it as she moved up and gently rubbed the muscles and skin on either side of his throat, her magic flowing soothingly through her fingers, and he did not flinch, but again, he felt tears gathering in his eyes and then overflowing their banks. This time, Severus could not help the sobs that accompanied them, loud, gulping cries ripped from this throat, but Poppy said nothing, simply humming a soft, comforting tune, a lullaby, he thought vaguely as he tried to swallow his shame with his tears.

Her hands reached his face, and her fingers played their way through his tears, massaging his jaw and applying gentle pressure to his cheek bones. As one hand rubbed his forehead, Severus felt her wipe his nose and upper lip with a handkerchief, then, as a mother would for a small child, she held the handkerchief for him and softly said, "Blow," then wiped his nose again after he had.

Both hands massaged his forehead then his temples. Her fingers carded through his hair, and she massaged his scalp again. Finally, she placed both hands lightly on his shoulders.

"Better?" she asked.

Severus opened his eyes for the first time since she had begun rubbing the initial potion into his back. He nodded. Poppy's answering smile was weary, and he noticed what he had not when she had arrived: her grey-blue eyes were shadowed by dark circles and she looked exhausted. The urge to weep rose in him again, but this time, he successfully tamped it down.

"Thank you," he whispered. She could have gone directly to her rooms after returning from the Burrow. No one would have blamed her. Or she could have simply done her duty to him and applied the necessary potion to the lower portion of his back. Yet she had stayed and she had taken her time with him. Severus swallowed. It was her job, after all. No reason for gratitude.

She drew in a deep breath and let it out. "I am glad you feel better." Her face grew serious. "You need to eat better, Severus. I know that I have said that before, but you have lost weight just in the last week, and that's with us trying to look after you. I am going to send down a nutritional potion for you every morning and every evening. You need to drink it. I know what you believe about your early grave, but if you are going to be able to keep going until that point, you need to feed yourself properly. I know that often, your stomach probably rebels at the thought of food. The nutritional potions are easy on your stomach. Will you take them?"

Severus nodded. "Yes, I will."

"Do you want to talk? About tonight? Or anything else?"

He shook his head.

"You may, you know. I would never tell anyone else what you share with me, not unless I believed you were a danger to yourself...other than the fact that you keep having to go back to him, which is unavoidable. But you can talk to me," Poppy said.

Severus shook his head again.

"Angelina Johnson's death is upsetting," Poppy said softly. "It is to everyone. It is not surprising to me if you are upset about it as well."

Severus closed his eyes, remembering the tall, energetic Gryffindor. She had been one of the prettiest girls in the school, and diligent in Potions. And a Quidditch player, like Higgs.

"I am responsible," he said softly. "I knew what Potter planned. I should have told Minerva. I did not. If I had, she would be alive. One death I could have prevented."

"There is always danger to those who oppose him. She chose to follow Potter and to join her friends in freeing three prisoners. They are now at the Burrow, recuperating."

"One was Lovegood, who were the others?" Severus asked.

"Florean Fortescue and old Ollivander," Poppy said. "If it is any comfort to you, I do not believe that Ollivander would have lived much longer in captivity, and Fortescue was half dead, nearly starved."

Severus swallowed. It seemed hardly a fair trade. Mundungus Fletcher might finally have done something good with his life by sacrificing it for the others, but Johnson had been so young . . .

"Even if you had informed Minerva, there still may have been casualties, just different ones. We cannot know. We cannot know." Poppy brushed some of his hair back from his face. "There are, I am sure, worse things that weigh upon you, things even more difficult to bear remembering. You don't need to bear them alone."

Severus swallowed again. "I do. I cannot tell you. I cannot tell you for many reasons. But if I were to tell you, I do not know if I could continue. It seems easier to just . . . to just push it aside so that I can do what I must do."

"Perhaps. I know that sometimes that is necessary in the short run for some people or they are unable to function, but I think you should talk about it to someone. If not me, then perhaps Minerva or another friend."

Severus couldn't help the short laugh that came in reaction to her suggestion. "I have no other friends, Poppy." He opened his eyes. "You may not have noticed, but I am a Death Eater spy. Hardly the type to have friends." His mind flitted briefly to Hermione, but however much she was his friend, she was also his student and she was very young. He could not tell her anything of this, whatever "this" was.

"I will listen, Severus." She paused, looking seriously into his dark eyes. "And if you wish, either for reasons of the Order or for your own personal comfort, you may use Obliviate on me afterward."

Severus blinked in surprise. "You don't mind the prospect of being Obliviated?" For most witches and wizards, the thought was, at best, unsettling, at worst, terrifying.

"I would trust you to do it with care. I would not . . . I would not prefer it, but I see that you suffer. I can hardly begrudge you something that might relieve that. It would be a small price. I would like, of course, to remember that I agreed to be Obliviated, and why, but you could erase the part of my memory that constituted our subsequent conversation."

Severus shook his head. "Even so . . . thank you for your offer, Poppy. I am sure it goes beyond the dictates of your profession to make such an offer, but I will not require you to demonstrate your sincerity. I simply cannot discuss anything to do with . . . to do with what things may weigh upon me."

Poppy nodded. "But if you ever change your mind, come see me. Day or night, Severus."

Poppy freshened and cleaned his pillow and sheets as Severus put his nightshirt back on.

"I think I'm going to skip breakfast and try to get some sleep," she said before she left him, "but I hope that you go up and eat some breakfast. I'll have my house-elf give yours your nutritional potion, though, so you can take that whether you manage to eat or not."

After Severus closed the door behind the school matron, he looked at the clock on his mantle. Seven-thirty. There seemed hardly any point to returning to bed, but he thought he would lie down for just a little while. He had to go to Grimmauld Place later that day and pretend to search for the fucking locket, and he wouldn't be surprised if the Dark Lord summoned him to his presence before that. His Mark was itching slightly, but he hadn't been called yet, though both the raid on the Malfoy manor and the results of the attack on Azkaban must be enraging the Dark Lord by now. He was probably busy taking out his anger on those who had taken part in the attack and those who had been supposed to be guarding the manor. Hopefully, the Dark Lord would not think about him for a while. At least not until he failed to turn up with the locket. And then he would have to create misleading memories of the Order meeting to eliminate their discussion of the attacks on Hogwarts and the Ministry. Fortunately, they had not discussed the attack on Azkaban in his presence, so it would be easy enough for the Dark Lord to see that he had not divulged that plan. He would excise the memory of his conversation with Potter, manipulate the memory of his conversation with Moody, and avoid any appearance of Hermione whatsoever, except as a vague attendant at the full Order meeting.

It was harder for Severus now to know whether his manipulated memories would hold up under scrutiny. Something like the search of the Room of Requirement was easy enough, but to disguise the content of an Order meeting was more difficult, and knowing what to keep of the truth without revealing too much was always a challenge. When Albus was alive, Severus had been able to have him gently probe the memory, not to determine whether his Occlumency shields would hold...although they did occasionally test those as well, they hadn't done it often in recent years...but to see whether the memory seemed complete, organic, and unaltered.

While he would deposit into the Pensieve his memories of accompanying Hermione to meet the other three at Grimmauld Place, those of testing the locket and the cup for curses, and any others that he thought might undermine the authenticity of the memory of his search for the locket, Severus doubted that he would have the time to examine memories of past Order meetings in order to craft just the right memory for the Dark Lord to view. He would have to rely on his raw skill, and although that was considerable, he was not sanguine that some indication of his deception might not creep in. Severus knew that the Dark Lord did occasionally have doubts about whether he was hiding anything, but he couldn't afford to have those doubts grow.

Severus sighed and lay down, certain that he would not sleep, but not yet ready to face his day. The next thing he knew, his body jerked in response to some unknown stimulus, and he opened his eyes. He must have fallen asleep. He reached for his watch. Ten-thirty. He blinked. It was still ten-thirty.

Severus shook off his surprise, wound his watch, and got out of bed. After he dressed, he went out to his sitting room and found a small bottle of nutritional potion on his table. There was a note with it.

Severus,

Here is your nutritional potion. It tastes best chilled. This one is vanilla, but I also have chocolate, orange, peppermint, and mixed vegetable. The latter is the one that Minerva prefers. It tastes primarily of spinach. Let me know if you prefer a specific flavour, otherwise I'll send a different one each time. You can tell me this evening at the staff meeting.

I hope you are feeling better.

Poppy

Severus groaned. He had forgotten about the staff meeting, which was to be followed by a meeting of the Heads of House, though he was not attending the latter meeting. As if his life weren't miserable enough.

After casting a cooling charm on the potion and quickly chugging it down, Severus decided that there was no point in procrastinating. He would be called by the Dark Lord soon, and in addition to learning the results of the search of the Black house, he would want to know why he hadn't been informed about the raid on the manor. Severus could honestly say that he hadn't known about it and tell him that the smaller meeting that had been held after he left must have been to plan that raid.

One step after another, he reminded himself as he rode the stairs up to the Headmistress's Office to deposit his memories into her Pensieve. Just one step after the other . . .

Severus heard someone downstairs, and then the portrait began to scream invectives. He suppressed a groan. Everyone had been told to stay away from Grimmauld Place all day that Sunday. He wanted to hex the fool who could not follow instructions. He was essentially finished, anyway. He closed the drawer he had just rummaged through and went to find the culprit.

"Lupin! What are you doing here?"

Lupin started, then turned to face Severus as he came down the stairs.

"Sorry, came to feed Buckbeak," Lupin said wearily. "Harry said he hadn't been fed since Friday night."

"I did it already," Severus said shortly. "The creature was likely to bite off my arm if I didn't."

"You found the..."

"Yes, I found the rats in the storage room." Seeing Lupin open his mouth, Severus added, "And I thawed them so he could actually eat them."

It had been disgusting, filling the sack with frozen rats, thawing them, and tossing them to the beast, but he had seemed appreciative, then after eating, he had curled up and sleepily watched Severus as he searched the attic. As Severus walked past him to leave, Buckbeak had given him what Severus assumed was a friendly bump in the leg with his head. Practically knocked him over with that gesture of affection, but Severus decided that that was better than becoming Hippogriff fodder. The creature should be moved back to Hogwarts. It would be unlikely to be discovered at this point, if anyone even still cared. And if no one was left alive to feed the Hippogriff, it would die in the attic. He would speak to Minerva about it.

"Oh." Lupin just stood there.

"Was there anything else?" Severus asked impatiently.

"I thought I'd have a cup of tea."

Severus sneered. "Molly didn't drown you all in tea already?"

Lupin blushed. "Well, she did, but I thought . . . a few minutes of quiet." Severus just looked down at him from his position on the stairs. "I could fix you a cup too. If you want."

Severus restrained himself from sighing, rolling his eyes, or cursing. "Very well. But stay out of my way."

Lupin nodded and stepped toward the hallway. "You don't want a cup?"

"I need to finish the room I was searching," Severus said. "I will need to excise this . . . *interruption* from my memory as it is."

"Come down to the kitchen when you are through, then," Remus said.

Severus snorted and turned and went back upstairs. He heard Lupin's footsteps headed toward the kitchen. Fifteen minutes later, he was finished searching the house. He had begun with the kitchen and storerooms, then gone on to the ground floor before going up to the attic and discovering that the Hippogriff needed feeding. After he had searched the attic, Severus had worked his way down to the first floor. It had been tedious and he felt covered with a layer of grime. He was also thirsty.

Lupin looked up as Severus entered the kitchen. "I made a pot if you'd like a cup."

Severus nodded. Since he had thrown Lupin out of his rooms over a year ago, they had spent no time alone together. Severus had been uncomfortable with Lupin's friendly overtures as it was, as well as his inability to remember not to call him "Sev"...that was a privilege reserved for very few. No one called him that now, and Lupin, no matter what delusions he might harbour about their relationship, had never been welcome to do so. But on that day when the werewolf had shown up with the bottle of firewhisky and Severus had chucked him out, Severus had only recently learned that the Headmaster was preparing for his death, and the last thing that he wanted was someone pretending to be his friend. It didn't help matters that on his previous visit, Lupin had drunk half a bottle of firewhisky and become too drunk to leave, then was sick all over his sitting room. Severus had put him in his own bed, a sacrifice in itself, but then the stinking drunk had called him "Sev" and pulled him down into a sloppy, drunken embrace and tried to kiss him. Only on the cheek, but it was still revolting.

Severus sat down at the table across from Lupin and sipped his tea. Still hot. Lupin must have cast a Cosy Charm on the teapot. Severus had never bothered to learn that one, just reheating his tea if it cooled off.

"How are things at the Burrow?" Severus asked.

Lupin shrugged. "You know about last night? Or this morning, I guess it was."

Severus nodded.

"Somewhat chaotic, but calmer. O'Donald was still there when I left, but she'd fallen asleep sitting up. She said that Dora will be fine."

Severus narrowed his eyes. Again, the selfish werewolf. Johnson was dead, Weasley was likely going to suffer the effects of the *Conruptus* on his leg for the rest of his life, the elderly prisoners were emaciated wrecks, but his darling wife takes a Stunner and a Petrificus, and he mentions only her.

"And the others?" Severus asked sharply.

"Angelina Johnson . . ."

"I know about her."

"Weasley will be fine. He was up walking around already this morning. Limping, but not in any pain, he said. No one else was injured significantly." Lupin sighed. "I didn't

want Dora to come on the raid, but she insisted. She's the one who got the information from Narcissa, and..."

"First of all, Lupin, you are telling me too much...the mention of Narcissa's name was highly imprudent of you," Severus said. "I am not supposed to know anything about the fate of the two Malfoys. Anything at all. Particularly not that they may have provided the Order with any assistance. I may have guessed that myself, but that is a different thing altogether. Secondly, your concern for your darling bride is understandable but of no interest to me, particularly given the fact that Johnson is dead and Weasley is permanently injured."

Lupin looked at him quietly for a moment, then he said softly, "Dora's pregnant."

With that statement, Severus understood Lupin's concern. Either hex alone could have imperiled the pregnancy. Both hexes together were almost guaranteed to cause a miscarriage.

"I see," Severus said.

"Only two months. No one else knows. Except Poppy and Melina, of course. And now you." Remus sighed. "I wanted Poppy to look at her right away, but Dora wouldn't hear of it. Of course, she was right. It's hard to believe that Angelina is dead. She actually woke up for a while. We thought she would be all right."

"Minerva needs to know...about Tonks. And Arthur, as well," Severus said.

"Dora doesn't want anyone to know. She is adamant about it. She wants to be treated just as usual."

"That's one of the most idiotic things I have heard in a long time, Lupin, and I hear stupidity on a daily basis." Severus glared at him. "She will participate in no more dangerous activities. You will insist upon it. You are the child's father...I assume you are...and you have a say in it. Her desire to continue going on raids is absurd. It is fine for her to endanger herself, but she should not imperil the baby as well. You will tell her that."

Lupin opened his mouth then closed it, shifting in his chair and looking uncomfortable.

"Are you a man or not, Lupin? Foolish question," Severus said with a sneer.

"We weren't planning to have children this soon. It was an accident," Lupin said as though that explained everything.

"If you are saying that she doesn't want the child, there are better ways of dealing with that situation than allowing herself to be hexed," Severus said.

"No, no, I'm not saying that. We both want the baby. But we hadn't planned it. She thinks it's important to keep fighting You Know Who. She doesn't want our child born into a world with You Know Who in it."

"She is not indispensable to the Order, and you know that. There are others who are fighting him." Severus looked at him with hard eyes. "You need not tell Minerva. I shall. Tell Tonks whatever you like about it."

Lupin nodded. "Thanks, Sev."

"And do not call me that." The fool believed they were friends just because he didn't want a pregnant witch to be hexed.

"Sorry. It must remind you of..."

"It reminds me of nothing but the fact that you presume too much, Lupin," Severus said disdainfully.

Lupin looked down into his teacup. "I'm sorry, Severus. Whatever I did. I'm sorry."

Severus's lip curled in disgust. "You don't remember almost *killing* me?"

"No, I meant . . . whatever I did more recently. I thought . . . I'd thought we were getting over that." He shrugged.

Severus shook his head. "I tried to call a truce for the Headmaster's sake. That was all. You read too much into it, and then you took advantage of my attempt at tolerance."

Lupin looked back up, his brow furrowed.

"I do not enjoy cleaning up after a drunken werewolf who pukes all over my sitting room and then stinks up my bed with his putrid carcass, and who then can't even utter a simple 'thank you' the next morning," Severus spat.

"I threw up?" Lupin asked.

"Threw up! Projectile vomit, Lupin." Severus did not hide his disgust.

"I didn't remember. You weren't there in the morning." Lupin shook his head. "I'm sorry."

Severus snorted. "Hopefully, marriage has curbed your drinking. Fatherhood should. If it doesn't, your child will be better off without you. Your wife, too."

Remus nodded. "It was . . . it was a phase."

"And aren't I the privileged one to share that lovely phase of your life with you!" Severus said sarcastically. "Didn't have any friends who would put up with it?"

Remus twitched one shoulder.

Severus stood. "Clean up here." He paused in the doorway and turned his head to look at Lupin. "Make sure Tonks doesn't do anything foolish. Be a man. Take care of your wife."

He didn't wait for Lupin to react. He left the house as quickly as he could, crossed over to the park, and Disappeared.

As he walked up to the castle from the gates, Severus remembered the man who had been his father, who had been his father until he abandoned him. The last year that he was still around...and he hadn't been around much...he had come home smelling of alcohol and cigarettes, and then he would sit and drink more, sitting and smoking and drinking in the dark. Severus would come down the steps and sit on them, watching the cigarette end glowing and fading, glowing and fading with each puff. He would hope that his father would get up, see him, and bring him up to bed, tucking him in as he used to, but he never did. The few times that his father did see him, he would just ignore him as he tripped drunkenly up the stairs. Then one day, his father was gone, and it was just him and his mother, with frequent frightening visits from his grandfather.

Severus didn't give a damn about the offspring of the werewolf and the Metamorphmagus, but any child deserved better than a drunken father. The kid would already be starting life with handicaps: not only not a pureblood, but the child of a half-blood and a werewolf. It was possibly worse than being a half-blood or even a Muggle-born.

Up in the Headmistress's Office, Severus encountered no one. He took the Pensieve from its cabinet and readied himself to deposit bits of memory in it, concentrating to remove just those involving Lupin, but then he stopped. He needed to inform Minerva about the pregnancy first. He disliked going up to her suite uninvited, but it was important that he do that before he went to see the Dark Lord. If the Dark Lord killed him or kept him captive, it would be too late to do it, and he did not know when, if ever,

Minerva would think to look at the memories he had deposited in the Pensieve. He knew...and trusted...that she did not look at them while he was away, only viewing those memories she explicitly requested to see, such as the one she had viewed the day before. Severus had no reason to believe that she would simply discard his memories if he were to die, but he doubted that viewing them would be one of her first priorities, either.

He climbed the spiral brass staircase up to the suite and knocked at the door. A few moments later, he heard someone crossing the room. Minerva, dressed but looking sleepy, opened it to him.

"Severus. Come in. Back from headquarters?" she asked, opening the door more widely.

"Yes. And before I deposit the memories of the interruptions into the Pensieve, I needed to speak with you."

Minerva sat in one of the armchairs and Severus took a seat on the sofa.

"There were supposed to be no interruptions," Minerva said with some irritation.

"Gryffindors are never ones to follow rules," Severus scoffed. "Lupin showed up before I was done."

"Why? What couldn't wait until you were through?"

"Supposedly he came to feed the Hippogriff. I had already done that since it was obvious the beast was hungry." Lest it seem he'd acted out of the goodness of his nonexistent heart, Severus added, "It was that or be unable to search the attic."

"Of course."

Severus thought she was humouring him, but he continued. "Lupin still stayed, but he kept out of my way. Before I left, I spoke to him. Tonks is pregnant."

"What?!"

"She is with child. Lupin said it was unplanned but not unwanted. Nonetheless, I thought you and Arthur should know. It could be dangerous for her to participate in any other Order raids. Lupin wanted her to stay out of it, but apparently appeasing her was more important to him than protecting the life of his child. Hardly surprising, I suppose, coming from him. But I believe that he has seen the error of his ways."

"We would not have sent her to the manor if we had known. You are correct to tell me this," Minerva said. "It is one thing if she happens to need to defend herself in an unexpected situation, and it's quite another for her to place herself in such a situation." Minerva shook her head. "It is difficult enough to know that people are likely to die and that I cannot protect every child at Hogwarts, but we *can* protect that baby...we can at least keep Nymphadora from participating in anything that would make her a target. Thank you for telling me, Severus."

"Mmph. Someone needs to think clearly," Severus said. "I need to go see the Dark Lord. I hope I will be back before the staff meeting..."

"Can't you go afterward? You told him about it yesterday," Minerva said, surprised herself that she remembered that that was part of the conversation which had taken place after the poison was tested on Higgs.

Severus hesitated. "I am concerned that he has not called me. I believe from the way my Mark felt earlier today that he has been calling others to him, but I do not know why he has not called me. The entire time I was searching headquarters, I expected to feel his summons."

"Perhaps he has found others to blame for the failures. He also expects you to be searching for the locket today. If that is important to him, he would want you to finish that before he saw you. And he seemed interested in the staff meeting."

"He always is interested in staff meetings, though there is rarely anything of use to him in them. I think it's more of an obsessive interest on his part than a useful one," Severus replied.

"Probably. Be sure you remove any memory of the other meeting. That would be suspicious to him."

"Mm. That there would be a meeting of Heads of House to which I am not invited is suspicious even to me, Minerva," Severus said with a thin smile.

Minerva hesitated only a moment, then she said, "We will be discussing strategy. What to do if Hogwarts is attacked, who will do what, where the younger students will be sent, what defences we will mount, and so forth. This is a castle and we will defend it as one. I've invited Hooch to meet with me later tonight to discuss forming a small broomstick squad of select staff and a few older students. We will have a multi-pronged defence whatever else happens. When I meet with Filius, Pomona, and Alroy, I will explain that you and I have already met, and that you have a very special role to play, which is why you are not present..."

"What of Slytherin?" Severus asked, interrupting.

"I will speak to Sinistra separately. She will work with your prefects to get the young ones to safety. She will also have to keep them all together...the older students, too. I know that not all of them are from Death Eater families, but enough of them are that we cannot risk having them added to the toe-rag's numbers. She will do it."

Severus shook his head. "I doubt she will be able to keep students like Goyle and Nott from joining the Dark Lord when he attacks. They and others will be vipers striking from within."

"That is what we must try to avoid. We may not be successful, but we can't simply allow them to run loose. We have to try to confine them."

Severus nodded. "I am unhappy with that, but I see no other alternative, unless you were to take away their wands and lock them up in advance of the attack."

"And then it would be very obvious that we had advance warning of the attack," Minerva said. "No, we can only do so much beforehand. Even the plans I make with the Heads of House will need to be done in such a way that they believe I am simply being overly cautious. They cannot believe that I have any definite foreknowledge of an attack. That will be an impediment to planning, but at least we will have some plans in place. I don't want folk running about willy-nilly. Besides, they will wonder why I would keep the school open if I believed it was going to be attacked."

"If you were to close the school early, the Dark Lord would only attack as the students boarded the Hogwarts Express. That would draw everyone away from the castle, since the staff would come down to defend the students, he would still be able to take Hogwarts, and Potter would still rush to its defence. It would be mayhem and far more people would be likely to die." At Minerva's expression, Severus said, "He has actually spoken of doing that if I am unable to lower the wards when he wants me to. He would have no compunction whatsoever about killing dozens of children. It is one of the few consolations I have, that in assisting him to attack the castle, I am at least averting that."

Minerva nodded wearily. "Unless he calls you sooner, stay here for dinner and the staff meeting. You can leave immediately after that." She looked over at him. "Did you sleep at all last night?"

"I did not sleep before Crouch fetched me, but after I returned to my rooms, I slept for a couple of hours. Then Poppy woke me up to put that potion on my back, but I was able to sleep again after that."

"Yes, she mentioned that when I saw her after lunch. She did not say that Nymphadora was pregnant, though, and she must have known."

"I have no doubt that Tonks asked that no one be told." Severus was beginning to appreciate the mediwitch's sense of discretion, although he did think that this might have been an exceptional circumstance...a witch running about engaging in duels while pregnant couldn't be anything which Poppy approved of.

Minerva nodded. "Of course." She stood. "I will see you at dinner, Severus. If I do not, I will assume that you have been called. I am going to lie down for a few minutes."

"I will deposit my memories in your Pensieve now, then," Severus replied, standing.

"Very good."

Severus had found dinner scarcely palatable, and he only remained, pushing his food around his plate, because the staff meeting was scheduled for immediately after dinner. Finally, he pushed away from the table and stood. He would wait for the others in the staff room. On his way out, he stopped next to Poppy and bent to speak to her.

"Madam Pomfrey, I anticipate being out of the castle this evening," he said in a low voice. "I might be back quite late. I tell you so that you will not be surprised if I am unavailable for the final treatment."

Poppy nodded briskly. "Come to me when you return...as soon as you are able after you return," she amended, knowing he would likely go to see Minerva first.

"It may be quite late."

"That is of no consequence. Eleven at night, two in the morning, whenever it is."

Severus made a noncommittal noise, then turned and left. Foolish witch. As though one more treatment would make any difference, particularly this close to the end of his life. A part of him, though, was grateful that she cared at all, even knowing that he was on the way to his death. She would probably see to it that there was another nutritional potion delivered to his quarters that night, and she would continue to send them twice daily until he was dead. That thought brought him a peculiar, unidentifiable sensation, which he shook off as he entered the staff room.

Uncomfortable at the notion of sitting alone at the table waiting for the others, Severus took a seat in the wingback chair in the corner of the room. From that vantage point, he could see everyone who entered, but as he was in the shadows and not near the table, which would be the focal point for anyone entering the room for the meeting, few people, if any, would notice him. He would wait until Minerva arrived, then he would take his place on her right. Until then, he would simply wait...and perhaps overhear some interesting gossip.

Filius and Pomona entered first. Severus grimaced when, after they had each taken their seats, Pomona leaned over and kissed Filius. The kiss grew more passionate, and Severus closed his eyes. He was grateful when he heard the door open again. It was MacAirt and Vector, two relatively tolerable colleagues. MacAirt spotted him immediately, looking at him, raising an eyebrow, but then looking away, not greeting him and giving no indication to the others that he had seen him. Points to MacAirt. Sinistra came in next with Firenze, then Filch, quickly followed by Trelawney, with Minerva and Crouch just behind her.

As Minerva came in, Severus stood and stepped toward the table. The others who were already there had no time to be startled by that before a second, more startling event occurred.

Trelawney saw him, and as soon as she did, her eyes rolled into the back of her head, her body stiffened, her head went back, and a loud, hollow groan emitted from her mouth.

"A phoenix burns, a phoenix dies.

"A phoenix rises, a lioness stalks.

"A snake commands, a snake obeys.

"A snake strikes, a snake falls.

"A phoenix flares, a phoenix flies.

"A snake sleeps, a lioness cries.

"A lioness breathes, a snake suspires.

"A phoenix sings, a lioness leaps.

"A snake dies, a lioness roars.

"A snake sheds, a lioness weeps.

"A phoenix burns, a phoenix lives."

Crouch on one side of her and Minerva on the other took Trelawney's arms as she went limp for a moment, then blinked and looked around at everyone staring at her. She looked up at Minerva. Minerva patted her shoulder.

"You know, Sybill, I think you seem a little tired this evening. Why don't you let Robbie walk you back to your tower, hmm?"

"If you think so," Sybill said with a nod, backing up and running into Hagrid, who had just come up behind them and was standing in the open doorway. Sybill jumped.

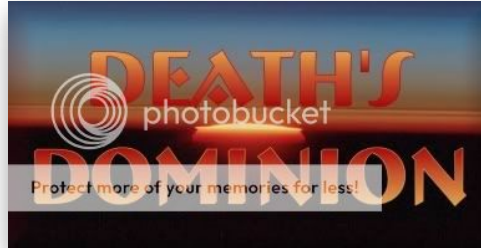
Robbie smiled down at her. "It's only Hagrid."

Hagrid greeted her with a big grin, unsure what was going on, but happy to put her at ease, then Robbie led her out of the staff room. Just outside the door, he looked back at Minerva and nodded. She smiled, and Severus just shook his head and took his seat at the table. He shared Hermione's estimation of divination: a load of rubbish, most of it. But he also knew the power it held over people, and he had seen the devastation that belief in it could cause. Everything that had come from Trelawney's mouth was gibberish, but this was still one memory of the staff meeting he would have to excise before he saw the Dark Lord again.

Chapter Twenty-Four: They shall have stars

Chapter 25 of 34

Preparations abound in anticipation of a coming attack on Hogwarts.



Chapter Twenty-Four: *They shall have stars*

21 30 April 1998

Hermione looked at Neville in disbelief. "You want us to *dowhat?*?"

The open mouths and wide eyes of the others were testament to the fact that Hermione's disbelief was shared.

"You heard me the first time, Hermione," Neville said, sounding more confident than anyone had heard him sound before. "I've been doing a lot of thinking over the last couple of days. We need to be prepared, and in this case, being prepared means being prepared to kill. To completely ensure that a Death Eater does not have another opportunity to curse another person. Let's say you're a Death Eater, Hermione. I Petrify you or maybe Stun you. A few minutes later, another Death Eater comes along, casts a *Finite* or a *Rennervate*, and, whish, you're up and casting hexes again. Evil hexes, Hermione, deadly curses like the *Avada Kedavra*. You remember the pictures that Professor Snape had on his walls last year. *Those* are the kinds of hexes we will be defending against, and those are the kinds of hexes we have to learn."

"But those are Dark Magic," Dennis Creevey said in a hushed voice, as if the mere mention of Dark Magic could bring some doom down upon them.

Neville shrugged. "What's Dark Magic? I think you could probably tickle someone to death, and that would be dreadful, but the spell itself isn't Dark. I'm not talking about casting Unforgivables...and that's just a legal definition. It has nothing to do with the spell itself. *Obliviate* may be as bad as the *Imperio*, but the Ministry finds the first useful and the second dangerous, so the second one is declared Unforgivable and the first isn't. Not that misuse of the *Obliviate* can't get you in trouble, but it's not a mandatory life sentence, and it's usually overlooked entirely. We need to learn spells that will really protect us from attackers by making sure they can't attack us again."

"The best defence is a good offense," Dean Thomas said thoughtfully and nodding.

Hermione had been thinking while Neville had been talking. "All right, I agree with you...in principle! But what do you have in mind specifically? We can't very well be casting potentially deadly spells at each other, not even to learn how to defend against them."

"I came up here earlier this afternoon and asked the Room to give me an environment and targets appropriate for practising, um, certain sorts of spells. It gave me some very life-like models, dummies, I guess you could call them. They didn't fight back, of course, but I was able to try out a few of the more destructive spells I found. As soon as we are agreed about this, the Room will provide us more dummies tonight. I think we need to meet daily to practise, though not all together." Neville looked around the room. "I think if we pair up each sixth- and seventh-year student with one or two younger students, that would work. Set up your own practice schedules...it won't matter if they overlap, but it would be good if we didn't all disappear at once. Don't ever come and practise on your own...even you seventh-years! You never know when there could be a problem or an accident," Neville said sternly. "But since we aren't learning duelling and we merely need to perfect casting the hexes, I think that would be our best plan. Today is Sunday, and we should all try to get in some practice over the next few days, then I thought we could all meet again, all of us together, on Thursday night after dinner and we can discuss our progress and whether there are any new spells we want to try out."

There was a little discussion and some argument, but when Hermione and Terry Boot both backed Neville's proposal, the rest agreed to it, as well.

"Now I want to make something clear," Neville said. "Even though I have invited a lot of you younger students to join us, I only did that because I think you need to be prepared for the unexpected. If there is an attack on . . . on Hogwarts or the train or anyplace else that we may be, then if the third-, fourth-, and fifth-year students can stay safely in their common rooms or wherever the teachers or any other adults say to go, you are to do that and remain in safety. I have to have your word on that, all of you who aren't NEWTs level, or you're out now. You'll need to stay behind with the younger kids," he added, "and be their last defenders, if necessary. You can't leave them."

"But what if we can't get to safety?" Dennis Creevey piped up.

"Then you do what you must to defend yourself and stay out of the way of the adults...the teachers and Aurors and such...so that they can do what they have to without worrying about you, and then as soon as possible, try to find a group of younger students and keep them safe and reassure them."

"What about the Slytherins?" Barbara asked.

Neville hesitated at the third-year Hufflepuff's question. He had used word of mouth to invite everyone there, enlisting Hannah Abbott and Terry Boot to help him contact the Hufflepuffs and Ravenclaws. He had drawn up the lists very carefully, but had included no Slytherins on them.

"If you become separated from your own Housemates, you must find any group of younger students that needs your assistance. It doesn't matter what House they belong to, even Slytherin. But we all know that there are certain Slytherins with close ties to You-Know-Who," Neville said, "and even if we invited someone to join us who we believed to be trustworthy, we could still be betrayed somehow. They aren't all bad, of course, but we have to be careful."

"There's Blaise, though," Susan Bones said. "And Marietta was a Ravenclaw, not a Slytherin, and we were still betrayed."

"Zabini is okay," Ginny said, remembering the handsome Slytherin's defence of Eleanor Branstone and Susan a few days before, "but I agree with Neville, and I wouldn't

invite him or any other Slytherin to join our meetings. Besides, they probably all know the kinds of spells we need to practise. As for betrayal, I think we remember the high cost of that from last time."

"What should we call ourselves?" Colin asked.

"Hogwarts Defence League," Dean suggested.

"They're Death Eaters, so maybe we could be, um, Life Lovers?" Eleanor asked.

Hermione suppressed a giggle, but not everyone else did.

"I think we should still be Dumbledore's Army," Ginny said as the laughter died down. "We're still fighting for what he believed in, and everyone knows that he was the one wizard Voldemort was afraid of. His Death Eaters will see that Dumbledore's Army is nothing to be sneezed at, either. And," she said, looking over at Eleanor, who was blushing, "Professor Dumbledore certainly loved life."

Other than Dean Thomas, who thought the word "League" should be in their name somewhere, everyone agreed, and Dumbledore's Army was reborn.

"Are we all agreed with Longbottom's plan, then?" Terry asked. At the nods and sounds of agreement, he turned to Hermione. "Do you have another contract like the one that we all signed before?"

"No, I didn't know we would need one. It takes a while for me to cast the correct charms." Hermione looked at the assembled students, all of whom looked serious. "We will rely on your words of honour," she said, "and you will find that there are consequences far worse than what Marietta Edgecomb endured if you ever break your word. I think we all know the seriousness of the situation, especially with the attack on Azkaban early this morning, and many of us have lost friends and relatives to Voldemort and his Death Eaters. I think your word of honour is sufficient. If it is not, then no punishment that I could devise would deter you from breaking it."

"What about a wand oath?" Michael Corner suggested.

Hermione and Neville exchanged glances.

"No," Neville said, "we will all rely upon each other's honour, now and in any battle. For my part, you all have my word of honour that I will do my utmost to protect any of you, to protect Hogwarts, and to fight Voldemort to my dying breath if need be, and that I will not betray any of you."

One by one, each of the students bound themselves not by magic but by their honour, promising their loyalty and protection to each other and to Hogwarts, the younger ones being prompted to add that they promised to remain in whatever safety they could and only to join in any fighting when they had no option for retreat or in order to defend students younger than themselves.

Once they had done that, Neville divided them up into groups of three and one group of four, trying to keep them together by House, since he thought that it would be less suspicious that way if they were seen together.

"We don't have the same worries we had when Umbridge was here," Neville said, "but I believe that discretion is still important, so no talking about what we're doing unless you're in the Room of Requirement...never assume you can't be overheard by someone no matter where you are."

"Constant vigilance!" Ginny said in a gruff voice, imitating Moody and eliciting some laughter.

"Precisely," Neville said. "But I think that our motto should be, 'Don't be a victim.' There have been too many victims. Even if we die, we won't die victims! We will fight and we will do whatever we must, including using some very nasty spells if we have to."

"What ones did you have in mind?" Hermione asked.

"I think we might as well begin," Neville replied, looking around him. "I found two spells that were not terribly difficult to learn, although they may seem rather gruesome at first. But remember our motto: we won't be their victims. We cannot cast a little tickler and think that will keep them from killing our friends and our teachers. So I thought we would start with those two. The first is *Decapito* and the second is *Exentero*."

"You weren't kidding about these spells, were you?" Hermione asked rhetorically. In response to a few puzzled expressions, she explained, "*Decapito* cuts off someone's head and *Exentero*, um, eviscerates someone. Cuts out their entrails, right?"

Neville nodded. "Yes, it essentially disembowels someone. The dummies, or whatever they are that the Room provides, don't bleed, but otherwise they look pretty realistic, and it's disgusting. If you're going to puke, get it over with today."

"What if we . . . we can't?" Barbara asked timidly.

"Try it," Neville said. "Give it a go. If it's too much for you, just practise Stunning and Petrifying, but I want to see everyone try each hex at least three times before deciding they can't manage it. Remember, in life, these people will be Death Eaters trying to kill us...if not you, then your friend or family member. You don't want to be thinking that it's all right to cast these whenever you like, but in a battle with killers, things are different. On Thursday, we'll pick two more hexes to practise."

"Maybe less bloody ones?" Susan Bones asked.

Neville shrugged. "Maybe less bloody ones, but bloody or not, this is serious stuff. If you kill someone, they're just as dead whether you cut off their head or used a nice bloodless Killing Curse. It might make it too easy if it weren't so bloody and disgusting. Killing should never be easy, and that's one of, one of *Voldemort's* evils. Maybe that's why the *Avada Kedavra* is an Unforgivable and other lethal curses aren't. I don't know."

"It's partly that," Hermione said, "the fact that it seems so innocuous...for something that causes death...but also because you can't resuscitate someone who's been hit by the Killing Curse. Of course, cutting off someone's head pretty much eliminates any chance of survival or resuscitation, too."

With that, Neville called upon the Room to release the dummies, and he began to teach the students how to disembowel a Death Eater.

Melina furrowed her brow. "Yes, I think I can help, and Dad, too. I will need him. We will need to create a new potion. It would be good to have another Potions master work on it with him. Estelle can help, but her talents are very narrowly focussed on the use of plants in potions, as you know. From what you have indicated, we haven't much time." She shook her head as she pondered their situation. "As I say, I think I can help, but I can't guarantee anything. I will need as much information as you have, and Arthur will have to help, and by donating more than just the memory you just showed me."

"You, Murdoch, and Estelle could work on the potion on the island, that way Robert could assist you," Minerva said. "As for Arthur, I will speak to him. He will make himself available to you."

Melina shook her head, staring at the Pensieve and thinking about Arthur. "You know how most wizards feel about blood, but that's what will be required...and soon, if we are to have any chance of developing an effective potion, though there will be no means to test it reliably. As far as other measures . . . given both the memory and your interpretation of the prophecy, I believe there may be other supportive steps we can take that should help." She looked up. "I am not used to devising treatments in this way, particularly not in response to a prophecy. You have said yourself that you are unsure of most of its meaning."

"We are," Robbie said, "but I believe that much is clear. It is at least likely, given what else we know. It was one of the possibilities we had already considered."

"Have you consulted Gertrude and Gareth about it?"

"Not yet," Minerva replied. "We thought it best to contact you immediately."

"Even if you are correct, it may be too late to create a new potion in time. I will do my best, though, and there are other measures that can be taken. They may even be sufficient, though I would prefer not to rely on them." Melina shook her head again. "It may all be futile, in any case, as I doubt this would be a public event or that people would stand idly by while you cast spells and administered potions."

"I will worry about that aspect; you needn't," Robbie replied. "What are the other measures?"

"There is a specific spell that I can teach...a few, actually, but this one would be vital with or without a potion. Anyone whom you believe might be in a position to cast it will need to learn it."

Minerva and Robbie looked at each other, and Minerva nodded. "The two of us will learn them. There is at least one other whom you can teach, as well," she said.

"I will need to have a volunteer to practise on. Someone both trustworthy and trusting," Melina said.

"We will find someone for you," Minerva replied. "When?"

"Tomorrow. But I will need to see Arthur today, after which I will go to St. Mungo's and look at his records."

"He will be at work right now, but we will find some pretext to call him away," Minerva said. "You will wait here for him?"

Melina shook her head. "I need to return home briefly and fetch some supplies, but I will not take long. We will need someplace to meet undisturbed."

"You will have it," Minerva said. "Whatever you require. And I will find our volunteer." She looked at the clock. "I can have him here after lunch and discuss it with him."

Hermione stood nervously in front of the Headmistress's desk. Professor Crouch had pulled her aside as soon as she came in for Defence class and told her that the Headmistress needed to see her and that she was excused from classes for the rest of the afternoon.

"You are an adult and a full member of the Order, Miss Granger, and I would like to ask you to prepare to take on a specific responsibility. It may be that you will never be called on to exercise that responsibility, but I would like you to be prepared. Are you willing?" Minerva asked.

"What responsibility?"

"I cannot tell you. If you agree, then you will know what it is you have been prepared for if the occasion arises. Until then, you only need to be prepared."

"How can I be prepared if I don't know what I am preparing for?" Hermione asked, perplexed.

"If you agree, you will acquire a few specific skills that will be useful if certain circumstances come about. You will not be the only one being prepared. We do not know when, how, or even if, events will require anyone to use the skills. We need to have more than one person trained in order to maximise the likelihood that if the situation arises, there is someone available who can act quickly. I assure you, you will recognise when you need to act. It will not be ambiguous at all. And we will do what we can to ensure that you are not on your own...at least initially."

Hermione knit her brow. "I find it confusing, but if you say that it is important, I am willing. What do I have to do?"

"Go upstairs to my suite. Melina is there. Do as she asks. Oh, and Miss Granger," Minerva added as Hermione started toward the stairs, "I do not need to tell you, I am sure, not to let anyone know what you are doing. Not even Professor Snape, for his own safety."

Melina was pleased with Muggle-born Hermione's grasp of the basic concepts she presented to her as essential background. It was a relief not to have to explain what the diaphragm was, the differences between arteries and veins, or the ways in which respiration and circulation were connected and vital to life. That understanding would make teaching Hermione the spells and other techniques much easier.

Gareth arrived in Minerva's office, his demeanour much the same as always, although Minerva believed his smile was a bit nervous.

"Your volunteer guinea pig has arrived," Gareth said. "Where do you want me?"

"Upstairs. The guest room," Minerva replied. "You informed your mother?"

"Yes, though I wasn't completely sure I should. She seemed undisturbed, however, and she gave me this for you." Gareth dug into the bag he carried over one shoulder and pulled out several sheets of paper clipped together. He handed it to Minerva. "She wanted me to get a good night's sleep last night, but she was up all night with this. I haven't had time to look at more than the first and last page, but . . . I think you will be pleased."

Minerva grimaced as she flipped through the document. "It's all Arithmantic." She had brushed up on her Arithmancy and become somewhat more adept at following Arithmantic calculations, but the level at which Gertrude and Gareth were working was still beyond her ability to interpret them unaided.

"She didn't have time to prepare a report. She said she would send something with Fawkes later tonight, but I can sit with you after dinner and go over it with you," Gareth offered. "If, of course, my darling cousin doesn't kill me or turn me into a vegetable or something." He grinned, but Minerva still detected some apprehension.

"I am certain you will be fine," Minerva said. "Melina will be monitoring you the entire time, and it's not as extreme as what I had to learn to do last year. She is a good teacher and an adept and talented Healer. I wouldn't let her do this if I didn't believe you would be safe."

Gareth shrugged slightly. "Compared to what Snape has to do, this should be positively restful, and if it helps, well, I did say I'd watch his back. If this is the way I can do that, I'm willing. All assuming, of course, that the claptrap out of Trelawney's mouth is more than just nonsense *and* that you have interpreted it correctly."

Minerva shook her head. "We don't know whether our interpretation is correct. There is a lot of ambiguity in it. You know I do not like to rely on prophecy...I still don't think I believe in prophecies despite our experience with them. I think that who it is that has knowledge of the prophecy is more predictive than the prophecy itself."

"You always spoke highly of Quin...and of Aine," Gareth said, mentioning Quin's daughter.

"He didn't do very much predicting, though, and his divination was not as painted with obscurity, and Aine . . ." Minerva shrugged. "She is a typical witch of her line, better with interpersonal relations than anything else, and I don't think that what she does is even a matter of prediction in the sense of 'seeing the future.' I think she is very good at sensing the compatibilities between people and whether a relationship between them...whether marriage, business partnership, or anything else...has a chance of success based upon how compatible they are."

"Yet you trust in Arithmancy to help you make decisions, and you're trusting this prophecy now," Gareth replied.

"Arithmancy is different, you know that yourself. And this prophecy . . . perhaps our interpretation of it is influenced by what we already believed might be one possibility. In

any case, this is a sensible course to take, prophecy or no prophecy."

Gareth shrugged. "It does seem reasonable, although even if you're right about what it is the villain will do, I don't know how any of you will be in a position to do anything about it."

"We will worry about that. Robbie has several ideas."

"Well, I'm off to die for the cause," Gareth said cheerfully.

"You aren't dying," Minerva said, rolling her eyes.

"I hope not. Mum might actually leave the island and hunt down Melina and whoever her inept trainee was."

"Hmmpf."

Gareth bent and gave his aunt a kiss on the cheek then went upstairs to the Headmistress's suite.

Melina looked over as Gareth came into the guest room. "Hey, Gary, thanks for coming. You're right on time. We're ready for you now."

Hermione returned Gareth's cheerful smile with a smile of her own, but he thought she looked nervous. Nervous was good in this situation, he thought. There was no room for overconfidence.

Gareth set his bag on the floor and took off his lightweight cape. "Do you want me to undress?"

"No, that's not necessary, but since you'll be lying on the bed, you should remove your shoes, and you'd likely be more comfortable without the sporran," Melina replied.

Gareth didn't respond. He simply removed his sporran, setting it on a small table next to a vase of flowers, then he sat on the edge of the bed and pulled off his short boots, pulling his *sgian dubh* from his sock and putting it in one of the boots before lying down.

"All right," Melina said briskly. "Because this could be extremely uncomfortable and certainly disconcerting if we were to do this while you were conscious, I am going to put you to sleep for a while. Knock you out. I'm using a spell rather than a potion, since that is easier for me to control, among other things."

Gareth nodded, indicating his understanding.

"I know that Aunt Minerva has already told you this, but I will explain it again. While you are unconscious, I will use a spell to paralyse your diaphragm." Melina turned toward Hermione. "If the situation arises in which you will need to implement these procedures, there will likely be other . . . other symptoms that you will notice. Do not be concerned about them, whatever they may be. It is essential that you remain focussed on the spell and on your patient. Whatever other symptoms may be exhibited, this one is deadly. You must not allow yourself to become distracted. If you are, you may have to recast the spell. Remember that."

Hermione nodded. "I understand."

"You needn't worry, Gareth," Melina said, a reassuring hand on his shoulder. "I will demonstrate for Hermione before I allow her to try it, and if she has difficulty, I can lift the paralysis very easily."

Gareth took a breath, let it out slowly, and said, "I am ready when you are." He turned his head and looked at Hermione with a grin. "Don't let this one beguile you with the Healing Arts...they are a fun hobby, but Arithmancy, that's exciting!"

Hermione laughed. As Hermione was still laughing and Gareth's eyes were sparkling with humour, Melina raised her wand.

"*Suain!*"

Gareth's eyes closed and his face went slack. Melina cast a few diagnostic spells, then nodded.

"Good. He will sleep for a few hours unless we awaken him with a counterspell before them, regardless of what we do," Melina said. Seeing Hermione's dubious expression, she added, "Go ahead, try to wake him up."

Hermione reached out and shook his shoulder, then she called his name, but Gareth slept on. Hermione drew her wand and cast a tickling jinx. He twitched slightly, but otherwise didn't respond.

"All right, now," Melina said. "As I explained earlier, the spell is called *Prospirator*, and the incantation is *Prospirote*, with a slight hesitation before the final syllable, 'te.' As you breathe, he will breathe. If you hold your breath, he will hold his breath. If you talk, laugh, eat, or anything else, his breathing will be somewhat disrupted. If you lose your awareness that you are breathing for him, the spell will fail, and he will not breathe. If you must speak, maintain your awareness of him, and speak in an unhurried, unexcited way, letting your speech follow your natural exhalations. Be sure to inhale fully while you are speaking...often when we speak, we don't. Because you are breathing for someone else, you need to remember that, particularly as he is larger than you are and the strength of your breathing will have an impact on how well he breathes. Remember that if you have a real patient, he or she may be more compromised than Gareth is. Gareth is perfectly healthy. A real patient may not be. It is vital to breathe as deeply and calmly as possible. This sounds easier than it may be for you. It can feel peculiar at first to be so aware of your breathing. I expect you to practise that aspect of your training every night before you go to sleep, being aware of your breathing, breathing deeply, and becoming comfortable with it."

Hermione nodded seriously.

"I am going to paralyse his diaphragm now and demonstrate the spell, then I will allow him to breathe on his own for a few minutes before you have a turn," Melina said, "and then you can ask any questions before you try it, okay?"

Hermione nodded again.

An hour and a half later, Hermione was lying beside Gareth on the bed, breathing for him and practising holding a conversation with Melina.

"Whoop!" Melina said. "You lost it, Hermione." She lifted the paralysing spell. "But you did very well. Twenty-seven minutes this time," she said, looking at her watch, which was very similar to Dumbledore's watch with its many hands.

"How can you tell from looking at that?" Hermione finally asked...she had wondered every time Melina had checked her watch.

Melina leaned over and showed her the watch and explained the existence of what she called "shadow hands" that allowed her to tell the time in an ordinary way.

"So, shall we try again? I want you to be able to sustain this for at least an hour without having to recast it. If you end up having to use the *Prospirator*, you will be performing it under more stressful conditions, and I would not be surprised if you have to recast it repeatedly. You may also have interruptions over which you have no control, so the greater your mastery, the more likely you will be successful."

"You never said what kind of spell...other than the one you are using...could cause someone to need another person to breathe for them," Hermione said.

"No, I didn't, did I," Melina said with a wry smile. "There are a number of things that could cause someone to be unable to breathe on their own, not just spells. But one spell that can have that effect is the *Petrificus Totalus*. If cast too strongly, a person can lose the ability to breathe, and they can die within minutes, or their breathing may simply be somewhat compromised and they can die slowly over several hours from very gradual suffocation."

Hermione blanched. "The books don't say that."

"It isn't terribly common, but a wizard accidentally killed his wife that way a few years ago. He only wanted to shut her up and go out for a night of drinking. When he got back, she was dead."

Hermione swallowed hard, remembering how casually she and others cast the spell...even on Neville Longbottom, just leaving him to lie on the floor unattended. "We could kill someone with it?"

"Not in the type of practising you do here at school, of course. There's always someone around to lift the Petrification, for one, and for another, it's unlikely that most students would cast the spell forcefully enough for it to have that effect. Casting it in extreme anger or fear has an effect on how strongly the spell takes," Melina said, trying to reassure her.

Hermione nodded. She didn't think she had ever cast it nearly that strongly.

"Ready to try again?" Melina asked. "Mind on your task?"

"Yes, I'm ready," Hermione replied.

"*Praecordiarigescere!*"

Gareth's breathing stopped.

Hermione sat up, pointed her wand at Gareth's midsection, then said softly, *Prospirote!* A deep green light emerged from the tip of the wand and expanded as it hit Gareth's body, then it faded, and Gareth's chest began to rise and fall in rhythm with Hermione's breathing. She lay back down.

"Don't forget your patient! You must not get too comfortable and fall asleep," Melina reminded her.

"I'm too nervous . . . to fall asleep," Hermione said, trying to breathe naturally between phrases.

Melina grinned.

After a few minutes, Hermione said, "Why is Professor . . . McGonagall having . . . me learn this?"

"I cannot tell you," Melina replied.

"But you know."

"We each know what we must know, or what is judged best for us to know. I have confidence in Aunt Minerva's judgment in this. In fact, knowing what I know, I can say that I have confidence in her decision both to train you and to tell you the least you need to know in order to be effective," Melina said. "Now, I suggest we discuss other topics. Arithmancy. Gareth mentioned you enjoy that."

"I don't know if . . . I can think about . . . it and remember . . . to breathe," Hermione said.

Melina laughed. "All right, then, I will read to you."

One hour and ten minutes later, Melina stood by the bed, flicked her wand at Gareth's head, and said, *Mosgail!*

Gareth let out a slight groan and opened his eyes. He blinked blearily. "So, I'm not dead. Or we all three are." His voice was hoarse.

"Go with your first guess, Gary," Melina said. "How do you feel?"

"I have a pounding headache," he replied, swallowing, "and I'm very thirsty. Other than that, I think I'm fine."

He sat up and took the glass of water Melina handed him. "And you tell me that I have to do this a few more times?" He sighed and drank his water.

"We shall see," Melina said, glancing at Hermione.

"I'm not the only one learning this?" Hermione asked.

"You must proceed as though you are the only person in the universe who knows how to perform that spell, Hermione," Melina replied. "Do not rely on the idea or the hope that someone else can or will take your place."

Hermione nodded.

"Now, do you want to practise the intravenous injections again?" Melina asked. "I think you have the mechanical method down pat, but I'm concerned about your comfort with the charms method."

"Not on me, thank you very much," Gareth said, standing up. "Don't like the idea of anything going into my blood, even something harmless." He shuddered. "You can asphyxiate me, if you wish, but no injections, please."

Melina laughed. "I had her practise on me, Gareth, so you aren't the only victim today."

Hermione brought the conversation back to the question she was asked. "You said that the charms method . . . that you wouldn't prefer it for whatever this potion is."

"That's right. I do not know how the potion itself might react to the magic of the charm, so I would prefer to have it delivered the old-fashioned Muggle way using a needle in the vein."

"Then why learn the charm at all?" Hermione asked.

"Because even using a Charmed needle, you may have difficulty both in breaking the skin and in finding the vein. If the veins collapse, you may have to resort to using the charm. And I am conscious and quite agreeable about having you stick the needle in my arm. Even unconscious or partially conscious, a patient's natural defensive magic may make that more difficult...the needle could simply break off."

Hermione knit her brow. "That used to happen to me when I was little...I had to have all my vaccinations for school, and the needles kept breaking. I remember I was upset about getting a shot. They finally distracted me with ice cream, but they had to use a much larger needle than the others they had tried. It didn't happen when I got older."

"I'm not surprised," Melina said. "Although they would probably have had much better luck with a finer gauge needle. So, shall we practise the charm?" Melina held out her bared arm, which had some slight yellow bruising on it.

Hermione nodded and picked up a vial of clear liquid from the table.

"You two have fun with your blood-sucking or whatever you're doing," Gareth said cheerfully as he shoved his sgian dubh back into his sock and pulled on his boots. "I'm going to find some chocolate biscuits, some peppermint tea, and some Headache Potion."

"No blood-sucking," Melina said with a laugh. "It's definitely not recommended under most circumstances."

Hermione wrinkled her nose, lifting her lip. "Good thing, too. That's disgusting."

Gareth laughed. "I was just joking, but whatever you're up to, I'll be in the sitting room if you need me."

"No, no current students," Minerva said, shaking her head as she looked at the list Hooch had just handed her.

"But..."

"You will of necessity be practising in another location. I cannot allow any students leave the grounds at the moment. In addition, two of these students aren't even of-age yet...Miss Weasley and Mr Peakes. As Headmistress, I cannot approve their participation. Of the older students . . . if when the time comes, they are available to you, you may enlist them...although without any preparation, I don't know whether they will be more a help or a hindrance to you. For the rest of the list, they all look acceptable, but I need Charlie Weasley for something else, so you will have to do without him, and you can have Vector, but not MacAirt or Sinistra...they also have other tasks. I'd rather not do without Bill Weasley, either, but I understand why you need him now, though I may have to ask him not to fly with you on the actual day. Good choices, Rolanda," Minerva said with an approving nod. "Good, strong flyers, quick thinkers, and all reliable, too, though I do have questions about a couple of them."

"There were a few Slytherins on my original list, but then I thought . . . it's not that I don't trust those individuals, but someone untrustworthy might notice or learn something of it," Hooch replied uneasily.

"That is always a problem, I know," Minerva said understandingly. "You know that I hold no prejudice against your House, Rolanda. I have a few older Slytherins on my own little list, but I know that they are not in any position to betray us even inadvertently. When the time comes, they will join us here."

"You speak as though an attack is a certainty, Minerva. You didn't the last time we met."

"If not Hogwarts itself, then the Hogwarts Express when the students leave. You can see why I cannot make plans to simply close the school at this point."

Hooch nodded seriously. "I will be happy to help. I have asked Bill to join us. I hope you don't mind. He should be here soon."

"I believe that must be he on his way up now," Minerva said.

A moment later, the door to the office opened, and Bill Weasley stepped in.

The smiling wizard shook Minerva's hand. "So, you're in charge of this."

"I don't mean to upstage your father, Bill," Minerva said, "and I have informed him of some of the preparations...both him and Shacklebolt...but Hogwarts is my school. I am its Headmistress. In addition to it being my responsibility, there are certain capabilities that I possess as Headmistress that no one else does. It is also simply a fact that, strategically, I am in place already. To have anyone else in charge of Hogwarts defence would make no sense. We are coordinating our plans, and I have the complete cooperation of your father and Shacklebolt. Provided we haven't any rogue parties out there as we did on Sunday morning, things should go . . . not smoothly, as a battle is dynamic and not completely predictable, but we will have a well-coordinated effort."

"I'm sorry about Sunday, Professor. If I had known what my brothers were up to, I would have said something or stopped them," Bill said.

"I am sure you would have. But you and Charlie did very well...even your other brothers, for all their impetuosity, acquitted themselves well. Fred and George are both on Madam Hooch's list, as is Charlie."

Bill nodded. "I saw a draft list when Rolanda and I met on Monday, but do you have a final list?"

Minerva handed it to him.

"I am glad to see that you crossed Ginny off the list," Bill said. "She's a superb flyer, but she's too young."

"And your mother would have my head if anything happened to her," Minerva added.

"What about Percy?" Bill asked. "He didn't play Quidditch, but he's better on a broom than he's usually given credit for."

"Your father and I agreed that we tell him nothing until the time comes. At that point, Arthur will invite him to join him at the school. If he comes, he is welcome."

"He's not a bad guy, you know," Bill said. "There's a big difference between being a prig with your head up your arse...er, excuse me Professor...but there's a big difference between that and being a Death Eater."

"I know that, Bill. I taught him, after all," Minerva said. "He's just one of those few Gryffindors who rein themselves in by deciding to adhere to the rules as strictly as possible. He's a bit more stiff-necked than some, but I know he's not bad, as you say. He'll improve with age. I did, after all." Minerva grinned.

"You were all rule-bound as a student?" Bill asked. "I guess I can see that. You've always been pretty strict."

"Mm, not that I didn't occasionally do something stupidly Gryffindor and break a rule or two in the process, but generally, yes. In a sense, it was a way of controlling myself. I had a bit of a temper, for one thing, and following the rules was one way I had of keeping it somewhat in check. I also always believed that the rules were there for a reason...I did learn that sometimes the reasons weren't very good ones or that they didn't always apply, but I think that Percy can outgrow his priggishness, as you call it."

Bill grinned. "I guess we'll give him a chance if he wants to take it."

"Did you find a suitable location?" Hooch asked, bringing the conversation back around to the purpose of their meeting.

"Yes, I did, I think. I considered the moorland you suggested, Rolanda, where the Quidditch World Cup was held, but as isolated as that is, I am still concerned about it coming to the attention of the Ministry." Bill looked over at Minerva. "I actually got this idea from Professor Crouch. I hope you don't mind, Professor McGonagall, but with your approval, we are going to use your Grandmother Tyree's place. I spoke to her this morning and she agreed." He chuckled. "She even offered to get on a broomstick herself, but I didn't think you would appreciate that."

"Where is the Tyree place?" Rolanda asked. "I assume it's somewhere in Scotland, but I'm not familiar with it."

"It's in the Highlands to the north of here, the most isolated place you could imagine," Bill said. "It's really not very far from Hogwarts, but it feels worlds away, and I don't think that the Ministry or Voldemort will have any idea what's going on."

Minerva frowned slightly, but nodded. "That's fine. Grandmother Siofre has been champing at the bit to do something against Voldemort since he killed her favourite

grandchild more than twenty years ago. This may satisfy some of that need. I agree that no one is likely to notice anything way out there, and I can make you all Portkeys. I do wish Robbie had mentioned this brilliant idea of his, though." She sighed. "We're all too busy, but we have to make sure that we don't work at cross purposes."

Bill nodded. "I thought Crouch said something about speaking with you, but he probably forgot." He hesitated. "You mentioned her favourite grandchild . . ."

"My brother Malcolm...she loved us all, you have to understand how I meant that. It's just that he was rather extraordinary. She wouldn't have preferred another of us to have died instead, nor would I have, but his loss . . ." Minerva let out a slightly shaky breath. "Someday, we'll have to tell you more about him."

"He was Gamp's husband, wasn't he?" Bill asked. "Gareth's father?"

Hooch nodded. "Yes, he was Gertrude's husband."

"I do remember something about him," Bill took a deep breath. "Well, I won't let your grandmother get on a broom and fly with us, but this should give her some sense of contribution. I'm glad of that."

"Will you still cast the additional wards we talked about?" Hooch asked.

Bill nodded. "I don't think they're necessary, but better to take too many precautions than too few in this instance."

"I will leave you two to it, then," Minerva said. "Let me see the list again, Rolanda."

Minerva looked at the list, then she pulled out a fresh parchment, waved her wand, and duplicated its contents.

"I will make Portkeys for you...only four, so you will need to make arrangements for some to meet and travel together," Minerva said. "I don't want to have too many Portkeys floating about. I suggest that you and each of the Weasleys take one. And . . . a method of communication. Bill, can you sort that out? Some kind of Proteus Charm should do. Only to be used when they are all to assemble here at Hogwarts...or wherever you would like them to meet first, if you think it's better that you all arrive here together."

Rolanda nodded. "I think we will have a two-pronged approach. Bill and I discussed this last night. There are a few of them who can Apparate-by-Broom...or who have done it before at least once without Splinching...we're going to have them practise and use them as a vanguard. Their arrival should be a surprise. Then the other flyers will join them."

"I've never Apparated-by-Broom before, but I think I could," Bill said. "I'm going to try it. If I'm successful, I'll lead them. If not, we thought that Krum might do."

"And you're certain that Krum is trustworthy?" Minerva asked, looking at the list again. "I don't know him except by sight. It makes me uneasy...him and, what was her name?...Helena Benetti. I've never even heard her name before."

Bill laughed and Rolanda quirked a smile.

"I can see you don't read the *Prophet* sports pages or the society pages, either," Rolanda said. "She's Viktor's girlfriend...correction, his fiancée...and she is the Seeker for the Sweetwater All-Stars."

Minerva's eyebrows rose. "She's an American?"

"No, Canadian. She started with the Regina team her first year out, but Sweetwater is a better team and offers its players more money, so she took their offer a couple years ago. The North American leagues have a different season than we do, so she's in off-season until mid-June and has spent it with Viktor."

Minerva shook her head. "I don't know . . . she is a complete stranger. And what care does a Canadian with a name like 'Benetti' have for wizarding Britain and its fight against a Dark Wizard?"

"She's a good one, Minerva," Rolanda assured her. "And she won't shirk, if you're worried about that. Her mother's father was Irish, and although that doesn't make for close ties, it does make for sentimental ones. And her grandfather, Ignazio Benetti, fought Grindelwald. She grew up with stories about him. Helena is also quite aware that if You-Know-Who succeeds in Britain, he will not stop there. You would like her, I'm sure."

"Even if all you say is true, she may be good on a broomstick, but we know nothing about her other capabilities. It's no good to have her in the air if she can't cast a spell," Minerva said.

"She attended Whiteshell Academy in Manitoba for all eight years despite being scouted by Quidditch teams since her fifth. I doubt she would have done if she were talentless," Rolanda said.

Minerva sighed. Whiteshell was a good school. Most students who didn't leave after the Canadian equivalent of the OWLs after their fifth year still left after their seventh-year examinations, with the eighth year being devoted to only one or two subjects, almost like a shortened apprenticeship. Minerva had often wondered whether such a scheme could work in Britain, but the traditions were different. Perhaps one day . . .

"Very well," Minerva said. "But I do recommend you take a wand oath from her...not just from her, but from everyone. Fashion it however you believe best, Bill, but I don't want us betrayed."

Bill nodded seriously. "I will."

"If there is nothing else on this topic?" Minerva looked at the two. "Good. Bill, do you know if Charlie has made arrangements to move the Hippogriff yet? I thought I would have heard from him by now about it."

"I think he's doing it tonight. He'll probably just move Buckbeak and let you know when he's arrived. I know he talked to Hagrid about it already, and Hagrid's going to reintroduce him to the Forbidden Forest, as you requested," Bill replied.

"And Ronald? How is he?"

"Still limping, but he's staying at the Burrow...complaining the entire time...and Mum is applying potion to his leg and making him exercise it. I don't know if he'll fully recover, but as he says, at least it shouldn't keep him from playing Quidditch."

"Good, I am glad to hear it," Minerva said, smiling as Rolanda chuckled.

"And the rest of your family?" Minerva inquired.

"All well. Fleur wants to begin thinking about having a child, but I told her it would have to wait until after this is over. It may be selfish of me, but . . . I would rather wait."

"I don't know." Minerva looked misty-eyed and somewhat unfocused. "I can understand her desire." She blinked and smiled at Bill. "Even if you don't come home, she would still have the baby. You may think that it would be easier on her if she didn't, but I think that it would be a comfort to her, one less loss for her to bear...if she lost you, she would lose any possibility of ever having a child with you. I don't know whether you have time enough now, but if you do, you may want to reconsider." She shrugged. "Of course, it's none of my business."

Bill smiled. "I appreciate your opinion, though. Thank you."

Minerva looked toward the door. "Someone is coming up, so if we are finished here, I am sure that you both have other things to do this evening."

She stood and Bill and Rolanda followed suit.

"Come by in the morning and I will have the Portkeys for you," Minerva said, addressing Hooch. "And then you can tell me how the first meeting goes and who actually attends. And, of course, whether Bill Splinches himself trying to Apparate-by-Broom," she added with a crooked grin.

The door to the office opened.

"Did I hear 'Apparate-by-Broom'?"

Minerva smiled brightly. "I didn't expect you back so soon!"

"Everything went well and quickly," Robbie replied. He sketched a slight bow in Rolanda's direction, then nodded to Bill, smiling at them both. "Madam Hooch, Mr Weasley."

Rolanda nodded stiffly. She had had a bit of a crush on Albus Dumbledore when she was young. He was a hero, he had gorgeous blue eyes and broad shoulders, and he was the most powerful wizard in the world...at least that's what she'd believed, and still did. What wasn't to like? When she joined the Hogwarts staff many years later, it became obvious that he and Minerva were in a relationship. She believed that they were wholly compatible, and she came to envy them both that compatibility as she grew older and never found that kind of relationship with a wizard herself. She had always believed that Minerva was completely devoted to Albus. She and Minerva had never been close friends themselves, but with Poppy as a mutual friend, she had come to know, like, and respect the older witch. Every time she saw Minerva's reaction to this Crouch, she felt like shaking her, hitting her, and then throwing her over her broomstick and hauling her off to the Janus Thickey ward to find out what on earth could be wrong with her brain.

It felt as though she was jealous on Albus's behalf, which was silly, Rolanda recognised, but it was nonetheless true. And the fact was, she really didn't have anything against this Robbie. He seemed nice enough, and he was Gertrude's son, which was a recommendation in itself, as she had always admired the older Slytherin, but it just didn't seem right that Minerva could be in a relationship with someone new so soon after Albus's death. Rolanda didn't begrudge her another lover at some point in the future, but after a more decent interval. Surely even a period of mourning would be longer than the few months that had passed before Minerva seemed to have taken up with this new wizard. Rolanda found it difficult to believe that Minerva had mourned her loss only so briefly. And now her eyes lit up when Robbie entered the room just as they had for Albus. It made Rolanda angry with them both.

"Bill was just saying that he is going to see if he can master Apparition-by-Broom," Minerva said.

Robbie nodded and smiled. "I see." He looked at the younger wizard. "I have heard that the most important factor in Apparition-by-Broom is Destination...some would rank Determination higher, but my understanding is that because of the forward motion of the broom and the inertial forces, understanding the effect of the inertia and fixing the Destination in your mind is most important to prevent Splinching."

Bill grinned. "I will bear that in mind, Professor."

The two took their leave, Rolanda somewhat coolly, but promising to return for the Portkeys before breakfast the next day.

As soon as they were gone, Minerva put her arms around Robbie and leaned into him. "I was worried about you, leaving the grounds like that. I am glad you are back. How did your meeting with Aberforth go?"

Robbie chuckled lightly. "He was more than somewhat put out with me, but as I had hoped, he quickly agreed to help us." He kissed Minerva's forehead. "He's never disliked Severus, and I think that over the years, he's actually developed a bit of fondness for him, though I doubt he would admit such a thing."

"You know what Aberforth needs?" Minerva asked.

"I know, I know, you always say it, but really, if he wanted a good witch in his life, he could find one for himself, I am sure," Robbie said.

"Still . . . maybe after the war," Minerva began.

"Do you remember how old he is? I do. One hundred and fifty-three years old. He has not been in a relationship with a witch since he was around forty. I find your optimism quite refreshing...and your affection for Aberforth touching...but at this point, it could be seen as cruelty to try to get him to start seeing a witch. If not to him, then to her...I'm sorry, my dear," Robbie said with a laugh as she swatted his arm. "But truly, you would not be doing him a favour."

"Melina is seeing Mother tonight. I wish I could go," Minerva said, her sadness clear in her voice. She sighed. "We are supposed to be upstairs by now...I am, at least. She needs to teach us those techniques before she leaves."

"I still believe that there is no need for me to learn the respiration spell. The prophecy clearly speaks of a lioness," Robbie said.

"It can't hurt you to learn it," Minerva said, "and the others will certainly be useful. It would be best if whoever is doing the breathing doesn't also have to do the injections and the immobilisation, as well."

"Of course. You are right," Robbie agreed. "Let's get started so that Melina can get to the McGonagall Cliffs before it gets terribly late."

"I told Gareth he could stay in the guest room tonight," Minerva said as they walked toward the brass staircase.

"That's a fine idea...although with all the sleeping he has done today, he might be up half the night."

"Mm," Minerva agreed distractedly. "There's still been a lot of movement in and out of the Room of Requirement this evening. I wanted to speak with Miss Granger about it before she left this afternoon and find out if she knew anything, but they weren't finished until it was almost dinnertime, and I didn't want to keep her from her meal."

"We will sort it out. I could speak with her tomorrow, if you like."

"No, I will. I will ask her to see me immediately after lunch, so she may be late to Defence tomorrow."

"Very well, as you see fit."

Minerva stopped at the top of the stairs and turned to him with a smile. "I love it when you are so agreeable."

He shrugged one shoulder. "How could I be otherwise?"

Minerva laughed heartily as she opened the door to the sitting room. "I do love you."

"And I, you," he replied softly. "And I, you."

"I had to tell her, Neville," Hermione said. "I didn't break my promise to everyone. I had to. It wasn't a betrayal. It's not like she's Umbridge or a Death Eater, and she didn't say we should stop, or even ask many questions. And she was very pleased we were still Dumbledore's Army," she added, remembering the Headmistress's smile and the way her eyes had filled with tears when she had told her that they were Dumbledore's Army and always would be. "She didn't object at all."

Neville had a very uncharacteristic scowl on his face. "You should have talked to me about it first, Hermione. You aren't in charge, you know. It wasn't your decision to make."

"It was my decision to make. I . . . I've been working for Professor McGonagall for the past few months. I can't say any more than that. When she asked me whether I knew why the Room of Requirement was being used so much, I couldn't lie to her, especially after she told me . . ." Hermione shook her head, remembering what the Headmistress had said about the raid on the Malfoy mansion and that Angelina's death and Ron's injury may have been preventable if only Harry had bothered to speak to someone and coordinate with the Order. "I just know that I did the right thing. She does want to speak to you, though. She said to come up to her office after this meeting."

When Neville's scowl grew, Hermione said, "If she had been upset about it or wanted to stop us, she would have already. We talked yesterday after lunch, after all. She's had time to do whatever she wanted to stop us or punish us. I know for a fact that some of the DA practised last night and this morning, and nothing happened to them." Hermione rolled her eyes in frustration. "And if you don't stop scowling, pretty soon people will begin mistaking you for Professor Snape," she said, thinking that Neville would find this a horrific thought, and possibly even an amusing one.

"Hmmpf, and would that be so bad, Hermione? I always thought you respected him."

"I do," Hermione said, feeling puzzled.

"That's good, because there's far worse things in the world than taking after Professor Snape."

Before Hermione could pursue the conversation further, more of the DA began to arrive, trickling in as planned so as not to arouse suspicion.

Once everyone had arrived and reported on their progress mastering the *Decapito* and *Exentero* spells, Neville said, "Tonight, I thought we would learn two more spells...less bloody, as requested...the *Massuelius* hex and the *Frangere* hex. These are more difficult to cast than the first two because they have to be aimed...or rather, wherever they hit a person is where they take effect. So if I cast the *Massuelius* and strike someone's arm, their arm may be damaged and useless, but it won't fully incapacitate them, and the same with the *Frangere*. In addition, the amount of damage inflicted will be proportional to the force with which you cast the spell. So the *Massuelius*, which essentially mimics a severe blow to the body...think of being hit extremely hard with a lead-weighted Beater's bat, for example...the *Massuelius* can do anything from creating a slight bruise to inflicting massive internal injuries and even breaking bones."

Neville looked around him at all of the serious faces. A few years ago, he would never have believed he could learn such hexes, let alone seriously consider casting them, and now he was urging others to learn them and be prepared to use them against other human beings. He overcame a slight wave of nausea and continued. "The *Frangere* is a shattering spell. It particularly affects the bones, although if cast strongly enough, it can cause other organs to burst. And the bones don't simply break, they become fragmented. It's a very nasty curse. Aimed at the head, it is almost certain to cause death, though not necessarily instantaneously. Aimed at the chest, the shattered ribs tear through the lungs and can even enter the heart. If aimed only at the limbs, the *Frangere* can still be very disabling, and an injury caused by that hex is extremely difficult to treat and can result in permanent damage, even requiring amputation."

Neville took a deep breath and prepared to answer questions while wondering one of his own: how would he...or anyone...live after a war in which he had cast such terrible spells? He did not know whether there was any answer to that, but hopefully, at least, more of them would be alive because of them.

Severus slumped wearily into the armchair across from Minerva. He was looking forward to rest, real rest, not the disturbed sleep he could expect that night and every night thereafter. Death would be welcome, he thought, if only because he finally might rest.

"I saw Longbottom leaving," he said, accepting the teacup Minerva handed him. "What was he doing here so late?"

"If I were to tell you, you would have too many more memories to hide from the toe-rag," Minerva said. "I will tell you, however, that Mr Longbottom has revived Dumbledore's Army."

"Longbottom has?" Snape squeezed his eyes shut then opened them, hoping he might feel more awake. He didn't. "You mean he's joined some newly revived version of it."

"No, he revived it." Minerva's lips twitched as though she found something amusing and was trying not to laugh. "He said that he was inspired."

Severus snorted.

"He named you as his source of inspiration, Severus."

Severus choked on his tea.

"He didn't say precisely what it was about you that inspired him, but he said it quite defiantly, as though expecting me to challenge him," Minerva said, finally giving in and smiling.

"Fear of me, no doubt," Severus scoffed.

"Mm, I don't know about that, Severus. Perhaps not having had to suffer through Potions the last couple years has allowed him to view you in a new light."

Severus just grunted and took a sip of his tea.

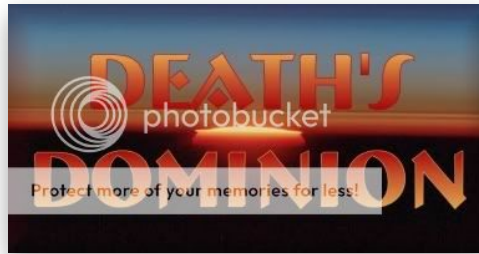
"So, what did the toe-rag want tonight?" Minerva asked.

"The usual...unlimited power, the universe cowering at his feet, immortality. And," he said, putting his cup down and looking at Minerva, "for me to kill you."

Note: I haven't said it in a while, but any of the spells that are not canon spells may be derived from Latin or some other language, but they are not grammatically correct in any language. So whether a spell resembles Latin, Gaelic, or some other language, remember, it's a magical incantation. You can probably discern the root words, but don't expect any kind of "correctness."

Chapter Twenty-Five: At elbow and foot

Minerva meets with Hermione, giving her instructions and more. Severus makes a discovery, agrees to an exchange, and hears some good news. Dumbledore's Army continues to train and is introduced to some new ideas.



Chapter Twenty-Five: *At elbow and foot*

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Minerva laughed. "My, my. Have I risen in his estimation, then? Or is he merely irked that he had to give up his plans to kidnap me?"

"Neither," Severus said, hoping that despite her laughter and his own flippancy, she was taking this new problem seriously. "He still underestimates you and he no longer cares about finding Potter. He simply wants you out of the way so that I can step in as Headmaster."

"Hmmp. Well, that's good. Better that he underestimates us all, don't you think, Severus?" Minerva asked, a gleam in her eye. "How are you supposed to kill me? And when are you supposed to do the deed? Or am I supposed to be dead already?"

"No, he has left the 'how' up to me, and the 'when'...it will be at a strategic point, he said. I believe he wants me to do it to coincide with the attempt to take the Ministry, or at least finally to assassinate Scrimgeour. He will be the primary target of the attack on the Ministry."

"Good, then we don't have to worry about my murder for a little while, perhaps not at all if the attack on the Ministry coincides with the attack on Hogwarts."

Severus shook his head. "This persuades me even more that the attack on the Ministry will come first...with the attack on Hogwarts to follow very, very close on its heels. I believe he will want you dead before he attacks Hogwarts, and me, either nowhere to be found but at his side or here, ready to surrender the school to him. He is aware that there would be resistance to him even if I were here and Acting Headmaster, but I could make it easier for him to get at Potter, which is what he desires above all else. He believes that once Potter is dead, everything else will simply fall into his lap with only a few, easily overcome problems after that. His belief in the prophecy has him convinced of it. He believes that 'the one with the power to vanquish him' means the *only* one with that power, and that once Potter is out of the way, nothing can stand in his way."

"We still won't need to deal with it until it becomes apparent to him that you have not killed me. You can always lie, tell him that you have, and then be shocked when I'm not dead."

Severus took in a breath and let it out slowly. "I think by that time, he will know that I am a traitor. If he hasn't discovered it already, that will confirm it. He will know that the wand is not the Deathstick he's looking for, he will see that there have been preparations made for the attack even if I drop the Anti-Apparition wards for him, and he will begin to realise that all of my failures were deliberate. The locket, the diadem, the wand, the failure...I hope...to assassinate Scrimgeour during the attack on the Ministry, the failure of the potion at Azkaban, everything, large and small, will finally fall into place and he will know that I have always been a traitor." He looked into Minerva's eyes. "And do not tell me that I have to kill you in order to look as though I am loyal to him. I won't do it."

Minerva chuckled. "Oh, no, Severus. I have no desire to have you or anyone else kill me, although I do agree, that would be one way to overcome his doubts about your loyalty to him. Of course, he could also simply believe that you are an ambitious Slytherin who wants to be Headmaster, but that would amount to the same thing. I hope that we can find another way to protect you when he discovers your true loyalties. Perhaps he won't realise until after you have returned to the castle. You will still be in danger with the rest of us, and likely a particular target, but you would have a good chance of survival."

"I don't know." He was so tired. "Somehow I doubt that once I have dropped the wards, he will let me out of his sight."

"Drop them but don't go to him..."

"We will have to see. He could suspect some kind of trap if I do not go to him, and our efforts may be undermined. If I can delay him from joining the Death Eaters on the grounds, I will. It may save lives if he is kept away long enough. It could give you all a chance to eliminate some of his force. Once he is here . . . his magic is powerful, Minerva," Severus said with a shake of his head. "You call him 'toe-rag,' but you must recognise that he is powerful. Perhaps as powerful as Albus was, or very nearly. And whatever he has done to himself, he is not as susceptible to curses as a normal wizard. Part of it is wandless magic, but part of it is something else, and I don't know what, unless Potter's substance has truly afforded him some special protection. But it may be some other factor at play."

"Regardless, do try to make it back to us, Severus," Minerva replied. "I could stay in the background until you have returned, have Filius in charge and give the impression that I am not available. That might give you time to escape him before he realises your betrayal."

Severus shook his head. "No, you are the general, Minerva. I have seen only a little of what you are doing to prepare, but I know that. You cannot hide in the background and allow so many people to believe that you are dead or even that you may be missing. You need to be present to orchestrate everything and lead the defence. I hope you won't be in the forefront of the fighting, but you cannot disappear." Severus quirked a small smile. "Besides, I want my reward after all these years. I want to see his face and hear his outrage when he realises that I have been betraying him for more than fifteen years, that it has all been a lie, that I, whom he believed useful but far inferior to him, that I have been playing him for a fool, that my mind and my magic kept him from the truth." His smirk grew. "That will be a worthy moment, when he realises that in this, at least, I was more powerful than he. And I will have my vengeance and my victory. So do not be concerned, Minerva. It will be a sweet moment for me. And knowing that my vengeance and my victory have helped you and the others to live and defeat him fully, that will be sweet, as well."

"Hopefully, you will have that moment of victory," Minerva said, "but without having to die immediately after."

Severus shook his head. "At that point, he will kill me. I have no doubt. And as a traitor, he will want me to have a traitor's death. He'll likely wish to kill me slowly and ignominiously." He tried to suppress a grimace, but Minerva saw it. "He likes to kill slowly himself, although when he gets bored, he usually finishes with the Killing Curse, but he does sometimes just leave his victims to die of whatever injuries he has inflicted on them. And a traitor or someone who has incurred his personal wrath, such a person is often fed to Nagini afterward...or even killed by the snake. The last time he had Nagini kill someone, he had Pettigrew undress the corpse to make it easier for Nagini to eat him...though I think the poor wretch was still alive at that point, but hopefully not conscious. It seems to take a while for someone to die of Nagini's bite, depending on where they are bitten, which pleases the Dark Lord to see, particularly when Nagini begins to swallow them and they are still twitching. That probably would have been Higgs's fate if I hadn't poisoned him first. For all I know, he still fed him to Nagini after I left. Yes, once the Dark Lord learns of my betrayal, I am dead and likely Nagini's next meal. If he's in a hurry, I may be lucky and receive the Killing Curse, unless he simply decides to leave me to Nagini's tender mercies, aware of the slow death that I would suffer."

"Let us hope he does not succeed in killing you," Minerva said softly. "I want to celebrate your victory with you, Severus, and I want to be able to stand in front of everyone

and tell them of your bravery and your loyalty, and to have you stand beside me as I tell everyone that Severus Snape is my much-loved friend and that the salvation of the wizarding world could not have been achieved without him."

A lump rose in Severus's throat. "Will you . . . if you live, will you do that? Even though I am dead and not celebrating with you?" She would surely forget in the joy of the moment, forget him, lying in the belly of a snake or rotting on a forest floor somewhere.

"I certainly will," Minerva said, reaching for him and resting her hand on his wrist, "but I will find it harder to celebrate, knowing you aren't there with me. And any celebration will be tinged with sorrow at all we have lost to achieve that victory. But I will tell everyone that you should be there with us, and I will tell them why. I do hope you are beside me, though, Severus. Please, don't give up, even when you have your moment of victory, think of us and try to return to us. I know that you believe you will die, but please don't simply die in resignation. Carry your triumph into your last breath, if you must, but don't give up. Please."

"Minerva, I . . ." Severus swallowed and tried to control his breathing, fighting the burning in his eyes and in his throat. "I . . . payment . . . I must pay. I betrayed her."

"Not deliberately. The toe-rag used his imagination and his own self-hatred to target Lily's son. You may have set it in motion, but you did not tell him how to interpret the prophecy. You betrayed *him*, Severus," Minerva said vehemently. "You came to Albus, and at risk of your own life, you betrayed him to save Lily. It was Pettigrew who betrayed Lily, who betrayed them all, James, Lily, Sirius, Lily's baby, and the entire wizarding world. You tried to protect her just as Albus did, and you and Albus were not responsible for the Potters' choice of Pettigrew to be the Secret Keeper, nor for his choice to betray them. And whatever your responsibility in the matter was...and I am not saying that you bear none at all...you have long since repaid any debt incurred, and you are having your vengeance for which you have waited all these long years. More than that, you are not simply exacting retribution and paying a debt, you are attaining redemption. You are doing more than simply avenging Lily's death, as you desired when you agreed with Albus's plan all those years ago. You are more than you were then, and I am grateful to you for all you have done. Your death would be no payment for any debt to Lily. You have long since paid that debt, and she would not desire your death."

Severus shook his head. "Even my death would be insufficient. I have come to realise that. But I will still have my vengeance, and my death will help you and Potter and the Order to bring an end to him. My death will not be without purpose. It will be a step stone for you." He sighed when he looked at her and saw the distress in her eyes. "I will try, though, for you. I will remember you and won't give up in my moment of triumph. I will fight the bastard to my last breath, if that is your wish." He twitched a smile. "You can remember that of me, too, even if there is none left alive to tell of it. Remember that I won't just give up, even if the fight is futile, and I'll be thinking of you and of Albus and of everyone else who has not given up on me despite myself. Hmm? So don't cry, Minerva. Please." He turned his arm and took her hand in his. If she cried, he would no longer be able to hold back his own tears.

Minerva blinked back the tears that had begun to gather in her eyes. "Good, very good. Don't let go of life easily, Severus. Not yet. Later, later after you have had your long life, then I will not begrudge you a gentle passage into death, but fight it now, and fight the Dark Lord. You may not believe you have any hope, but there may be some yet."

"And even if there isn't any hope, I'll still resist him for you. I promise."

"Thank you, Severus. I worry so. You seem so resigned." She squeezed his hand. "The way you speak sometimes, I have worried that you would simply give up and walk straight to your death without a struggle. I know you are tired, I can't imagine how tired you are, and I know that you have suffered increasingly over the last few years, especially this last one, and I understand that death might appear more attractive than continued suffering, but I hope that you do not die before your time. And I hope that you live after this is all over and learn something of life beyond the narrow, painful existence you have borne for these many years."

Severus closed his eyes and bowed his head. He did not wish to speak more of this. He wished to shove his suffering down into his gut, away from his heart and his mind. Minerva was right: he was tired and death did seem attractive. But he had already promised her that he would not meekly allow the Dark Lord to take his life without a fight, and he would do that for her and for his own meagre pride, what remained of it in his exhaustion, and yet more . . . more than that he could not do. He knew of Minerva's hope, and of Hermione's, that he live, a hope that Albus had shared before he had died, but they would have to hope without him. Severus knew he would die, and he accepted it, whether as payment for a debt or as the natural, logical end to his misbegotten life. Minerva could expect no more from him than that he would try not to make it easy for the evil bastard to kill him. And then he would accept his death when it did come and he would welcome it. Gods, the mere thought that he might live after the fall of the Dark Lord . . . it was not merely impossible to contemplate, it would be an impossible life. There was no Severus Snape beyond this narrow existence. It was not simply justice that he die, but it was necessity. The universe cannot accommodate such an impossibility.

"I am sorry, Severus," Minerva whispered. "You are tired. You need to sleep. Do you have more to report?"

Severus opened his eyes. "He is still as angry as he was on Sunday night about the failure of the attack on Azkaban, but he does not suspect the poison. The guard who was to have administered it and who lowered the wards is dead, so the Dark Lord was unable to question him. Still, he lost two of his Death Eaters, not counting the dead guard, and freed only nine of the more than thirty he had hoped for, not including Malfoy. Unfortunately, those freed include the Lestranges and others of similar ilk...everyone who had been captured during the failed attack on the Ministry two years ago, in fact. Nonetheless, it could be worse. Malfoy . . . it is as I told you before the attack. He was taken from Azkaban only to be kept as a living symbol of the consequences of incompetence and betrayal. The Dark Lord has told Malfoy that his wife and son are dead, that he killed them himself after lengthy torture." Severus grimaced, almost looking as if he were about to be sick. "He even told Malfoy that he had given Draco to Bella, the boy's own aunt, to be her toy until he finally killed him. I had believed that Bella at least cared for her sister, and possibly for Draco, even if she cared for no others, but clearly her enthusiasm for this concocted story demonstrates that she cares for only two people: the Dark Lord and herself, in that order. I wish I could tell Lucius that it isn't true, that they live and are safe somewhere in hiding, but there is no way for me to do that. I would even kill him if I could, just so that he does not have to continue to suffer. He is not a good man, but he has helped me in the past, and whatever he has done, what the Dark Lord is doing to him . . . it is inhuman."

"You said once that you might be required to join in, to punish him," Minerva said softly. "Have you had to?"

"One of the few blessings in recent days, I have not. Standing by and watching, or simply seeing him in a huddled heap on the floor, his robes bloody rags, covered in filth, as the Dark Lord eats and drinks and makes his plans . . . that is difficult enough."

"And of the planned attack on the Ministry?"

"The primary goal, as I had already guessed, is to eliminate Scrimgeour. The Dark Lord is frustrated that none of his previous, more covert attempts have succeeded...indeed, that the two Aurors who had been targeted for *Imperio* not only were able to resist the *Imperio*, but actually arrested the Death Eaters inside the Ministry who had tried to put them under the Imperius, that truly enrages him." Severus smirked. "Shacklebolt did well in choosing Scrimgeour's guards."

Minerva nodded. "And not just in choosing the guards. Everyone who works closely with the Minister or has access to his office has had to show that they could throw off even a very strongly cast *Imperio* or they were moved to another department. Moody helped Shacklebolt train and test them. Scrimgeour has you to thank that he was not captured or killed months ago."

"It was simply a logical course of action. The Ministry would likely have done something similar even without my warnings."

"Mmm, I don't think so," Minerva said, shaking her head. "It is a pity that Pius Thickenesse had to be killed before Scrimgeour took Kingsley's warnings seriously, though. Scrimgeour was a canny Auror, but some of his decisions . . ."

"Becoming Minister did not improve his judgment. If he...and Fudge before him...had listened to the Headmaster years ago, much of this could have been avoided."

"So, fill me in on what I need to pass on to Arthur and Shacklebolt, and then if there's nothing else of urgency, you should go to bed and try to get some sleep. Poppy said that she was sending a mild sleeping draught to your chambers tonight, so you should take it."

"Perhaps, if I cannot sleep...very well, very well, I will take it," Severus said in response to Minerva's glare. He hesitated. Every evening, there was either vanilla-, orange-, or vegetable-flavoured nutritional potion waiting for him on the table in his sitting room, and every morning when he woke up, there was a coffee-flavoured nutritional

potion...something Poppy had apparently procured especially for him, although he had made no special request except to say that the chocolate was too sweet. "Thank Poppy for me. It will be welcome to get more sleep."

"I will. You do have a lot of people who care about you, you know, Severus."

"Poppy is paid to care."

"Severus . . ." Minerva sighed. "I would berate you, but we're both too tired for that. Just tell me what I need to pass on to Shackbolt and Arthur."

"Where is Crouch?" Severus asked, wondering for the first time where Minerva's shadow was.

"He is with Alroy and Hagrid down in the Thestral paddock. He should be back soon, though, if you need to speak with him."

"No. I just wondered." He took a deep breath and prepared to recite the few facts that he had been able to glean about the raid on the Ministry.

Minerva listened attentively, asking few questions. His account was clear and concise, and when he was finished, Minerva shook her head.

"I don't see that the attack can succeed...not now that we know of it, anyway," she said.

"He assumes complete surprise, and he doesn't care who dies as long as Scrimgeour is one of them. Anyone else is expendable."

"I am glad you won't be going, that you're supposed to be here killing me," Minerva said.

"As long as you don't actually expect me to kill you, I am, as well," Severus replied.

Minerva smiled and said, "No, I wouldn't ask you to do that...unless it were to save me from something worse."

Severus stood. "That is what the Headmaster believed he was asking of me," he said softly.

"I know. And he realised that there was an alternative, and he took it," Minerva replied, standing. "I mean only that if I am in the toe-rag's hands, I would prefer you to kill me than to end up like Malfoy, or worse."

"I would not allow that, Minerva."

"I know, Severus, I know." She looked up at him. "You are the most loyal of friends. And I am very sorry for all that I have put you through."

"It was all my choice. You have nothing to be sorry for."

Minerva did not reply to that, though a brief pained expression crossed her face.

"Good night, Headmistress," Severus said softly.

He had reached the door and laid his hand on the doorknob when Minerva suddenly stopped him.

"Wait, Severus! I almost forgot!"

She went over to the desk and pulled open the centre drawer.

"For you," she said, holding out a small package wrapped in brown paper.

Severus knit his brow, crossing over to take it from her. "What is it?"

"I don't know. Gareth was here earlier. He had hoped to see you, but he had to leave before you returned, and he asked me to give this to you."

Severus raised one eyebrow, but put the package in the pocket of his robes.

"Good night, Severus. Sleep well...don't forget to take the potion!"

"I will remember it," Severus replied.

When he reached his rooms, he found the two potions on his table, a small brown bottle beside the larger bottle of nutritional potion. Green. The vegetable one that night. Severus swallowed it down. It wasn't bad, really, and he did think he felt the better for taking them.

There was a note this time, the first since the one that had accompanied the initial bottle of potion.

Severus,

The smaller bottle contains Somnus Potion. It's one of Murdoch's, so it's good quality. Please take it. I'm sure I don't need to tell you how and when to take it.

I hope you sleep well.

...Poppy

Severus brought the small brown bottle with him into his bedroom and set it on his bedside table, then as he removed his teaching robe, he felt the small package in his pocket and set that down with it as well. He picked up his watch and opened it, not really checking the time or the sidereal alignments, only reassuring himself of its possession. He never brought it with him when he went to the Dark Lord's side. It was doubtful he would ever see it, but Severus did not wish to risk it. He wished he could bring it with him on the last day, but he didn't want any Death Eaters to get their grubby hands on it after he was dead. No, he would leave it here, and Minerva could find it and keep it, pass it on to someone worthy of it.

After a quick shower, though nothing could wash off the sense of defilement he felt every time he returned from a meeting with the Dark Lord, Severus donned a grey nightshirt and sat down on the edge of his bed. Somnus Potion was not particularly powerful, but he should be able to get a few hours of solid sleep, provided he didn't have nightmares. Unlike Dreamless Sleep, Somnus took several minutes to take effect, but if he wanted to see what was in McGonagall's package, he should open it before taking the sleeping draught.

Severus didn't have very much energy remaining for mere curiosity, but as he reached for the sleeping potion, his hand paused, hovering over the brown package. It was late. It could wait until morning, he was sure. Yet the memory of McGonagall the last time he saw him prodded him to pick up the package.

The brown paper was held in place with an easily broken Sticking Charm. Severus carefully removed the paper, folded it once, then put it on the night stand. He took the lid off of the dark blue cardboard box. There was a note. As Severus took the note, he saw what was beneath it and his eyebrows rose.

Snape...

You may remember this. I thought it might come in handy for you. You might consider inside your left sleeve. A little charm should hold it in place nicely.

I understand that the gift of a knife severs a friendship and that it is traditional to accept something in return, so one day soon you can buy me a drink in exchange. I'll take an I.O.U. in the meantime, unless you don't care to make this a trade. Whichever is the case, the knife is yours now. It's not Charmed or magical in anyway, purely Muggle, but sometimes, that's just what is needed. Be careful with it...I once cut myself.

Take care of yourself.

...G.R. McGonagall

Severus took the flick knife from the box. The handle was plain, smooth and matte black, only the ends shiny steel, but it was well constructed. He pressed a hidden button and the blade sprang out with a satisfying click. He picked up the brown wrapping paper and sliced through it. One corner of his mouth turned up. It was sharp as a razor. He remembered that McGonagall seemed to have retracted it automatically. He pressed the button again, but nothing happened. Frowning, he turned the knife over and examined it. Perhaps McGonagall had used magic to retract it. He tried pushing on the back of the blade, but it was locked in place. Then he saw a small indentation on the handle with a second button. He pressed it, the blade unlocked, and he was able to swing it back into the handle.

Severus did this a few more times, flicking the knife open then swinging it closed. For something wholly non-magical, it felt good in his hand. He put it back in the small box, his eye catching sight of McGonagall's note. An I.O.U., indeed! Superstitious nonsense.

He waved his hand, extinguished his lamps, and lay down in bed, then he sighed and relit one of the lamps. He would not be able to sleep without the potion, and he had promised Minerva he would take it.

Severus sat up and looked for the bottle of sleeping draught. He saw Gareth's note again. He doubted that McGonagall was really superstitious about such things. But the threads between them were few, tenuous, and easily severed. Not friendship, precisely . . . he had no need for friends. Minerva and Hermione, if they were friends, they would suffice. He reached for the potion but picked up the knife. His thumb rubbed the smooth black handle. That hadn't been an expression of superstition. It had been a tentative offer of friendship. If he did nothing, McGonagall would know that he had no interest in his offer.

He put the knife back in its box. Foolishness. He wouldn't live to buy McGonagall a drink, let alone become friends with the irritating wizard.

Severus began to reach for the potion again, but then he stood, went out to his sitting room, found a piece of parchment, and standing at his table, he wrote:

"G.R. McGonagall...I.O.U. one drink....S. Snape"

He folded the note twice, sealed it with a charm, then wrote Gareth's name on the outside. He didn't know how to get it to him, but it was written. He could give it to Minerva if he remembered. If he didn't, they would find it after his death, and McGonagall . . . McGonagall could buy his own damned drink.

"That lends credence to our interpretation of the prophecy."

"Mm. I would say it lends support to our own plans which were based upon logical deductions," Minerva replied, pulling his arms closer around her as she felt him chuckle and kiss the back of her neck.

"In any case, I think we will succeed."

"I hope so, but I will not count on it," Minerva replied, burrowing more deeply under the covers and trying to get closer to him, as though that were possible. "And Buckbeak?"

"Very happy to be back in the Forest. We should have moved him after Sirius died. Keeping him in the attic for two or three years . . . even for one, it may have seemed the right thing at the time, but I think it was cruelty. We should have relocated him somewhere else."

"Yes, well, he was company for Sirius, and then Remus wanted to take care of him, feed him. I think it made him feel closer to Sirius," Minerva replied. "And you have to admit, something good did come of it."

"What's that?"

"Remus and Tonks. I understand that's how they started seeing each other, how Nymphadora managed to convince him to embark on a relationship," Minerva said. "She started helping him feed Buckbeak."

"'Witherwings' now, just in case anyone from the Ministry remembers him and feels vindictive enough to still want to kill the creature despite the Malfoys' absence."

"I don't know if I will remember that," Minerva said with a yawn. "I think I'm asleep already."

Robbie kissed the back of her head. "Sleep then, my love. Morning will be here soon."

"This is too early for a Saturday morning," Terry grumbled, yawning. "What couldn't wait until our meeting tonight?"

"Dean and I were talking yesterday. Actually," Neville said, looking over at the tall Gryffindor, "he came to me and said we needed to talk. So we met here last night. He has brought up a very valid concern, and he's got an idea about what we can do about it. I'll let him explain."

Dean smiled at the other sixth- and seventh-year students. "My uncle is a commander in the Royal Navy, and one of my aunts is a colonel in the Army. She's a doctor...that's like a Healer," he explained. "Anyway, after remembering a conversation between them, I realised that one of the things that we need to worry about is something that Muggles call 'friendly fire.' It doesn't sound so bad from the name, but it is. 'Friendly fire' is getting hit by your own side. I'm worried that we might accidentally hit someone we don't mean to. I've also noticed that we're just not very good at aiming in general, and since the *Massuelius* and *Frangere* in particular need to be aimed where you want to hit, I think we need to practice aiming, especially when everyone is moving around and people are getting in the way."

"That sounds good," Ginny said, "but we can't start hexing each other just for practice, not with these spells."

"No, we can't. But we can practise aiming at moving targets, and we can also practise avoiding hitting each other. The first is simple enough, since we could get the Room of Requirement to have the dummies move around, but I actually have another idea for target practice and for avoiding hitting people on our side." Dean looked around, trying to spot other Muggle-borns. There were a few, and a few more with at least one Muggle parent. "Ever heard of laser tag or paintball?"

"Yeah! Cool!" Colin said, his excitement shining in his eyes. "When do we start?"

Dean laughed. "Well, first we have to work out some kinks. I decided we need a wizarding version of paintball using our wands and not rifles, since we'll be using wands to cast the hexes and the principle for aiming a spell is different from aiming a gun. I've been able to come up with a nice spell for casting paintballs, but I haven't figured out how to control the colour."

"I still don't know what a paint ball is," Ernie Macmillan complained, "or why we would want a ball of paint in any colour."

After further explanation of what paintball and laser tag were, some discussion of the merits of the plan, and a little practice...and implementing Hermione's suggestions for changing the colour of the paint...they were able to reliably cast small paintballs from the ends of their wands. By changing the ending to the spell, they could indicate which colour they wished the paint to be.

"No aiming at the head," Hermione said. "It might only sting, but if you got hit in the eye, you might actually get hurt."

Dean grinned. "Good point. When I've played paintball with my cousins, they actually got bruises and welts from the paintballs, and if they were hit in the head, they got big bumps. They can't understand why I only got stung a little when a paintball hit me." He shrugged and laughed. "Only one of them knows I'm a wizard, and that's because he was living with us when I got my Hogwarts letter. Kind of hard to hide it after that. We usually play laser tag, but I don't like that as much because it's indoors." He looked around at the Room of Requirement. "I think we should ask the Room to give us something more like the outdoors, the way Professor Firenze's classroom is."

"Are you sure this isn't dangerous?" Zacharias asked. "Not that I'm afraid, but if one of us ends up in the Hospital Wing, people would ask questions, and my mum would go spare if I had to have an eyeball regrown."

Dean sighed. "It's not dangerous. You'll hardly feel a thing. If you're worried about your eyes, use a Bubblehead Charm to protect them. Muggles wear protective gear, and I suppose we could conjure some goggles or ask the room to supply them, but I hope everyone's aim will be good enough we won't need them."

"I suggest that we just practise some casting now," Neville said, "and then this evening when we all meet together, we can teach the younger years. We'll worry about goggles then. We will also be having a guest at that meeting, and I wanted to tell you now so you won't be surprised. Professor Crouch will be here to..."

"I thought we weren't going to tell anyone else," Ginny said in surprise.

"We are coordinating with . . . with some of the staff who are doing something similar," Neville said, trying not to be specific, "and Professor Crouch..."

"We hardly know Professor Crouch, though," Terry pointed out. "He's a competent Defence teacher for once...all right, Lupin wasn't too bad, and Snape was decent if you could get past the fact that he was Snape...but we really don't know him."

"I like him, myself, but I don't think we should trust him," Zacharias added.

"And what kinds of preparations are the staff making?" Ernie asked. "Do they know something we don't?"

"If you will stop interrupting me, I can tell you, and then we can get on with our practice," Neville said with a glower that was a fair imitation of his new source of inspiration. When everyone was looking at him and had stopped whispering with each other, Neville continued, "I cannot tell you anything about what the staff is doing or why they are preparing a defence, mainly because I don't know very much, but I spoke with . . . with someone, and that person needs to be able to coordinate everything. We can't all just be running around, doing whatever we feel like, possibly getting in each others' way or working at cross-purposes. Obviously, the goal will always be the same, to protect Hogwarts...or wherever else we might be...against Death Eaters. But there is enough chaos in a battle without having leaders on the same side who aren't working together."

"And why did you go see this mysterious person? And *why*? You started this, but who made you leader?" Ernie demanded.

"We did," Hermione said, answering for him. "We didn't vote or anything like that, but when we decided to listen to Neville and to follow his directions and learn his offensive spells, we made him our leader. And as to why he went to see this person, it was because I asked him to. I had been approached about our group, but I believed it was Neville's place to speak to, um, the person, and not mine."

Neville smiled briefly at Hermione. Any concerns he had had about her disappeared in that moment. She could be bossy, but she also recognised that he was the leader, and she would support him and not try to take over.

"Now, back to the point before we all miss breakfast," Neville said. "Professor Crouch will be coming in order to see our progress and to show us a couple different shield charms. He's also going to demonstrate a couple NEWT's level defensive charms to some of the younger years, such as two people combining their *Protegos*."

"That's useful," Ernie said sarcastically. "How many of *us* can do that? Or do it and sustain it? And that's in a classroom setting. It's pointless to try to teach the young kids to do the combined *Protego*."

"Still, it wouldn't be bad to have them see the *Protego connex* demonstrated," Hermione said, "and sometimes you can actually do better," under pressure if your life depends on it."

"And Professor Crouch has one particular defensive charm that isn't part of the NEWT's curriculum. He said it's an old one, not taught at Hogwarts, and it's good against a lot of Dark spells," Neville said. "And we know that he is Professor McGonagall's friend. I think it's a good idea."

There was a little bit more grumbling, but it was a *fait accompli*, and so, despite Ernie's continuing scepticism, they wanted to get to breakfast. They practised casting for a little longer, then left, a few at a time, and headed down to the Great Hall.

Severus nodded to Minerva when he entered her office.

"Good morning, Severus."

"Minerva."

"Any news?"

"None. I simply wished to use the library, if I may."

"Of course. I am expecting Melina soon. Are you going to be very long?"

Severus hesitated. "I do not know."

Minerva nodded. "Take your time." She tilted her head slightly. "I believe she is on her way up now. She had mentioned last time that she was here that she wished to see you..."

"I am in fine health," Severus said. "I am taking the potions that Poppy sends me. It is unnecessary for her to see me."

Minerva raised her eyebrows in amusement. "I do believe that she wanted to see you personally, Severus, not in her professional capacity. Some people do, you know."

Severus had no time to respond to that; Minerva waved her wand and admitted her niece to the office.

Melina blew into the room, full of energy, her face lighting up when she saw her aunt and Severus.

"Good morning!" Melina greeted them, her eyes sparkling. "And a very good morning it is!" She turned to Severus. "Oh, Severus! I just..."

To Severus's immense surprise, the witch flung her arms around him and stood on her tip-toes to kiss his cheek. Before he had time to do any more than stiffen slightly at

the unexpected onslaught, Melina had released him and stepped back. Severus blushed. Minerva had come around the desk, her mouth slightly open in anticipation, her eyes bright and fixed on her niece.

"Sorry, Severus," Melina said. "I had to get that out of my system, and before you could prepare to jump out of my way!"

"Is it...?" Minerva asked hesitantly.

"Yes, it is," Melina said with a laugh. She apparently hadn't completely got her enthusiasm quite out of her system yet, and she reached out and squeezed Severus's arm briefly. "Quin, Severus! Quin! For the last several weeks, I've been working on the problem using the information you gave me...finally including having one very wonderful and brave wizard have me cast the *Timere magia* on him so that I could try the..."

"And it worked?" Severus asked, interrupting. "Aren't you a pureblood?"

"Yes, I suppose am, but I have lived half in the Muggle world for a very long time and am married to a Muggle. I admit that it took me three days and several attempts before I could cast it, but..."

"Later, Melina!" Minerva said impatiently. "What happened?"

"It's more what didn't happen," Melina said, her eyes shining in joy and justifiable pride. "I just came from Quin's, where I was able to take out my wand and cast several spells in his presence with absolutely no ill effect on him whatsoever! That was the final step...or almost the final step. We have to work on rehabilitating his own magic now, it has been so many years since he has used it, and he has even suppressed his awareness of it flowing through his body, so he will have a lot of work ahead of him."

"That's wonderful! That's absolutely wonderful," Minerva repeated, tears gathering in her eyes. "Have you told Alroy yet?"

"No. I did stop by his quarters in Gryffindor Tower before I came here, since I thought he should know first, but when I couldn't find him, well, I was too excited to wait to tell you." Melina looked up at Severus, smiling. "Thank you very much, Severus. Quin will be able to regain some of his life now, and Aine will be freed, as well. She has spent the last twenty-five years living with her father as a Muggle, and although it has not been a bad life, she will be glad to be able to interact with the wizarding world more than she has and then eventually leave her father to take care of himself."

Severus found himself returning Melina's smile. "I am glad to have been of help."

"I was going to tell you about our progress when I was here last, but now I'm glad that I didn't see you until today," Melina replied. "And I know what you said about not telling anyone you gave us the information, but Gareth's already guessed. It's probably best that no one else know yet, but once everything's over, I would like to at least tell Quin who he has to thank."

Severus hesitated. He would be dead then. And it might be one more person who would be inclined to think of him as something other than a Death Eater. It shouldn't matter to him how he was remembered, but it did.

Severus nodded stiffly. "If you wish. After it's over."

"Good!" Melina turned to her aunt, seeming more sober. "Now, we have that other matter to discuss."

"Yes," Minerva agreed. "I think in my study rather than here. Severus, feel free to use the library for as long as you wish. Are you meeting Miss Granger?"

"No, I have no plans to, though she may wish to use the library today, as well," Severus replied. He wanted to take another look at the book in which Crouch had found the potion formula. He had briefly glanced at the formula itself just before he had delivered the potion to the Dark Lord, but hadn't taken the time to look at the book itself, although there appeared to be some very intriguing spells and potions in it. Severus hoped that Crouch hadn't taken the book back yet.

"Very well. I will be unavailable for at least the next hour, should you see anyone else, unless it is an emergency," Minerva said.

"I shall handle anything that may arise," Severus replied. "I will leave the door to the library open while I am there."

"Thank you, Severus."

"It was good to see you," Melina said, her smile returning. "I am glad that I could tell you myself. I hope you are able to meet Quin one day. I think you would like him."

Severus simply nodded and forbore mentioning that it was unlikely that Quin would like *him*, although he might be grateful to him. Besides, he would be dead then.

Minerva stopped at the bottom of the stairs. "Oh, Severus, I forgot to mention it, but I sent your note on to Gareth for you."

"Thank you," Severus replied, thinking again that his I.O.U. had been foolish...but harmless, he supposed.

In the library, Severus bent and looked for the small book where he had replaced it on one of the bottom shelves. Crouch hadn't taken it back yet, and Severus found it easily.

He settled into one of the chairs at the end of the long table and looked at the book again. It was clearly very old and had been well used over the years. The soft leather binding was not desiccated, still supple even after many decades, perhaps centuries, though the writing on the front cover was nearly illegible. Severus held the book in front of him, tilting it in the light until he could see the slightly impressed letters. It looked like "*vita furtiva, vindicta occulta, nex abdita*" He raised an eyebrow. "Secret life, concealed vengeance, hidden murder"? Something of that sort, anyway, and certainly not the kind of book he would have expected a retiring, though multi-talented, middle-aged apothecary from Amsterdam to possess. Of course, Crouch hadn't said that it was *his* book, merely that he had a potion that he thought would meet their needs. Still, Crouch had found it and the potion quickly.

Severus opened the book and began to page through it. The contents would appal and horrify most witches and wizards, and if the Ministry knew of its existence, they would likely wish to destroy it or to take it for themselves to keep in the Department of Mysteries. Spells, potions, Charmed devices..."cursed" would be a more appropriate description...and all laid out as matter-of-factly as if it were a book of household cleaning and maintenance charms. Almost all of them were Dark, and certainly all were capable of evil use, but they were fascinating and inventive, and most of them were new to Severus, or at least, they were unknown, occasionally older, variants of spells and potions he was acquainted with.

There was a small slip of parchment inserted about half-way through the book, pushed, whether through time or intent, tightly into the binding. Severus pulled it out and looked at it. The writing seemed faded with time, a pale brown, but the script was unmistakable. So, this had probably belonged to the Headmaster, or it had been something that he had used, at any rate.

Severus puzzled over the small piece of parchment. It was merely a list, it seemed. A few quite ordinary potions ingredients, mention of a marble pestle, something about a cloudless sky, and a note at the bottom that said, "variant of ff draught may counter eff of comp. scind. potion." Just beneath that note were a series of nine alchemical symbols, a triangle in the third, sixth, and ninth places. Fire. Severus puzzled over the symbols for a few minutes, then he decided that it was merely an Albus-doodle. The old wizard had often doodled during meetings or when thinking about a problem. It had been a rather irritating habit.

It looked as though at one time, Albus had attempted to discover an antidote to one of the potions in the book, probably very many years ago, and the notes on this list were something that he had made at that time.

Severus sighed. With so little information, it was impossible to tell precisely what Albus had meant by any of it, or what the formula for the final potion would have been. He

wondered if Albus had been successful in creating the new potion, and whether there had been a practical purpose to his developing it, or if it had been a purely academic, intellectual exercise. And it didn't matter. Albus was gone. What he would seek from Albus if he were here was not anything that he could find in this book.

What he could find in this book . . . Severus leafed through the pages for a few more minutes. Although many of the spells and potions were completely new to him, and some relatively innocuous in themselves, though they could be bent to evil purpose, Severus saw nothing that was truly unknown. All manner of death, disfigurement, torture, illusion, concealment, revenge, enslavement . . . and here was another slip of paper, this a bit of Muggle paper, not parchment, but still in Albus's hand, this ink, still blue and unfaded. Severus felt a lump in his throat as he looked at the writing and began to understand its meaning.

"Enslav & bonding charms, diff to break, partic when bonded willingly submits and when bond is magico-corporeal. Bonding only through a cursed obj alone can be broken by breaking curse on obj. Much more diffic when obj is the person's body. Curse and bond through branding of corpus hardest of all to break. Potions alone never effective. Only capture & use of bonder has allowed breaking of that bond in past. Success seems to require or cause death of master. Death of the branded one is usual result of all other attempts to break bond. Experiments pose great risk. Possibility: if brand is on limb, not torso, amputation? Might mark relocate? Magic may remain even if mark does not.

"Can I free him before R returns? If not "

Albus's note ended there, hanging in mid-sentence. During that time when his Dark Mark had been scarcely a shadow, almost entirely invisible to the eye, Albus had been looking for a way to eliminate the bond between himself and the Dark Lord, to free him before the Dark Lord's return. "R" was certain "Riddle." Albus had always called him "Tom" or "Riddle," though he had never shied from using the name "Voldemort" in public. He never used it when they were alone together, though, out of an abundance of caution. Severus himself was unsure how aware the Dark Lord was when others used his adopted name in the presence of someone bearing the Dark Mark...perhaps not at all...but it was a part of the terrifying mystique that had developed around him. Odd, actually, that anyone even remembered the name he had taken for himself, since no one but he ever used it.

Severus sighed, replaced Albus's note, and closed the book. Although it was an interesting, if somewhat gruesome, little volume, there was nothing in it that could help him, not in the time he had remaining. And he was prepared for his end, though it would have been satisfying if he could have taken the Dark Lord with him.

Severus stood to return the book to the shelf. He looked at it, its dark, aged leather warm in his hand. Such an innocuous thing, so small, and yet so filled with evil. Except . . . Severus opened the book again and drew out the second slip of paper. He bent and replaced the book on its shelf, then he folded the piece of paper and put it in his pocket. Just in time, it seemed. He heard Melina and Minerva coming back down from the Headmistress's suite.

"Ah, Severus! Finished with your research?" Minerva asked as he emerged from the library.

Severus nodded.

Melina looked at Severus and smiled slightly, then she said to her aunt, "I am going to go find Alroy and give him the news."

"And you can't stay for lunch?"

"No, I'm sorry. I have to get back. Good bye, Severus, it was good to see you again."

"Healer O'Donald," Severus said with a nod.

After Melina had left, Minerva sat down behind her desk. "Quiet morning," she remarked.

"Yes." He hesitated a moment, then he pulled out the scrap of paper. "I was looking through a book . . . the one that Crouch used to brew the potion. I found this."

Minerva raised one eyebrow. "And 'this' is?"

Severus slowly handed it to her.

Minerva read it. "Ah. I see." She took off her glasses and placed them on the desk, handing the paper back to Severus. She took a deep breath and let it out slowly. "There was a period during which Albus did research in order to see whether he could discover some method to remove your Mark. He was very torn about it. Albus knew that you . . ." She sighed again. "He knew of your desire for vengeance against the Dark Lord and of your desire to make amends for your betrayal of the Potters. He also knew that when Riddle returned, you would be an invaluable resource as a spy. But Albus thought that if he could find such a method, he would offer it to you, and then, if you accepted and it was successful, he could help you to relocate to some other part of the world. I believe that he felt . . . uncomfortable even doing the research. He felt it was selfish of him to want to rid you of the Mark, and not in the best interest of the wizarding world, and perhaps not even in your best interest. In any event, he never was able to find any solution to the problem."

"I could have saved him the trouble. In fact, I did once tell him there was no way to be rid of the Mark," Severus said. "I am bound to him. He will always be able to find me, always be able to call me to him, always have his evil touch upon me."

"A year or two before Potter came to Hogwarts, Albus said that your Mark bound you not only to Riddle, but to him, indirectly," Minerva said sadly. "At the time, Albus worried that it was the only thing that did. You had such a difficult relationship with him at times...and for many reasons, on both your sides...but he cared for you very much. He also told me that he dreaded the prospect of sending you back to Riddle, and yet he would, despite what he knew could happen to you. And then the time came. Riddle did return, bringing death with him. And Albus sent you back, and you went. And every time you went, it wore him down a little bit more. I saw it happening, but there was nothing I could do, and Albus shared very little with me, thinking to protect me and, I think, to protect the friendship between the two of us. And now I send you, and each time you leave, I try to harden myself, knowing what you must do and what you must endure. I try to get used to it. Now I know that Albus never really managed to harden himself or become used to it. He simply endured it, as I do now."

Severus swallowed. "But he wanted me to kill him."

"We have discussed that before, Severus. Even though he was wrong, Albus truly believed it was for the best for everyone, and although I have no doubt that Potter would still have had his opportunity to defeat Riddle, I believe that the price would have been much higher, certainly for you, but also for me, and likely for the wizarding world, as well. And he did change his mind." Minerva smiled slightly and shook her head. "Albus is sorry, you know, that he ever asked such a thing of you. He believed that you would come to see that you had done him a mercy and had also served the wizarding world in doing so."

Severus snorted a brief laugh. "We never got to see whether that would have been the case, though. Perhaps it would have been better. Do you know you still speak of him sometimes as though he is still here?"

"I do?"

"You said, he *is* sorry, not that he was sorry," Severus said.

"I am sure that, wherever he is, Albus *is* sorry," Minerva replied. "Now, I have a few more things to do before lunch, so if there's nothing else? No? Then if you happen to see Alroy, would you ask him to send Miss Granger to me...unless you see her yourself, in which case, you can tell her instead. Otherwise, I will speak to her at lunch."

"So you understand, Miss Granger, no matter the time of day, no matter what you are doing or what you are wearing, you are to keep these with you," Minerva said.

They were meeting in the Headmistress's private study, which Hermione had only glimpsed through the doorway before. It was small, much smaller than her study had

been as Head of Gryffindor House, but she also had a much larger office now, and the suite as a whole was larger.

Hermione nodded. "I understand, but what about, well, bathing?"

"The bag is charmed to be waterproof. Do not let it out of your sight or your possession. Sling it over your shoulder, fasten it around your waist, whatever is most convenient at the time. And don't carry it outside your clothing unless you must." Minerva looked her up and down. "It would probably be easiest if you made a habit of wearing your student robes over your regular clothing, regardless of what you are doing. For the moment, put it in your book bag, but don't let it out of your sight. And although I do approve in principle of your participation with Dumbledore's Army, I am concerned about the contents of the bag. The vial is charmed to be unbreakable, and the rest of your kit has similar charms on it, but such charms don't provide complete protection, as you know, particularly not from spell damage. Please be very cautious."

Hermione examined the contents of the bag again. It was cleverly constructed, less a bag than a wide belt with pouches sewn in, and each pouch precisely the size and shape required for each item and closing with Charmed, self-sealing flaps. Loops along the other side held a tourniquet. There was a single vial of clear liquid, which Minerva had explained was a potion that needed to be administered directly into the bloodstream as Melina had taught her to do. She had also hesitantly told Hermione that it was an antitoxin potion, a very specific antitoxin, but experimental.

Another small pouch contained the intravenous needle and syringe with which the antitoxin potion should be administered. They were charmed but looked much like something you might find in a Muggle hospital. If for some reason she couldn't inject the potion into the person's vein, she could use the completely magical method to transfer the contents of the vial into the patient's bloodstream. It had been a difficult charm to master, but Melina had been a patient teacher, even when Hermione had caused what appeared to be a painful bubble of fluid under her skin, and now Hermione found it quite easy to cast.

One very small pouch held a single Bezoar, though Minerva warned her that it was included only as an additional precaution and might very well be either ineffective or impossible to administer and not to be relied upon. The next pouch over was home to a squat brown jar of a sticky, muddy green potion that Minerva had called "Omnicogulant Potion," which, applied externally, would help close even the most obstinate of cursed wounds.

"And what is this for again?" Hermione asked, pulling out a squeeze tube that looked quite Muggle to her.

"As I said, it is a potion to be applied externally, should the need arise." Minerva thought for a moment, considering what other information she could give her. "It is an anti-necrosis potion. If and when you need to use it, it will be obvious precisely how it should be used...provided, of course, that you possess the intelligence I believe you to have and you don't use it lightly and needlessly before then."

Hermione nodded. "This has something to do with Professor Snape, doesn't it?"

"As I say, you are an intelligent witch. If I could tell you all that it concerns, I would. It may be that the situation for which we are preparing you will never come to pass. Speak of this to no one but myself, Professor Crouch, or Melina. You will know when it is safe and appropriate to speak of it to anyone else, I am sure."

Hermione was not so certain herself, but she agreed. Whatever it was that the Headmistress was anticipating, she had entrusted her with an important responsibility, that much was obvious, and Hermione would not take it lightly.

"Remember, Hermione," Minerva said, "the most important thing is the Prospirator Spell. Even if you lose the potions or cannot administer them, the Prospirator is key and may be sufficient, but the potions would never suffice. *Dum spiro, spero.*"

"I remember. Melina told me the same thing, and it is rather obvious that if someone can't breathe, they will die," Hermione replied.

"We are going to be late for lunch. Do you have any other questions?"

"Only ones that you probably can't answer," Hermione replied, "but if I think of any later, I'll come see you."

Minerva entered the Great Hall to see that almost everyone was there already. She glanced over at Alroy and caught his eye. He gave her a broad grin. No doubt he would want to go see his father, but if he went, it would have to be a very brief visit. Despite the intelligence Severus had provided, Minerva knew that Riddle could change his mind and attack sooner, or even simply try a weak feint, and there was always the possibility that he mistrusted Severus and his suspicions were causing him to give Severus false information.

There was an additional person at the staff table, sitting beside Hooch, her face turned so that Minerva could not see anything but long, very straight, very black hair. Hooch caught sight of Minerva, smiled, and said something to her companion, who turned and looked toward Minerva, smiling warmly. Minerva almost stumbled over nothing. The petite witch seemed to exude vibrancy, but more than that, she was stunning, with high cheekbones, glossy hair, full lips, and a glowing complexion that was more coppery than olive. As Minerva drew closer to the table, she saw startlingly bright blue eyes. This must be Krum's fiancée. It must be quite a contrast to see the two of them together, she thought.

Hooch had mentioned bringing the witch to see Hogwarts, but she had not cleared it with Minerva, which rather irked the Headmistress. Nonetheless, Minerva put a smile on her face and stopped beside the other two witches.

"Minerva, I would like you to meet Helena Benetti," Rolanda said. "Helena, this is Professor McGonagall, whom I told you about."

Benetti held out her hand. "Very pleased to meet you, Headmistress. I do hope that my presence is not an inconvenience."

Minerva's smile became less forced. "There is always enough for a guest. You are quite welcome."

"She is staying down at the Three Broomsticks," Rolanda explained. "I had been going to ask you during lunch about a tour for her later today, but when I got her owl saying she had arrived, I went down and fetched her."

"I could have lunched in town," Helena began.

"Nonsense," Minerva replied, cutting her off. "I have heard a great deal about you...although I must admit to not following the international Quidditch teams...and it is good to meet you." Minerva gave Rolanda a quick look that clearly informed the Flying teacher that they would be having a conversation later about unvetted guests.

"Helena has agreed to do a demonstration for some of our Quidditch players," Rolanda said. "I thought that after the tour, we could take some sixth- and seventh-year players out to the pitch and we could do a little practice with them. Others would be welcome to come and watch, of course."

Minerva hesitated. This seemed to be Rolanda's way of not only acquainting Benetti with the Hogwarts grounds in case she participated in its defence, but also to get some of the older students out and flying together. They couldn't practise spell-casting from their brooms, but perhaps there were other things they could do that Hooch thought would be useful. Minerva was uncomfortable about including the sixth-years, since many were not yet of-age, but segregating them that way might appear odd.

"Very well," Minerva said with a nod. "And afterward, why don't we have tea? My office?"

It sounded like a suggestion, or perhaps a request, but Hooch took it for the order it was.

"That would be fine. Four o'clock in your office," Rolanda agreed.

"Oh, afternoon tea! I do enjoy that custom," Helena said with a bright smile. "It always feels very civilised. It always sounds much nicer than a coffee break does. And I adore scones."

Minerva smiled. "I will be sure we have scones, then."

"Not if it's any trouble," Helena said quickly. "I only meant that I enjoy them."

"It is no trouble at all. I am partial to them, myself," Minerva said, hoping that Benetti was truly as pleasant as she appeared to be. Even her accent was rather quaint.

"Thank you, Minerva," Rolanda said.

Minerva nodded. "Have a good afternoon. It's nice weather for flying."

"You should come out with us," Helena suggested with some enthusiasm.

"I am sure I would enjoy it, but unfortunately, my schedule won't permit it," Minerva replied. "I will see you both at four, though."

Neville nodded in greeting to Professor Crouch as he met him in the corridor. Without speaking, the two proceeded down the hall, where Neville stopped and began to pace. A peculiar thing it would have been to witness, had there been anyone else present to see.

The two wizards glanced at each other, then Neville reached out and opened a door that hadn't been evident before. He let the older wizard enter first, then followed him in after checking the corridor once more.

Crouch crossed the large room and looked at the peculiar, grey-clad, faceless figures gathered along one wall.

"These are your targets?" he asked softly.

Neville nodded. "The Room releases them when we are ready."

"Show me what you have been practising," Crouch said.

Neville stood in the centre of the room and drew his wand. "First one!"

One of the dummies stepped forward.

"*Decapito!*"

A bright red spell arced toward the figure and hit it. The faceless head flew off. A moment later, the dummy and its head vanished.

"Next!" Neville called out.

A new dummy stepped toward Neville and stopped.

"*Exentero!*"

A large rent appeared in the dummy's shapeless robe, and bloodless entrails spewed out. Just as before, the dummy disappeared. Neville stood ready for another target, and the Room apparently read his intent, because another walked out to stand in front of him.

"*Frangere! Frangere! Frangere!*" Neville cast three hexes in rapid succession, striking the dummy in its chest, its shoulder, and then its leg, causing it to fall to the floor. By now, the young wizard was sweating slightly.

The dummy vanished to be replaced by a new one that stood ready and waiting for Neville's hex.

"*Massuelius!*"

The dummy rocked as the curse hit it dead centre.

"That's enough," Robbie said as Neville raised his wand to cast another hex.

The Room obligingly removed the dummy. Neville watched somewhat nervously as his teacher paced the floor. Finally, Robbie stopped and turned to face the young wizard.

"Your control of the spells is impressive," Robbie said. "And there is no doubt that they are effective and that they would be powerful in a battle. You may have noticed that they do take a good deal of energy to cast, particularly the first two. Unless you are fighting only one or two opponents in a brief skirmish, those two would not be very good choices for your initial sally, and if you only had one or two opponents, killing them would quite likely be . . . overkill, if you will pardon the expression. In a battle with many potential opponents, it is important not to fatigue yourself too greatly at the start of it. Also," Robbie ended softly, "it is always preferable to avoid killing."

"But, sir..."

Robbie held up one hand, stopping Neville's protests. "I said it is preferable. It may be unavoidable, particularly if faced with a strong opponent. But it is important to remember that a strong opponent will also be difficult to kill. If you are strong enough, though, you may be able to avoid killing even a very powerful opponent. I do not say that you have done wrong in teaching these curses. On the contrary, these hexes may save some lives, but only at the expense of others."

"But they are Death Eaters," Neville protested.

"Yes, and to defend oneself or others and to prevent someone from killing, it may be excusable, and certainly defensible, to kill that person, but do not forget that you are killing a human being, Mr Longbottom, taking a life." Robbie looked him up and down. "I do not like to contemplate any of you becoming killers, and yet worse would be to have you die, slaughtered by those with no such compunctions. Still, as I said, those spells take a good deal of power to cast, particularly the *Decapito*, and I recommend reserving them for the moment when they are most needed and at a moment when your opponent is less guarded. Casting the powerful hexes repeatedly and to no avail will only do two things, warn your adversary that you present a greater threat than he...or she...believed, and tire you and weaken your own defences."

Neville contemplated that, and then he said, "I take your point. I'm glad you'll be here to tell everyone this, Professor."

"You may tell them yourself, Mr Longbottom. I will be here simply as a resource for you, although I will, as I promised, do some demonstrations and teach two additional shielding charms," Robbie said. "How well have the others mastered the spells?"

"The *Decapito* and the *Exentero* were the most difficult, though everyone has managed to cast them at least once. I thought it was only because they are sort of disgusting, but it's probably what you say about how much energy it takes to cast them." Neville looked over at the dummies. "And these things don't fight back. They aren't even alive. I thought I was doing a good thing with this." He sounded discouraged.

"You are doing a good thing, Neville. Even if almost none of them ever use either of those curses, they are aware of them and of their possibilities for use in battle against them. And what of the *Massuelius* and *Frangere*?"

"They did better with those, but they didn't always do very much damage." Neville looked over at the dummies again. "But I suppose that any damage from either of those might hurt a real person enough to incapacitate them."

"Indeed," Robbie said. "I think that you and your group should concentrate on those two. If someone has a preference, one spell that is easier than the other for them to cast, let them practise only that one. Better to be excellent at one than mediocre at many. And for you . . . one more demonstration, I think, to drive home the point in a practical manner."

"Which point is that, sir?"

"The one regarding the energy required to cast such destructive hexes at a living, breathing wizard, and one who is defending himself," Robbie clarified. "And despite my confidence in my ability to shield against any of them, as I do not wish to lose my head, I suggest you cast the *Exentero*."

Neville blanched. "But, sir..."

"As I said, Mr Longbottom, I shall shield against it. And if you do get through, it is unlikely to do grave damage, and even then, we are at Hogwarts and Madam Pomfrey could probably put me back together again before it could kill me," Robbie said mildly.

Neville stood looking at him, opening and closing his mouth for a moment. Robbie had his wand out.

"Mr Longbottom? The others will arrive soon."

Neville raised his wand, swallowed, and cast the *Exentero*. Robbie flicked his wand slightly and the beam of orange spell-light dissipated then vanished.

"Come now, Neville, you can do better than that! Even if it had hit me, I doubt it would have penetrated my robes. Again!"

Neville screwed up his courage and raised his wand again. '*Exentero!*'

Robbie smiled slightly as he cast a nonverbal shielding charm.

"Better, Mr Longbottom, much better. Now, cast repeatedly."

Neville did as he requested, casting several *Exentero* spells in succession, slowing toward the end as he tired, and Robbie's shield held for all of them.

"You see now what I was saying?" Robbie asked as Neville wearily dropped his arm and ceased casting. "Of course, in battle, things would proceed rather differently. Your opponent would not only shield himself, but would be attacking you. Reserve your strongest offensive for when it can best be effective. Stunners and Petrifying spells are sufficiently difficult and tiring to cast...though not as much so as these others, obviously...and used in combination with Body Binds and rope spells, they can also incapacitate. Again, I do not say never to use the *Decapito* or *Exentero*, but use them strategically and only when you must, when your opponent invites that kind of force. As for *Massuelius* and *Frangere*, they are quite useful spells for disabling an opponent, even when not cast with lethal force and aim." A spasm of pain or sadness seemed to cross Robbie's face. "I do hope none of you children will be required to kill," he added softly.

"I am of-age, not a child," Neville said.

Robbie took in a deep breath and let it out. "Yes, of course you are." He smiled. "And what were your other plans for this evening?"

Neville told him about Dean's idea for paintball, and Robbie chuckled, finding it very clever.

"Muggle-borns often have some of the very best ideas," he said brightly, "and those who have spent time in the Muggle world. When this is over, my boy, spend some time in it, open yourself up, learn from them."

The others began to trickle in a few minutes later. When everyone was assembled, Neville carefully and methodically explained what he had learned from Professor Crouch and told them of their new strategy for using the new hexes and how they would begin to practise mainly the *Massuelius* and *Frangere*, each person concentrating on whichever of them they preferred. When Neville had finished speaking, Robbie stepped forward from the shadows where he had been listening and allowing Neville to conduct the meeting as he saw fit.

"I understand that you are all looking forward to a game of paintball this evening..." He chuckled when he saw some of the expressions on the younger students' faces, ranging from confusion to excitement. "I believe I have spoiled the surprise...and no, Miss Jackson, I shall not explain what 'paintball' is. I will leave that to Mr Longbottom and Mr Thomas. I am here to demonstrate the *Protego connex* and to teach two new shield charms. The first should be relatively easy for you all to learn, since you know the base charm, although it is not a particularly powerful or reliable spell. It can be cast quickly, however, and takes little energy. The second is more difficult to cast, but it is a naturally powerful spell that requires relatively little energy to cast in proportion to its effectiveness. Best yet, it is almost unknown in Britain, so it will be a little surprise for any opponents."

A hand went up in the back.

"Yes, Mr . . ." Robbie craned to see the boy whose hand was raised. "Mr Brett. You have a question?"

"Yes, sir." The straight-backed, fifth-year Ravenclaw stepped forward. "Why don't we learn these two spells in our lessons?"

"The first one is not a part of the standard lessons because it is not tested on the OWLs or the NEWTs, and it is not on the examinations because at some point in the past, the Ministry Examiners decided to eliminate it. I believe there was some thought that it was too simple or ineffective, and it is not a conventional defensive spell. The second one . . . it is an old spell from another part of the world. It is not a part of the British wizarding tradition."

"But now, Professor," Jamie Brett persisted. "You could teach them in class now."

Robbie smiled mildly. "You are correct. I could teach them in class now. However, this evening, I am teaching them to you here. Is that acceptable, Mr Brett?"

Jamie flushed but nodded.

"Then we shall begin, with everyone's permission?" Robbie looked around, and there were no objections or questions. "First, *Repello cantamen*. It is a basic repelling spell, but unlike most you have learned, it repels a cast spell rather than a physical object. Miss Abbot, assist me."

Hannah stepped forward.

"Cast a spell...a Stinger, perhaps, and I will demonstrate *Repello cantamen*."

Hannah dutifully cast a Stinging Hex, and Robbie cast the *Repello*, emphasising the pronunciation.

"You see that the wand movement is identical to that in the other *Repello* spells. You must simply have the intent to repel the spell coming toward you. Because of that, the one difficulty with this method of defence is that you must know what spell is being cast and be able to cast it yourself. If Miss Abbot had decided to cast a Jelly-Legs Jinx instead and had done so nonverbally, my spell would have been ineffective."

Everyone paired off and practised the *Repello* for several minutes. Some of them found it difficult at first, and were hit by mild Stinging Hexes, but they all caught on.

"Good, very good," Robbie said as they all stopped and turned toward him. "Just practise using a variety of other non-injurious spells. And now, I will demonstrate the other spell. It is quite strong. Almost any spell will be stopped, even very Dark spells. One that it will not stop is the *Avada Kedavra*. No one has ever developed a spell that will shield against that, although there have, of course, been instances in which someone was protected against it by something else."

"Like Harry," Celia Jackson said.

"Yes, like Mr Potter," Robbie agreed. "*Parlakkalkan*. That is the shield spell."

"That's Turkish!" Lawrence Bain blushed when everyone turned and looked at him. "Well, I think it is," he mumbled.

"You are correct, Mr Bain," Robbie said with a smile. "And do you know what it means?"

Lawrence blushed more darkly and shook his head. "My cousins are Turkish. My aunt's husband is Turkish. I just hear it; I don't really understand it. But, um, I think 'parlak' is something good, like, sharp, or bright, maybe?"

Robbie smiled and nodded. "It can mean different things in modern spoken Turkish, including 'bright.' In this spell, 'parlak' is 'brilliantly radiant,' more or less. I am unsurprised you do not recognise 'kalkan' at all. That simply means 'shield.'"

"And we're learning a Turkish spell?" Ernie MacMillan asked, trying to sound polite but not succeeding.

"It is a spell like any other that you learn here at Hogwarts. How many spells do you learn that sound like English?"

"The one you just demonstrated," Ernie said. "*Repello* is like 'repel.'"

"Only because both the spell and the word come from the same Latin roots. Do you forget what you were taught your very first year in all of your practical classes? It is *intent* that matters. The incantation, no matter how powerful, can only assist you in channelling the intent. That is why you are able to cast a spell nonverbally, even those that ordinarily have an incantation."

"But language is powerful," Jamie said softly, almost to himself.

"Oh, yes, language is, indeed, powerful, and there are entire volumes written on the magical power of language, both as language and as pure sound, but that is a study of many years, not a lesson for one evening. If you are interested in it, I am sure that you can find many volumes that will provide you fascinating hours of reading. I recommend those by Merwyn McGonagall, in particular."

"McGon..."

"Our Headmistress's late father, yes," Robbie said, enjoying the tangents but feeling pressed for time. "Now, for the demonstration of *Parlakkalkan*. Let us begin. Miss Granger, will you assist me? Cast any spell you wish, verbally or nonverbally...other than the obvious Unforgivables or similar spells...and I shall block."

Hermione stepped up, pointed her wand, and cast a nonverbal spell. Robbie cast the *Parlakkalkan* verbally.

Hermione stepped back and there was a chorus of gasps. Hermione's spell seemed to meet some invisible force, and there was a shower of light as it was blocked.

"Very nice, Miss Granger. A *Stupefy*, correct? A few more times, but cast more strongly," Robbie said.

Hermione cast a strong, verbal *Frangere*, and this one exploded in a shower of white light.

"A little flamboyant, for a defensive spell, but very pretty at night," Robbie commented.

She followed another *Frangere* with a *Massuelius* and a *Petrificus Totalus*, then she paused, smiled slightly, and tried a nonverbal Cheering Charm.

After that one was repelled, accompanied by a shower of turquoise and pink light, Robbie smiled and said, "I almost wish I had let that one through, Miss Granger. A Cheering Charm might have been rather nice!"

Hermione laughed.

Robbie paused, looking at Neville. "I believe it has become too late tonight for a demonstration of the *Protego connex*, and perhaps Mr Brett has a point. I shall consider demonstrating it to a wider audience. We shall see."

Robbie turned the meeting back over to Neville, and he pulled Hermione aside.

"You might enjoy paintball, Miss Granger, but perhaps it might be safer for your package if you do not participate this evening," he said softly. "I can provide you with an excuse to leave, if you wish."

Hermione hesitated, then nodded.

Dean was in the midst of explaining the principles of paintball, and Robbie leaned over and whispered something in Neville's ear. Neville looked slightly surprised, but nodded.

"Come along, my dear," Robbie said, leading Hermione to the door. "I believe it is time for you and me to discuss wand theory and . . . a few other issues, hmm?"

"Did you have a good evening?" Minerva asked.

"Quite." Robbie put his arms around her from behind, looking over her head out the window.

"And your discussion with Hermione?" Minerva asked, leaning back.

"Also satisfactory. I believe that she will be able to explain what she must to Harry when the time is right."

"From what Severus told me, it sounds as though Harry has already come to the correct conclusion about what happened when Riddle failed to kill him the first time."

"That should make it much easier," Robbie said, then, distracted, he added, "Is that . . . Aurora Sinistra and Firenze?"

"Yes, it is, again." She glanced back up at him. "Almost every night now. She brings out a telescope, he joins her, they talk. She looks through the telescope much less than she talks, and less each night. I don't know as she uses the Astronomy Tower at all now, except for teaching."

"It is good that Firenze has found a friend. It has been very isolating for him here, cut off from his herd, from people who understand him."

"From Aurora's behaviour, I think she feels something more than friendship for him," Minerva said.

Robbie was silent for a moment, and then he said, "If that is so, it saddens me. Centaurs do not view humans in that way, not even Firenze, for all his liberal notions. Any kind of . . . relationship would not be possible between them. He could never return any romantic feelings she might have for him."

"Personally, I find it puzzling," Minerva said. "I know Firenze is a person, sentient, and so forth, and I like him, but I don't see how . . . I mean, physically . . . Perhaps I am reading too much into it. I hope so, for Aurora's sake, if what you say is true. And I don't think I've ever heard of a human-centaur, um, mating."

"Centuries ago, it used to happen occasionally, but even then, it would be brief, not what you would characterise as a relationship." Robbie paused, his attention on the two teachers. "On the other hand, I have been known to be wrong on occasion."

Firenze had put an arm around Aurora, and she leaned against him, then he nuzzled her hair.

Minerva turned. "Time for us to leave them with their stars, I believe," she said softly.

"And us to our dreams, hmm?"

"To our dreams."

Note: *Flick knives, also known as "switchblades," are often illegal to carry, or even to possess, in many countries, including the U.K., Australia, Canada, and parts of the United States. So I don't recommend emulating Gareth and Severus and trying to obtain one! Severus will be breaking Muggle laws carrying a flick knife in England and Scotland, but I doubt that is high on his list of concerns.*

I recently posted to my blog and LJ a list of some of the noncanon spells in Death's Dominion. There's a link to my blog on my author's page.

*And since I haven't said it recently, please **do not** take any of my stories as an infallible source for information about the real world, whether scientific, cultural, social, linguistic, literary, medical, veterinary, or otherwise! :-)*

Chapter Twenty-Six: They lying long

Chapter 27 of 34

Severus works to maintain the Dark Lord's trust in him until he has accomplished what he must. He has disturbing news for Hermione. Preparations at Hogwarts continue.

Warning for an instance of vulgar language.



Chapter Twenty-Six: *They lying long*

16 21 May 1998

Severus sat in one of the armchairs beside the fireplace in the Headmistress's Office. He was trembling inside, and not from the after-effect of the Cruciatus this time. He wanted to leap up and pace, or perhaps simply cast himself headlong out Minerva's open window, but he simply tightened the grip of his hands on his knees and waited for Minerva to finish pouring the tea.

"Now," Minerva said, placing his cup in front of him on the low table, "what has disturbed you so?"

She had been concerned when he had appeared, pale and sweaty, after lunch. They had met in the Entrance Hall as she was leaving the Great Hall and he was coming into the castle, the door swinging closed behind him, shutting out the bright sunshine. She had wished she could say or do something then and there, but she had simply nodded to him and suggested that they go up to her office. When they got there and Severus had made it clear that he was not in need of any medical attention, Minerva insisted on calling for strong hot tea, and despite his usual preference for milk only, she added a teaspoon of sugar to his.

Severus reached for his cup as he decided how to begin. Minerva waited patiently and drank her own tea. Severus set his cup back down, noting abstractly that he had managed to regain control of his trembling fingers.

"The attempt on Scrimgeour is scheduled to take place next Monday, a week from the day after tomorrow, if all of the Dark Lord's other preparations fall into place. He will be increasing attacks between now and then, short, lightning quick strikes that are meant to increase fear and keep the Aurors and MLE busy and spread out. I don't know any details about the attacks, except that some will be on shops in Diagon Alley and McTavish Street and some will be on individual witches and wizards and their families. He's planning on some attacks in broad daylight. Minerva, I think that your brother's apothecary will be one of the first targets, but if he closes his shop before any of the other attacks on McTavish Street, it will be obvious that he was warned."

"I see," Minerva said.

"But it is up to you whether you tell him or not. He is your brother..."

"We will work something out," Minerva said. "Don't worry. I see why you were disturbed, but we will make sure that it doesn't appear that Murdoch was warned. The toerag won't suspect you yet. What else do you know about the attack on the Ministry?"

Severus took in a deep breath. "That was not what disturbed me, Minerva. There is something else."

"What is it?" Minerva asked, her heart beating faster as she saw the trepidation in Severus's face.

"The Dark Lord wants you dead before the attack on the Ministry. He doesn't care how I do it, as long as I am not suspected and I become Acting Headmaster. I can't do that, Minerva, and I won't."

"Of course not, Severus."

"But he will kill me..."

"Not yet. We will work something out. Have you a deadline?"

"He wants it done at least twenty-four hours before the assassination attempt on Scrimgeour. I can do it sooner, but not later," Severus said. "Once he has confirmed the timing of the attack on the Ministry, I will have my deadline."

"That's good, then!" Minerva said. At Severus's raised eyebrow, she explained, "We will know exactly when the attack on the Ministry is scheduled for."

"But, Minerva..."

"And did you have a sense of when the attack on Hogwarts will take place?" Minerva asked, interrupting.

"Soon after the attack on the Ministry, within hours at the most," Severus replied, tamping down his agitation. "He is not confident that I will be able to lower the wards if you are still here, but he also wants me here to turn Potter over to him and then give him the school...I think he plans to install himself in the castle, rule wizarding Britain from Hogwarts."

"Well, he'll never get that chance if we have anything to do with it. Which we do. And we have a more definite timetable now. That's good as well." Minerva reached out and rested her hand on his. "We will think about the little problem of my murder. I already have a few ideas in the back of my mind. I have been thinking about it since you told me last week. It will be all right, Severus."

"I don't see how," Severus said miserably. "Although perhaps he will not learn of my failure to kill you until after the attack on the Ministry, and we'll still be able to carry through with the rest of our plans."

Minerva stood, leaned over, her hand on his shoulder, and kissed his forehead. "Go now; do something routine. Don't think about this problem for the next few hours. Come back and see me at four. I'll have more tea for you, and we can discuss it all then."

As Severus opened the door leading to the spiral staircase, he turned back for a moment. Minerva was casting her Patronus. Five. Five at once, nonverbally, and all leaping off in different directions. Severus swallowed. She was a strong, intelligent witch. Not the equal of Albus or the Dark Lord, but powerful, nonetheless. He would simply have to have faith that Minerva's motivation and sanity would provide her an edge over the Dark Lord. That, her allies, and her foreknowledge would all serve her well. As would he, to his last breath, just as he promised her.

Severus closed the door gently behind him and went to find some routine tasks to occupy him until teatime.

A final Patronus, this one a bull, flew into the Headmistress's Tower, found its target, and flew to her. Minerva cocked her head, ready to receive its message, then nodded in satisfaction. Everyone would be there that night after curfew, each one arriving by his or her own preplanned route.

Minerva turned to Robbie, who had come down from her suite immediately after Severus had left.

"I think it's time for our little performance," she said.

"And you wish to include Poppy?"

"Yes. I think it would provide more realistic motivation for me to turn to Severus and rely exclusively upon him."

"Very good! You know that I am always ready for role-playing," Robbie said with a smile.

"I'll be back in a little while with your co-star, then!" Minerva said.

"Now I am becoming both curious and nervous, Minerva," Poppy said as they entered the Headmistress's Office. "You say it has to do with Severus, but that he hasn't been injured...and when I saw him a few minutes before you found me, he seemed his usual surly self, berating some Gryffindors for walking down the centre of the corridor and taking up too much space. Took points for it, too."

"Good!" Minerva replied. "I'm glad to hear he took my advice."

"You told him to take points from Gryffindor for no rational reason?" Poppy asked, dumbfounded.

Minerva chuckled slightly. "Not precisely. But it might do him some good, and a few House points is hardly a thing to be worried about right now."

"Is this to do with the infirmary preparations you have asked me to make?" Poppy asked. "I have been stocking up and, as you suggested, obtaining my supplies from a variety of sources and most of them from Murdoch's."

"I hope you have received your order from him already. There will be a very serious accident in his apothecary sometime soon...possibly even tomorrow morning. Demolish a good part of his shop, send him and Estelle to St. Mungo's. I'm afraid the Egidius Apothecary will be closed for quite some time as its Potions master recovers and repairs are made. Oh, and if you happen to find yourself in McTavish Street, don't eat anything at any of the restaurants or pubs. There's going to be an outbreak of some food-borne illness. I'm not certain what Melina finally decided on, but I gave her the signal to go ahead with it. Nothing deadly, of course. Just unpleasant. Enough to close Aphrodite's Apple and a few other establishments until the danger of contamination has been eliminated."

Poppy opened her mouth then closed it again.

"We haven't as many plans for Diagon Alley, but Arthur was going to speak to the twins about wreaking a little havoc. Subtly."

Poppy laughed at that. "I don't believe the twins are capable of subtlety!"

"Perhaps they will rise to the occasion," Minerva said. "As for you, you needn't participate in creating any explosions or illnesses. You only have to assist in a little bit of deception, if you agree."

"I can do that. Whatever you need."

"I can't tell you everything, of course, but it is to assist Severus. He needs some memories to bring back to the toe-rag...to Voldemort. I want them to be as authentic as possible. Therefore, we will perform a little play for the pathetic little pretender, provide him with some entertainment. Let's get on with it, if you're ready." She smiled. "I am glad I can turn to you for help, no matter what, Poppy."

"Of course you can! No matter what!"

"So, are you ready to hear what it is I need from you? What you agreed to do, no matter what?"

"Very Slytherin of you, Minerva. Extracting an agreement from me before I could have any grounds to decline. What is it you need me to do?"

Fifteen minutes later, Poppy had agreed to participate in Minerva's charade, with no reservations whatsoever.

"It's much better than making all those people in McTavish Street sick or having to blow up my own apothecary. This is positively child's play in comparison," Poppy said. She grinned. "It might actually be fun!"

"Hmpf, yes, I am sure it will be quite a diverting way to spend some time tomorrow. You and Robbie can practise your part this evening and tomorrow morning. I have a script for us to follow...not a script, precisely, but an outline with suggested dialogue. Feel free to ad lib as you wish." Minerva looked over at the clock on the chimneypiece. "And I had better get to work finishing it. Severus is coming up for tea. That doesn't leave me much time."

Poppy raised an eyebrow. "You told me that Severus had only talked to you about it this afternoon after lunch. You've already got a script?"

"I've known about the order in a general way for a while, but even before that, I had anticipated that there might be an occasion in which this or a similar deception might be necessary." Minerva grinned. "Adding you, though, that is a recent stroke of genius on my part. To add to the verisimilitude of the situation. Provide my motivation."

"Ha! As though I would ever engage in such conduct...or be so indiscreet about it if I did!" Poppy said.

"Oh, I'm sure that Tommy still has his mind in the gutter, just as he did when he was a boy. People with dubious or malicious motives are always very quick to impute them to others. No, he'll believe this. And it will hopefully hold off Severus's task for a while."

Minerva stood and Poppy followed suit.

"When do you want me to return this evening for, um, rehearsal?" Poppy asked.

"Ask Robbie at dinner. I'll spend the evening in my office, so you can rehearse in private for a while," Minerva said as she opened the door to the sitting room. "It will give you time to become comfortable with your roles before having to perform in front of Severus and me."

Poppy nodded. It was all very peculiar, and her mind swam at the levels of play-acting that would be involved.

"Thank you again, Poppy. You are a true friend."

"I am happy to help." She caught the door and held it open before Minerva could close it. "Minerva, if you can, could you let Murdoch and Estelle know that I hope they will be all right?"

"Murdoch will be here tonight, and I will tell him. He's been preparing for this for months. He and Estelle should be just fine if everything goes as planned."

Severus looked up from the last page of Minerva's script, a look of consternation on his face.

"This is your idea for saving me from having to murder you?" he asked.

"That's not all of it, of course," Minerva said. She seemed eager to have him approve her plan. "After that, you will have opportunities to reinforce the impression that I am susceptible to you and that you have a secret desire to control and manipulate me."

"I don't know . . ." Severus flipped back to the first page.

"The toe-rag understands that kind of desire, the desire to dominate, to manipulate, to . . . to want someone to develop a subservient dependence. He will believe that of you," Minerva said. "As for me, you say he has little respect for me, that he believes me to require the, the affirmation and guidance of a stronger wizard. Yet I would also be willing to bet that he believes me to be easily injured by any perceived betrayal, that I would become an unstable and emotional wreck. I think this will work. I really do. He already sees that you have become more important to me, that I am relying on you, and that Robbie is spending much less time with me in public. We could even have you imply that you have been working toward this...or even that you were aware of what was occurring and engineered this encounter."

Severus made a face. "I don't like having the Dark Lord believe that of you, Minerva. And I also don't know if it isn't too little too late."

"I don't think so," Minerva said. "If we had done this any sooner, you might have had to go further in your act than you will now. We only need to persuade him to believe that any reluctance on your part to kill me stems from your desire to dominate and control me, to obtain some kind of thrill from it after all of these years of having to serve first Dumbledore and then me. You could tell him that you want me for a puppet on a string, or that you wish to make me your captive at the time of the attack on Hogwarts. However you want to play it, Severus, and whatever you think that he will believe. Look at how he's keeping Lucius, after all! There is no good reason for it except a sadistic lust for power and domination. Or remember the fact that he allows Bella her 'playthings.' Use that when forming your own intent to show him."

"But I am not known for such characteristics," Severus objected, "nor for personal entanglements."

Minerva hesitated, but then she said gently, "Actually, Severus, you are. Just not to the same degree. You have always exercised petty cruelty and domination over the students. It is not a stretch to believe that although you don't normally desire domination and control to this extent, you do in this instance, and you may not be known for personal entanglements, but this is not an entanglement so much as it would be a kind of revenge against me and the pathetic wizarding society that had kept you from achieving all you desire."

Severus swallowed and looked down, then he tossed the script to one side and strode to the window, his back to Minerva. She could see his anger in his posture and his breathing.

"So it was all a lie, a lie to keep me going, to buck up the spy so he can keep going back," Severus said, his voice shaking. "You talk about hope and friendship *and* *tus*!!" he spat. "But now I see what you really think of me, how you really see me. No better than any other Death Eater, the same as Bella..."

"No! No, Severus! Never like her, never!" Minerva sprang up and went to him. "Never like any of them! What I mentioned about you, those are only very superficial things. They are petty cruelties, as I say, not at all on the order of what Bella enjoys. And I know the Severus Snape beneath that public persona. I know the pain you suffer, your disgust with the deeds of the Death Eaters, and how sick you feel when you are forced to participate in their activities. I am simply saying that someone as degenerate as Tom Riddle would believe it of you, just as he would easily believe that I am a weak witch who needs a strong wizard in order to function, and who has found the position of Headmistress far too stressful and beyond her ability. He could believe me a masochistic slut, Severus, and that would not make it true. The fact that Riddle would find it credible that you would desire such control over me for such unappetising reasons only goes to show two things: how much you have fooled him over the years and how very sick he is."

Severus turned slightly, and Minerva placed her hand on his arm. "Do you really believe," she asked, "that I would suggest such a pretense if I truly believed you to be such a man?"

"To save the wizarding world," Severus replied, though his voice held little conviction.

"If you do not wish to do this, that is up to you. I am simply trying to buy you a little bit more time, even if it's just a matter of hours," Minerva said. "But it is for you, not for the wizarding world. If you do not like this plan, we will simply have to find some other way of avoiding his wrath when you miss his deadline. Like you, I, too, dislike the notion of my disappearing just when I will be needed most, but that is another option."

"I'm sorry, Minerva. I know better. I..." He swallowed and averted his eyes. "I should not have become upset."

"Don't be ridiculous, Severus! If ever any man had a right to get upset, it's you...and it's not as though you had no provocation." She rubbed his upper arm. "I do hope, however, now that you have had time to calm down, you don't believe what you said."

Severus shook his head. "No. For whatever reason, you do care for me. I don't understand it, but I believe it. I even find it a little . . . unnerving. It's just that you were right, too, about me, about my less than amiable characteristics. And I don't like that you were right." He gave a short, voiceless laugh. "It is also why I can so easily doubt that you or anyone could care for me."

"Peculiar things, we human beings, aren't we?" Minerva observed. "Come now, give me a hug. Yes, Severus...I haven't had a proper hug from you in a long time."

He twitched a smile but put an arm around her and allowed her to put hers around him and lean against his chest. "Is this practice?" he asked.

"No, this is just two good friends, both very tired, recovering from a misunderstanding," Minerva replied, giving him a squeeze.

Severus took in a deep breath and let it out in a long sigh, then he dropped his arm and Minerva stepped back.

"When are we to perform this . . . soap opera?" he asked.

"Tomorrow afternoon. Poppy and Robbie are going to practise tonight and this morning. I thought afternoon would be best, in case he calls you in the evening. Then you and I can improvise over the course of this week."

Severus shook his head. "I don't know if any of this will be credible, but we can try it. I will only tell the Dark Lord about it if he asks about you, presses me about my plans. If we have some luck, perhaps I will not be summoned between now and the end of the week."

"Unlikely."

"Yes, unlikely," Severus agreed. He quirked a slight smile. "But you are the one who is always telling me to have hope."

"Touché, Severus," Minerva replied.

Minerva pulled out her watch. Eight-twenty. She had said she would return to the sitting room at eight-thirty. She fiddled with her quill for a moment. It had been almost an hour, but she could wait ten more minutes to go up and find out about their progress.

Five minutes later, she straightened her stack of parchments, put her quill away, and took off her glasses. She stretched. Hopefully, Poppy and Robbie had worked out any kinks in her little script.

At the top of the stairs, she paused. Laughter? That was not a part of her script. She opened the door to her sitting room. Poppy and Robbie were sitting on the couch, both laughing, Poppy holding her sides. Robbie's hair was more mussed than usual, and his cheeks were quite pink. Minerva smiled.

"You have changed my melodrama into a comedy?" Minerva asked, stepping into the room and closing the door behind her.

"Oh, oh, no," Poppy said, gasping for breath between laughs. "It's just all . . . it's just very silly!" She burst into peals of unrestrained laughter.

Robbie shrugged, chuckling. "Don't blame me, Minerva! This is your script!"

"Is it really that bad?" Minerva asked with a frown.

"No, no, not really," Poppy said, trying to control herself. "I'm sure it's not. If someone didn't know us...that is, if didn't know us...I'd find it quite believable, what little there is of it. We were just trying to come up with some reasons for our relationship, past assignations, the history of our torrid little affair, our character motivations, and it's all just so . . . so funny!" Poppy erupted in laughter again.

"I guess I'm just not her idea of a dream wizard," Robbie said with a dramatic sigh, but a grin on his face.

Minerva sighed and shook her head. "You two don't need to have any reasons or motivations! Only Severus does. As long as what he and I walk in on looks believable and sufficient to make me a weepy mess, that is all we need." Minerva looked at the two sternly. "And grinning and laughing like a pair of fools is *not* going to do that."

"We're sorry, Minerva," Robbie said contritely. "We'll try harder."

"Yes, Minerva, we will. We will be proper little lovers for you," Poppy agreed, clearly struggling not to smile. "Right on cue. We can be as debauched as you like."

"Not too debauched, just suggestive of debauchery," Minerva said, rolling her eyes as Poppy began to giggle again. "Really, Poppy! I would think you had outgrown this sort of thing decades ago!"

"Have some pity! It's not every day that I'm asked to have an affair with a friend's lover...by the friend herself! I think that a little giddiness is perfectly excusable," Poppy said, trying to contain her laughter.

"All right! I'll excuse you, but I want to see what you two have achieved, other than amusing yourselves."

Robbie smiled, but looked at her sceptically. "I really think you might want to wait until we have polished the performance. And it might help your own reaction be more spontaneous if you see it for the first time tomorrow when you and Severus interrupt us."

"Yes, you have a point there," Minerva replied. "Are you going to practise again in the morning? You look as though you could use it."

"Perhaps just for a few minutes," Robbie said.

"You may need more than that if you are having such trouble maintaining the proper attitude," Minerva said reprovingly.

"Now that I have this all out of my system, Minerva, I'm sure I will be fine tomorrow, really," Poppy said. She looked at Robbie appraisingly. "I just have to adjust my idea of my dream wizard. That's easily done. He does have those nice grey eyes and that cute, shy little smile, after all. What about you and Severus?"

"We aren't practising. He's a quick study, and it's highly unlikely that when I turn to him in my distress that he will burst into uncontrollable laughter," Minerva replied irritably.

"Well, that is a bit different from having to make out on the sofa with your best friend's, um, lover," Poppy said.

"Look, this is acting. Just forget who you and Robbie really are, what your real relationship is. And as for our relationship, pretend that you've always been jealous of me or something. The toe-rag doesn't really know us, after all. We're just playing roles, inventing other versions of ourselves for him. And if you find yourself tempted to laugh, Poppy, remember that Severus is depending on this. It could keep him alive."

Poppy sobered. "Yes, of course. I know that. I'm sorry. I know it's serious."

Minerva looked at her for a moment, then quirked a smile. "Well, I guess I can see how it could be funny. So, what stories have you come up with for the history of your torrid little affair?"

She settled down in an armchair and listened as Poppy told her the far-fetched, outlandish imaginary assignments that she and Robbie had come up with. By the end of a half an hour, Minerva was laughing almost as heartily as Poppy had been earlier. After Poppy had left, Robbie took Minerva in his arms and hugged her.

"You see, that was good for you. You look refreshed."

Minerva squeezed him back. "You are right. That was fun. I don't remember the last time I have laughed like that. It was probably entirely inappropriate, but..."

"No, not inappropriate." Robbie kissed her temple. "Inappropriate not to take the circumstance seriously, but not inappropriate to find humour where you are able."

"And which of you was it who came up with the scenario where you were doing it in the centre of the Quidditch pitch during a match?" Minerva asked.

"Oh, um, that was me," Robbie said, and Minerva could almost feel him blushing.

She laughed. "Since we have cancelled all the matches since January, you two must have started this affair of yours quite some time ago."

"Oh, yes, the attraction was immediate and magnetic. We just couldn't help ourselves. Tore our clothes off every time we saw each other," Robbie said, moving his lips down to nibble her ear.

"Sounds as though you must have a great deal of passion," Minerva replied, tilting her head as his kisses trailed down her neck. "Especially keeping up with two witches at the same time."

"Mmm, a passionate witch simply ignites my own passions. Would you care to strike a match?" he asked, pulling back and looking down at her grin.

Minerva laughed. "You are so silly sometimes."

"I know, and you love it!"

"Yes, I do, but," Minerva replied with a sigh, "everyone will be arriving in less than an hour."

"Oh, I believe we could burn fast and hot."

"You are ridiculous."

"That's not a 'no.'"

"That's not a 'no,'" Minerva agreed before kissing him.

"Is your brother all right?" Severus asked the next afternoon.

"He will be, as will Estelle," Minerva said. "He was very careful in how he did it, and all truly dangerous substances had been removed beforehand. They should be released from St. Mungo's tomorrow, and then since their flat was damaged, they'll be staying with our mother until it is safe to return."

"I am sorry. That apothecary has been there for years, I know."

"Several generations," Minerva replied. "But as I said, Murdoch is no fool and he had help doing it. The damage isn't as bad as it appears. It can be repaired. When this is over, he, his wife, and his apprentice will be alive and he can reopen. We're also taking steps to close some other businesses and try to minimise the number of people who will be in McTavish Street over the next several days. There are others who are making similar efforts in London. We can hopefully avert some of the casualties, anyway. And there are some very discreet preparations being made at the Ministry, too. We don't want to alert anyone who might be working for Riddle."

"Is it time yet?" Severus asked. Poppy had arrived five minutes before, greeted them both, and then gone up to the Headmistress's suite.

"Just about. Let's give them another minute or two to become comfortable," Minerva replied. "You're up to being strong and dominant, then?"

Severus twitched a quick smile. "It will be a pleasant change."

A few minutes later, Minerva opened the door to her sitting room. From his vantage point just behind her, Severus could see Robbie lying on top of Poppy, quite surprisingly on the carpet and not the sofa as the script had indicated. Poppy's skirts were hiked up, and Severus could see her legs, and the way that Robbie was positioned gave the impression that she might be bared to the waist, though his body and his robes covered her so that it was impossible to tell. Severus doubted very much that they had gone that far in their charade. Robbie's hands were tightly wrapped around her wrists, pressing them into the floor on either side of her head, and he was biting her shoulder where her robes had been pushed aside.

Severus put his hand on her shoulder as Minerva stepped back into him, her hand coming to her mouth. The two on the floor seemed oblivious that they were now being observed.

Robbie bit the other side of her neck. Poppy whimpered.

Severus was somewhat genuinely shocked at the deep bite mark he could now see on Poppy's shoulder, but before he could consider it, Minerva gasped.

"You!" she said hoarsely.

Robbie looked up, surprise on his face. Poppy's eyes flew open. Severus rose to the occasion.

"Minerva, you shouldn't have to see this. I will take care of it," he said, stepping forward and drawing his wand with his right hand while pushing Minerva behind him with his left.

"No, no, don't, Severus, just . . ." Minerva clutched at his back.

"Get off of her, Crouch," Severus said, his voice low and menacing.

"We...this isn't what it seems..." Robbie began.

"Don't insult us! We can see what it is."

Severus watched as Robbie's grip loosened and then Poppy reached down and tugged at her skirts, her face turned away.

"Get up," Severus demanded. "Get up!"

Robbie scrambled to his feet as Poppy rolled away from them, straightening her robes before she stood.

"I can explain, Minerva," Robbie said, trying to look around Severus to see Minerva.

"Your conduct was self-explanatory, Crouch," Severus said. He stepped into the room, Minerva following him closely. "Now get out before I hex you." Severus looked at Poppy, who wouldn't raise her eyes. "You too, witch! Both of you!"

Robbie didn't take more than a second to rush past them and out of the room, but Poppy stopped at the door.

"I'm sorry, Minerva. It just happened. I didn't mean it to."

Minerva stepped out from behind Severus. "After all these years of friendship, you take the one thing that matters to me! How could you? You always have had a man! I finally have a wizard of my own, and you have to have him, too? How could you do this to me? I needed him, and you knew it. All those late nights I was telling you how happy I was, were you scheming how to take him from me?"

"No, no, I swear I wasn't, Minerva! He's just very..."

"I don't want to hear any of your pathetic excuses! I can't fire you now, but at the end June, you pack your bags and leave!"

"You can't fire me because of this!"

"I can!" Minerva shouted, sounding more shrill than Severus had ever heard her. "I can do whatever I want to! I am the Headmistress here! Now get out!" She stamped her foot.

"But, Minerva!"

Severus looked at Poppy, and in his most dangerous tones, he said, "I suggest you do as the Headmistress says, Madam Pomfrey." He sneered. "And do fix your robes before the students see you. That bite mark is most . . . unattractive."

Poppy pulled at her collar as she backed from the room. Severus flicked his wand and closed the door in her face.

"Headmistress," Severus said softly, "are you all right? Would you like me to . . . take care of Crouch for you?"

Minerva turned and buried her face in his chest, clutching the front of his robes. She shook her head.

"Are you certain? I can teach him a lesson for you."

"No," Minerva said with a gasp. "No. I love him. I need him. He . . . he always knows what I should do. I can't go on without him! Why did he do this? I don't understand! Why?"

"Because he does not appreciate you and he is not worthy of you," Severus murmured. "He does not deserve your attention. And you do not need him. I am here. You know I am here for you. I will take care of everything."

"You . . . you will?" Minerva asked, her voice breaking, but still not looking up at him.

"You have always been able to rely upon me, Minerva. You needn't worry. I will provide you all the support you need." He patted her back.

"I thought he loved me," Minerva whispered.

"You do not need him. I am here."

Minerva nodded. "I know. You have been so strong these last few months. I don't know how I could have managed without you. It's all just too much for me, Severus."

"Don't worry. I will take care of it all. I will take care of you."

Minerva looked up at him, her eyes clear. "Do you think that's sufficient?"

"I should say so," Severus said, stepping back as Minerva let him go. He frowned. "I thought that was supposed to be a tender and amorous moment on your sofa we were interrupting."

Minerva shrugged. "I told them they could improvise. And it was more of a genuine surprise, I must say."

"Are you certain it was an act?" Severus asked, his eyes narrowing. "Crouch seemed quite . . . predatory."

Minerva laughed. "I am very certain. They'll be waiting for us in my office. Let's go down and see them."

Robbie and Poppy had tea set out and waiting for them, the two sitting and chatting pleasantly together.

"I know I said you could improvise, but that was unexpected," Minerva said as she came down the stairs.

"That was the point," Robbie said. "If you don't like that version, though, we have a more sedate version where we're just holding hands and cuddling on the sofa."

"Don't you two know of a happy medium?" Severus asked coldly, picking up the teapot and beginning to pour, handing Minerva the first cup. "Something between cuddling and ravishing?"

"Severus has a point. I had expected to interrupt a passionate but ordinary kiss on the sofa, just a little snogging," Minerva said.

"Yes, well, that's my fault, really," Poppy said, blushing. "I know it's acting, but I just wasn't comfortable with the kissing. It's not as though I do this sort of thing every day, after all...*acting*, I mean. I am perfectly capable of kissing."

Minerva rolled her eyes.

Robbie took a sip of tea. "I also thought that it might be more convincing this way, if I'm supposed to appear to be some dominating Lothario who has you wound around my little finger. But we can do it again, if you like. And I'm sure we can manage a passionate kiss if that's what you would prefer."

"I don't know," Minerva said. She looked over at Severus. "What do you think? This isn't for our benefit, after all. It's for Riddle's."

Severus thought for a moment. "I can work with those memories. The Dark Lord does see malignancy everywhere. He is likely to find this more credible than cuddling and hand-holding, particularly to incite Minerva's reaction. And as Crouch points out, it does show him to be a domineering bastard."

Minerva's eyebrows rose at that, but Robbie laughed.

"I did think the biting was extreme," Severus said, glowering at Robbie's reaction.

"Oh! That!" Poppy said. She pulled aside the collar of her robe, revealing a large, ugly bite mark. She fished in her pocket for her wand, then cast *Finite Incantatum*. "A Glamour," she explained brightly. "You don't really think I'd let him bite me that hard do you? Or that he would? It's all just illusion."

Severus's expression was blank, but Minerva reached over and touched his arm.

"As you say, Severus, Riddle would find that quite credible, even if we don't," she said softly, knowing, though, that a part of his discomfort with the situation was that ~~had~~ find it perfectly credible. She hoped that after Riddle was gone, he could find a life more warm and less painful.

Severus nodded.

"We do have one complaint, however," Poppy added.

Minerva raised an eyebrow.

"It took too long for you to come upstairs. I got very warm waiting like that," Poppy said. "If we do this again, we'll have to have some kind of signal to let us know you're about to arrive. We had to wait until we heard you just outside the door, and if we hadn't heard you, you would have walked in on a much more boring sight."

"We won't need you to do that again, I'm sure," Minerva said. "Now, it's just going to be Severus providing me 'support.'"

"Are you actually going to have him, er, you, Severus, behave controlling and manipulative?" Poppy asked.

"That will be unnecessary," Severus replied. "I am a Slytherin, after all, and it would be in keeping with that that I would be subtle about it until I could have her completely within my power. I need only demonstrate that I am fooling Minerva into trusting me and relying upon me."

"Why doesn't You-Know-Who just have you *Imperio* her?" Poppy asked curiously.

"He believes that the Headmaster taught her to resist the *Imperio*, and if I were to try it and she were able to throw it off, she would know what I had tried to do. The status quo has suited him up until now," Severus explained.

"Can you?" Poppy asked Minerva.

"Of course," Minerva replied. "It's actually not as difficult as most people seem to think." Suddenly aware that her statement sounded arrogant, she added, "If you know how, of course. And some people do have a harder time of it than others."

"The Headmistress has a very strong will," Severus said. "It is natural that she would find it easy to learn."

"She certainly is an obstinate, hard-headed one," Poppy agreed with a grin.

Minerva snorted.

"More tea, anyone?" Robbie asked mildly.

Severus thought that perhaps Fortune was smiling upon him when, for three more days, he was not summoned to the Dark Lord's side. But then on Wednesday evening as he returned to his office after dinner, he felt the tug, then the tingle, and then the burn calling him to the Dark Lord.

"Twiskett!" Severus rarely called his house-elf, but whenever he did, the small greyish elf appeared almost immediately, and this time was no exception.

Severus jotted a few words on a scrap of parchment and handed it to the house-elf.

"Bring this directly to the Headmistress. Don't give it to anyone else or let anyone else take it from you. If the Headmistress is in her suite, wait for her in her office and don't go anywhere before you have given it to her."

Twiskett nodded solemnly.

"Thank you. That will be all."

As soon as Twiskett was gone, Severus left, exiting through a door at the base of the North Tower and striding quickly toward the gates. It was early enough that there were still many people, students and staff alike, enjoying the late spring weather, and there was no way to avoid being seen leaving the grounds. He was rather irked, in fact, since the Dark Lord knew that the Headmistress had placed restrictions on the staff's movements. All departures from the Hogwarts grounds had to be approved by her. On Saturday, he had used the excuse that he had to go to the apothecary in Hogsmeade. At this hour, he could have no such excuse, and there would be many witnesses who would see him flouting the Headmistress's orders. He worried that being called now meant that something had gone wrong or that the Dark Lord was becoming suspicious of him.

Severus stepped into a small stand of trees just outside the gates. He disliked Apparating this way. It wasn't normal Apparition, and it felt more uncomfortable than the worst Side-Along. But it was unavoidable and it was hardly the worst thing about bearing the Dark Lord's brand, and so Severus simply drew his wand, removed his cufflink, and pulled up his left sleeve. He touched his wand to his Dark Mark, concentrated on the Dark Lord, and a scant moment later, he was catching his balance in an unfamiliar room.

From the looks of it, this was a Muggle living room. There was an electric fire, electric lamps, Muggle magazines and books. Certainly no wizarding family lived here. It was clean and neat, but there was a stuffiness to the air and there was a layer of dust everywhere. Perhaps the family was on holiday. Severus hoped that was the case, since the alternative was not something he wished to contemplate.

"Severus! You have arrived punctually. That pleases me. I will not forget your service and your diligence when I am in my rightful position." Voldemort was sitting in a large wingback chair, the closest thing the Muggle living room had to a throne, Severus supposed.

Severus did the usual grovelling, but the Dark Lord cut it short.

"I wish to learn of your plans for the Headmistress. Scrimgeour will be assassinated at four o'clock on Monday afternoon. Teatime. His tea trolley will contain some unexpected surprises, and his service will be particularly personal."

Severus closed his anxiety into a locked room of his mind. "And if he chooses not to take tea that day?"

"He will. He has an appointment with a very old friend. When she joins him, she will request tea. Scrimgeour is hardly a gentleman, but he would not be so churlish as to

refuse his dear old friend a cuppa and a few cakes." Voldemort seemed amused.

"Very clever!" Severus said admiringly. "And who would ever suspect an old friend of being coerced in any way? Particularly not when her only request is so very innocent. But . . ." Severus pretended puzzlement. "Aren't all of the staff who serve him trained to resist *Imperio*?"

Voldemort hissed a chuckle. "You are the Potions master, Severus. I am sure you can imagine ways around that."

"Of course, my lord," Severus said. "Foolish of me not to realise you would have accounted for every detail."

"And you have your deadline. At teatime on Sunday, you must be Headmaster of Hogwarts." Voldemort looked at him appraisingly. "And if you perform sufficiently well, I shall allow you to retain the title and the post after my ascension. You will, of course, take other quarters for your own, as I shall reside in the Tower, but you may have whatever ones you wish."

"You are more generous than I deserve, my lord," Severus said, bowing his head. "I will be very grateful."

"And McGonagall. What are your intentions for her?"

Severus hesitated. "She has become so very amenable to all of my suggestions recently. It has been quite rewarding to bend her to my will without her suspecting a thing." Severus smirked. "She may be unsusceptible to the *Imperio*, but the same is not true of her friends. I recently 'encouraged' the matron, Pomfrey, to become enthralled by the Headmistress's lover. Her attraction to him was overpowering, and he, being the man he is, was very happy to oblige the witch's desires. The Headmistress and I walked in on the most entertaining little scene the other day. Entertaining for me, most devastating for her. She now relies upon me even more. All that remains is for me to manipulate her desires. It would be most satisfying to have the proud Headmistress of Hogwarts willing to do anything I wished her to do...no, not only willing, but to have her *beg* to service me." Severus sneered. "That would be a reward for all of those years of kowtowing to her, to seeing the Gryffindors treated like little saints who could do no wrong even as they lorded it over others."

Voldemort raised one thin lip, baring a fang. "It does sound delectable for you, but you must work quickly. I want the bitch dead and you, Headmaster."

"My lord, I would enjoy sharing her with others, if that is something you would allow. And I could give her to you after I have worn her out, and you could kill her in whatever manner pleased you most. You could watch her die in person." Severus knew that he was pushing her, stretching the bounds of how the Dark Lord would allow him to speak to him, but he hoped not to be asked to carry out the murder. "You should have seen McGonagall's face when we walked in on her paramour and his new lover, who no longer understands why she thought she wanted him."

"I insist on seeing this. It should be most amusing, and few of my followers are bringing me anything of amusement in recent days." Voldemort gestured. "This house. This house is supposed to be the home of two dentists, parents of that Granger girl who is such a close friend of Potter's. And as you see, it is empty. You wouldn't know anything about that, would you, Severus?"

"The Mudblood's parents? No. The girl is of-age. We have had no correspondence with her parents. Muggle parents don't usually know much about Hogwarts as it is." Severus looked around the room again. It was a comfortable room, unpretentious but nicely decorated, and now he saw that the magazines and books were of the sort one might expect in the home of well-educated Muggles, but they didn't appear to be there simply for display purposes, either. The books on the shelves near the stereo cabinet were a motley assortment, ranging from older, well-read volumes to more recent best-selling mysteries. There were a lot of biographies and books on British history. Someone in the house enjoyed history. "They are not here? Perhaps they are on holiday."

"It must be a very long holiday," Voldemort hissed. "Pettigrew said that the most recent magazines are dated July of last year, and there is a calender hanging in the kitchen. According to that, it is July nineteen ninety-seven. The electric and gas have been shut off. Do you know nothing of it?"

"I don't know the Mudblood well, my lord. She is a Gryffindor and an irritating girl. She doesn't like or trust me. No doubt she would find it peculiar if I were to ask her about her parents. We have never spoken of any such topics in the past. Perhaps I could inveigle the Headmistress into inquiring about them."

Voldemort narrowed his eyes. "Perhaps you could. It is unimportant. We merely thought that having them in our possession would provide incentive for the girl to cooperate with us...or that it would encourage Potter to cooperate if he believed he was saving his friend's parents from a nasty fate. It was a fancy of mine, but not essential for our victory. It would have provided some entertainment. But I will settle for seeing what you have for me today."

With no further warning, Voldemort raised his wand and initiated Legilimency. Severus let his mind appear unfocussed and unresisting, but he led the Dark Lord through recent memories of Minerva's "reliance" upon him, her indecisive fussing about various mundane decisions, further worrying about threats to the students, which Severus calmed, reassuring her that there was no need to develop evacuation plans, telling her that Hogwarts was safe in their hands, and then finally allowing the Dark Lord to view the scene with Poppy and Crouch, and Minerva's subsequent hysterics. He manufactured feelings of satisfaction and gloating as the Dark Lord raked his mental fingers through the memory.

The connection was broken abruptly, and the Dark Lord laughed. "That was most touching! You are such a comfort to the bitch. I hope you persuade her to service you before you kill her," the Dark Lord said with a leer. "I know your proclivities, and I would relish seeing the proud old biddy on her knees in front of you, putting that mouth of hers to good use for once."

Severus bowed his head in acquiescence. He hoped that he might be more persuasive the next time that the Dark Lord inquired about Minerva.

"The other task I have for you is simple enough. You will bring me to Dumbledore's grave."

"Of course, my lord. When do you wish to do that?" Severus asked.

"I will call you. Be prepared to get me onto the grounds and then off again."

Severus hesitated. "I will be prepared, my lord, but may I suggest that we do this at night? The tomb is in a very visible position on the grounds. A visit during daylight would be inadvisable."

Voldemort hissed. "I am not a fool! I am very aware of that. Do not delay when I call you. I will not be patient. Any delay will be most severely punished!"

"Yes, my lord."

"And work out how you will kill McGonagall. I don't care how you do it as long as you are Headmaster afterward. You cannot be suspected."

"I thought suicide, perhaps," Severus said, "following her despair at being betrayed by her lover."

"Amazing she ever had one at all," Voldemort commented with a sneer. "It would be credible for the dried up old spinster to kill herself over it."

"Indeed. I believe Crouch was only interested in her for her position as Headmistress."

"You should have taken advantage of that yourself, Severus. It was very short-sighted of you to let that other wizard get close to her."

"At the time, she seemed to believe I had deliberately sickened Dumbledore when I treated his hand...she was partially correct, in that the potion I gave him was ineffective. She always worshipped the old fool," Severus said with disdain. "And I never believed she would take up with a married man. Besides, who would consider that freeze-dried prude as a sexual object? It was a surprise to me."

"You have done well now, though. Another Defence teacher falls!" Voldemort hissed with laughter. "You have amused me today, Severus. I will excuse your reluctance to kill McGonagall. But do not disappoint me."

"My lord," Severus said with a bow.

Minerva looked up from the large parchment spread out on the table in front of her.

"Yes, Phineas?"

"There is a house-elf in your office."

"What does she...or he...want?"

"It's just standing there. Won't reply to any of us, even Dilys. Appears to be waiting for you."

"Very well. Thank you, Phineas."

Minerva rolled up the large map of Hogwarts and sent it into her study, then she went down to speak with her visitor.

"Hello. You're Twiskett, Professor Snape's house-elf, aren't you?" Minerva asked. The house-elf was standing dead-centre in the office, looking very serious.

Twiskett nodded. He held out his hand.

"Did Professor Snape send you?"

Twiskett nodded again as Minerva took the scrap of parchment from his hand. She read its message in a glance.

"Did he give you any other messages for me? Say anything?"

Twiskett shook his head.

Minerva looked at the note again. "Thank you, Twiskett. You have served well. Return to your duties."

The house-elf winked away with a small pop.

A half hour later, Robbie returned to the suite, where Minerva was now making notes on a separate piece of parchment as she placed different symbols on the map in front of her. Without looking up or saying anything, and continuing to mark up her map, Minerva handed the note to him.

"Hmm. Brief and to the point," Robbie said, then he read, *Nineteen-ten. Called. Going now.* He looked at his wristwatch. "That was only a little more than thirty minutes ago."

Minerva nodded. "I won't begin to worry for at least another hour. And then I can't worry because I'm meeting with Filius, Pomona, Alroy, Sinistra, and Hooch." She looked up at him. "We will meet here rather than in the office in case Severus returns there."

"Very good," Robbie replied.

"Come and look at my refinements," Minerva said, beckoning him closer.

They spent the next forty-five minutes discussing Minerva's plans.

"As I have said before," Robbie commented finally, "the one difficulty that I foresee with this plan is your reliance upon the centaurs' participation."

"I have made allowances for that." Minerva waved her wand and the symbols on the map changed. "If they do not arrive to take their position, Hagrid and Grawp will be joined by these others." Minerva waved her wand again, and many of the little forks that had been moving in circles now moved across the map to stop at the edge of the Forbidden Forest. "It will reduce some of our offensive capacity, but it will hold that line." She considered the map again. "I am less sanguine about the gates than you are, but by the point at which we would need to be concerned about it, we can improvise. I am going to brief Binns and Nick on Sunday. I think that is the soonest we can do so safely, particularly given that Binns is somewhat absentminded and could say something he shouldn't. Poppy is fully supplied and has recruited more house-elves to serve in the infirmary. I spoke with Swelka earlier, and she will be prepared to seal herself and the other elves into the kitchen."

"And preparations for evacuation?"

"Also Sunday night for Hufflepuff, Ravenclaw, and Gryffindor. The Heads will orient their prefects to the routes for each House and emphasise the confidentiality of the exercise. Sinistra will have to work with the Slytherin prefects at the time of the emergency, however. I hope the Slytherins cooperate with her." Minerva tilted her head slightly. "Properly speaking, it's not an evacuation, though if it comes to that, everyone in Hufflepuff, Ravenclaw, and Gryffindor will be able to escape to Hogsmeade. I have had Blampa and Dobby supply their tunnels with sufficient food for twenty-four hours and create sanitary facilities, and Swelka will assign a house-elf to each tunnel. There is also a cot for each student, although I anticipate that most of the seventh-year students will choose to join in Hogwarts defence, and possibly even many of the sixth-years who are of-age. The Slytherins . . . they will all be in a secure location near their own House. Provided the castle does not fall, they should all be fine."

"You still aren't comfortable with that."

"No, I'm not," Minerva said with a frown. "I dislike treating everyone in the House as though they are all budding Death Eaters simply because some of them are. But I recognise that even many who aren't, are more loyal to their House than they are to Hogwarts and could betray us. My greatest worry, however, is that Aurora will not be able to win their cooperation. They may simply defy her, and then we will have a problem here inside the castle. That is the one thing we must avoid. We have to keep the battle on the grounds, where we can control it to some degree. If we have traitors within the castle, that will compromise all of our plans."

"You could take Zabini into your confidence. Severus seems sure of him. He could assist Aurora."

Minerva thought a moment. "Perhaps. Though I believe he would do so at the time even without knowing about it in advance. I will be sure that Aurora knows to call upon him. And he is a prefect, anyway."

"And now I believe your meeting is about to begin," Robbie said, standing. "I'll go down to your office and let them know to come up to you, then I will wait for Severus to return."

"I am sorry he is still insisting on my death, Severus. I had hoped to buy you more time," Minerva said. As soon as her meeting was over, she had gone down to the dungeons to see Severus.

Severus shrugged. "I had no such hope. Your performance did amuse him, however, and he did not feel the need to *Crucio* me. That was something. Did Crouch relay what I told him about the plans for the Minister?"

"Yes, Monday afternoon, a guest who will request tea, and then whoever serves it will be an agent of Riddle's."

"That is one interpretation" Severus said. "It could also be that it is whoever prepares the tea who will be the agent. The Dark Lord emphasised the tea trolley. It could be some kind of poison potion, or it could be that some object on the trolley will be charmed to do something lethal."

"I will speak with Kingsley." She frowned. "I was under the impression that the Ministry had house-elves who prepared and served any food and drink requested by the Minister or Department Heads, but it has been a long time since I worked there."

"From what the Dark Lord implied, I had the sense that someone would be Polyjuiced, probably someone at a low enough level that he...or she...would not be carefully watched. Whoever it is who visits the Minister, though, she will be someone above suspicion, and the *Imperio* would be of such a nature that it would hardly be evident in any of her other behaviour. Requesting tea is so innocuous that it could probably be masked as her genuine desire, so that even if she were tested for the *Imperio* before seeing him, only a very deep probe would reveal it. The kind of superficial examination to which a respected guest of the Minister would be subject would look for grosser manipulations...something that would be more obviously threatening."

"It is puzzling, however, that Riddle would plan an assassination of that sort when he has spoken of an attack on the Ministry in the past."

"I do not believe they are mutually exclusive," Severus replied. "His attack will likely occur at the same time as the assassination attempt."

"A Portkey," Minerva said. "Perhaps it will be a Portkey. The teapot, or the trolley itself. They will simply kidnap him and then kill him."

"Possibly," Severus said. "I do not know whether there has been any success in it. My guess, however, is that he will have a Charmed object on the tea trolley that will be designed to kill Scrimgeour...or simply anyone within a certain radius of it...and that Death Eaters will simultaneously attack the Ministry. I know that he has Death Eaters preparing for such an attack. No doubt if the tea trolley fails to kill the Minister, the Death Eaters have orders to find and kill him. The Dark Lord is becoming impatient with the failures to kill Scrimgeour, and I do not believe he would rely upon only one method."

"That makes sense," Minerva said. "Perhaps we should view the meeting in the Pensieve, see if there is more meaning that we can abstract from what he says."

Severus hesitated. "I will do that if you wish, but . . . I would rather you did not view it." He blushed. "It is foolish of me, but I had to say some unflattering things about you, and I would rather you did not have to witness them."

Minerva quirked a smile. "I would actually rather enjoy that, I believe, if it pertains to our little performance."

"The Dark Lord also said some disgusting things."

"I would expect that of him," Minerva said. "I count on it. Really, no need for embarrassment, Severus. We can view it together tomorrow after dinner." Observing his stiff expression, she added, "I presume one or both of you impugned my sexuality and femininity. Possibly using foul language." She looked at him a moment. "Did he call me a dried-up old cunt?"

Severus's eyes widened. "No," he rasped. "Not quite."

Minerva shrugged. "Can't be too bad, then. And don't worry about anything you said, Severus. I know you don't mean whatever it was." She thought for a moment. "When Albus worked with you on strengthening your Occlumency, did he ever tell you anything about when he was questioned by Grindelwald?"

"A little. That he deceived him into believing that he regretted not joining him, that he wanted a second chance with him."

"Did he tell you that he twisted his memories?" Minerva asked. At Severus's nod, she continued, "He conjured memories that convinced Grindelwald that he despised people whom he really loved, that he used them, that he had exploited Gertrude Gamp's grief at her husband's death, and that he resented and despised the Flamels, who were in reality like second parents to him. Grindelwald subjected him to hours of intense Legilimency alternating with the *Crucio*. He even used Legilimency while having someone else cast the *Crucio* on him. And through it all, Albus twisted his memories of those whom he loved, even making his warm, loving, intimate relationship with a dear friend into something coercive and dirty, and his mentoring relationship with me into something possessive and manipulative. To convince Grindelwald, he conjured feelings of domination, resentment, and greed. When Albus first told me something of it, he said that it felt as though he had filled himself with the vilest sewage imaginable, and that after it was over, it took him a long time to feel clean again. So I do understand the necessity of such deception, Severus, and I'm aware of how it might affect you when you must perform so convincingly that there can be no distinction between the deception and the feelings that accompany it."

"All right. It is uncomfortable to think about, but it is only deception, as you say." He smirked. "I suppose I should know better by now than to think that you would be shocked. You are tougher than that."

"I have no doubt that it disturbs you far more than it does me," Minerva replied. "You are the one having to perform convincingly for the toe-rag."

Severus suppressed a sigh. "I wish Albus were here. I wish he had told me more about that time and what he had done, how it had made him feel, how he coped."

"So do I," Minerva said. "But he didn't speak of it with many people. I didn't know many of the details until after my brother mentioned that Albus had been tortured when Grindelwald questioned him. Albus had left that part out, only telling me about the Legilimency, probably to save me from thinking about it."

"I am sure. He always wanted to protect you," Severus said softly.

"So we will view the memory together tomorrow after dinner."

"There was one thing that I did not tell Crouch," Severus said, hesitating. "I did not mention where we met this time."

"Where? Not the Malfoy mansion?" Minerva asked.

Severus shook his head. "The Grangers'. It was obviously abandoned, but the Dark Lord had anticipated being able to kidnap Hermione's parents and use them as hostages. He seemed oddly unperturbed about their absence, although he did suggest that I might try to find out where they were."

"You *don't* know, do you?"

Severus shook his head. "I was aware that Hermione had sent them into hiding, but no more than that. He believes that my relationship with her is as poor as with all other Gryffindors, and so it was unsurprising to him when I claimed to know nothing. In retrospect, I fear that he may have me kidnap Hermione instead, and then use that to coerce Potter to surrender. Obviously, I cannot do that."

"No, you cannot. But he may feel overconfident, since he believes you will be here to give him entry to the castle. And once he learns that you will not do that, it will be too late," Minerva said.

"And Crouch told you about the Dark Lord's desire to be brought to Dumbledore's tomb?"

"Yes. Do whatever he says with regard to that. Albus anticipated it. Do not let it disturb you."

"I wish the Dark Lord had told me when he plans to do this," Severus said with a frown. "If he had, we could arrange an ambush. Perhaps we still could. I could send you a Patronus when he calls me next."

"You could, but unless we could ensure Harry's presence, it would very likely fail, you would be killed, and perhaps several others, as well. And the tomb is in such an open

area that it would make it very difficult to sneak up on him," Minerva said. "How are you planning on bringing him onto the grounds?"

"Probably fly over the wall on the other side of the Quidditch pitch or go through the Forbidden Forest, unless he insists on some other route. I have little doubt that he could do this on his own, if he wished. It is one more test of my loyalty."

"And it is one that you will appear to pass, then," Minerva said decisively.

Severus nodded. He was still resigned to his fate, but since his conversation with Minerva the week before, the task of remaining alive had taken on a game-like quality. One more day, one more hour, one more minute, going down fighting. It was a game he could appreciate even if it was one he could not win.

"You seem so sure, Minerva," Severus said. "So . . . certain. And it seems nothing bothers you."

"I cannot afford to entertain doubts," Minerva replied. "I do consider different possibilities, different results, and I try to take those into account as I prepare, but the doubts that I may once have found helpful when my role was different would be a hindrance to me now."

"You must think me weak," Severus said with a sigh.

"Weak? Why would I think that? I think that you are a strong person. Amazingly so."

"You saw me after the business with the poison," Severus replied, his eyes averted. "I very nearly fell apart."

"But you did not. You pulled yourself together admirably. You are coping with intense pressure without losing yourself." Minerva paused, thinking. "You know already that the Draught of Peace that you took was originally brewed for me. I am not untouched by the pressure I am under, and I certainly feel pain and grief. There are moments in which I do feel as though I am incapable of doing what I must, or that what I must do comes at too high a price, but when I feel that way, I seek and find support and comfort. Believe me, Severus, I have occasionally been quite a weepy mess, but it would hardly do to break down in public or at a moment when I need to be clear-headed. I am blessed with a temperament that helps me to maintain my composure and my ability to carry on until I have the peace and space to let myself react to my feelings. It does tend to leave some people believing that I am colder and harder than I am, but it is my nature, and it's a part of my personality that I have cultivated over the years. A 'passionless bitch,' I once overheard someone say. But I do have people I can turn to when I feel overwhelmed, and without them, I doubt very much that I would be able to carry on as I do now."

Severus nodded. "I know that you aren't unaffected. And I appreciate your assistance. Without it . . . I believe I could continue to do what I must, but I do not know if I would . . . if I would have any sense of wholeness." He quirked a slight smile. "Not that I feel particularly whole, but I haven't felt whole in so long, this is a close facsimile for me."

"And I am sure there are others who are helping, as well. You are alone in many ways. I know that. But you aren't entirely alone. Miss Granger cares for you, as does Robbie, and even Gareth. And Poppy had no hesitation to do whatever was necessary to help you, even if it placed her in an embarrassing and unflattering light. It is hardly a part of her role as school matron to do that."

"Yes, they have been helpful," Severus admitted softly. "It has been unexpected."

"Perhaps when this is over, you will be able to develop closer relationships, have the leisure and freedom to have close and open friendships with them and others."

Severus shook his head, looking at Minerva almost in amusement. "You do persist in that hope that I will survive. Please do not be angry with me when I do not."

"I am not the only one who hopes you will live," Minerva replied. "I am certain that many others do, as well, including Miss Granger."

"I wish to tell Miss Granger about her house," Severus said, moving the topic away from his inevitable demise. "The Dark Lord will either destroy it or set traps. She should know, either way."

"I will tell Alroy to have her go see you in my library in the morning before your first class," Minerva replied. "And the toe-rag said nothing about the attacks on McTavish Street or Diagon Alley, or the fact that the number of targets have been reduced?"

"No, nothing specific, although he did mention that no one else was bringing him anything amusing recently. It increased his appreciation of that little performance we gave." Severus couldn't help the grimace that flickered across his face. "And he is anticipating that I will bring him some entertaining memories of the two of us. He thinks my manipulation will extend beyond Hogwarts business to the more personal, to put it delicately."

"And in that, as in so much else, he will be disappointed," Minerva said dryly. "Unless you do wish to use some memories from the *Adfectus*."

Severus shook his head. "No. Although I could manipulate those memories to seem more salacious, they are not the sort that he would appreciate. I will not offend you by saying precisely what he suggested, but it is nothing that I care to contemplate even attempting to fake a memory of. I simply will have inadequate time to bend you sufficiently to my will before it is time to kill you." He shrugged. "And then that deadline will pass and he will kill me."

"You need to speak with Hermione again," Minerva said as she poured their chamomile tea. "You need to tell her all of it, including the prophecy. We can do it together."

"Not yet," Robbie replied. "We have a few more days."

"We cannot wait until it is too late," Minerva argued. "I don't want her distracted by inconsequentials when she needs to concentrate on essentials. She needs to be ready. She is prepared to explain things to Harry now, but she needs to know more about what may be expected of her and who will be helping her."

"What *may be* expected of her. We do not know whether events will unfold as we believe they will. We have another week."

"I am not saying that we should tell her tomorrow. But certainly by Sunday."

"And when she sees Severus on Monday?" Robbie asked. "He is not unobservant and he reads her well."

"She won't attend Potions on Monday. I doubt very much that Severus will be concerned about class attendance on that day," Minerva replied.

"Sunday is still too soon," Robbie replied slowly as he considered the matter. "Monday afternoon. Harry will be arriving then. I will speak to her before he arrives. It will then be only a matter of hours before the initial attack on the Ministry."

Minerva nodded her agreement and moved on to her next concern. "Have you worked out how you will follow him? Everything will fail if you cannot find him in time. I don't think that we can rely upon Severus being able to activate his Portkey."

"No. He would be stopped before he could, and by the time no one was paying attention to him, he would likely be unable to do so," Robbie replied. "And if we gave him one set to activate at a particular time, it could be too early or too late...or it could be in someone else's possession and we would have an unwelcome visitor."

"I will still have Blampa stay in my office in case he can manage to use his Portkey, and she can fetch me immediately if he does. Have you solved the problem of finding him?"

"I know that you are counting on our being able to save him, my dear, and we will do all in our power to do that, but if Riddle does use the *Avada Kedavra*, we will not be

able to save him, whether we are there or not."

"I know that, but if he does use Nagini, or even some other method, we need to be able to find him in time."

"Yes, my sweet, and we will. I have thoughts on a way of using an old confidence trick, tweaking it a bit. It should work as long as Severus is not far away."

Minerva sighed. "I suppose that will have to be good enough. And it's a reasonable assumption that Riddle will be somewhere close to Hogwarts...perhaps even on the grounds...when he discovers Severus is a traitor. I hope it is not sooner than we anticipate, though."

"Even if he suspects Severus now, Tom will wait until he has lowered the Anti-Apparition wards...even if he does not believe that Severus will actually do that, he will wait until he has failed him in that final task, I believe."

"Or, if we are truly fortunate, lowering the wards will prove Severus's loyalty, and he won't kill him at all. He might bring him onto the grounds with him, believing Severus will give him access to the castle."

"I am unsure whether that would be preferable," Robbie said thoughtfully. "If there were a battle, Severus could become a target for either side, and if he turned on Tom at that point, I would be unsurprised to see him die by *Avada Kedavra*. It may seem paradoxical, but I believe it is better that Tom suspect him before it comes to that."

"From the way that Severus has spoken lately, I don't believe he would try to dissuade Riddle from his suspicions once he had done all that we expect of him. Severus wants to see Riddle's reaction when he learns that he has been disloyal for years, that he has been fooling him all this time."

Robbie nodded. "I can understand why, particularly for a Slytherin, that could be satisfying." He stood, taking Minerva's hand. "Time for bed. No more speculation tonight. We will do our best with what is given us, as you have told me so many times."

"Of course. And as much as I want to see Severus survive to enjoy his life, I can't forget the bigger picture. Better that any of us individually die than to have Riddle succeed," Minerva said with a sigh.

Hermione closed the door to the Headmistress's library behind her, and as soon as she had sat down, Severus said, "I must tell you that I met with the Dark Lord yesterday and the meeting was in your living room."

Hermione stared at him a moment. "My living room?"

"Yes. The Dark Lord was looking for your parents. He was disappointed not to find them at home. It is likely that after I left, he either had the house destroyed or he set traps in case you or they return there. As it is a Muggle residence, it is highly unlikely that it would be reported in the *Daily Prophet* if it was destroyed. If it was not, it should be checked for traps by competent Aurors or other curse-breakers before you or your parents return to it." He took in Hermione's stricken expression. "I am sorry. I know it was your childhood home. It seemed nice. I could see you growing up there."

Hermione nodded. "I had expected something like this," she said bleakly, "but it's been so many months, I guess I just thought nothing would happen now. At least my mother and father can't be found. And if he destroyed the house . . . I did take our photographs and the few things that were of any value and irreplaceable. Everything else can be replaced."

"I have to teach now. I'm sorry."

"Of course. And I have Charms." Hermione stood and picked up her book bag. "This means it's almost time, doesn't it? He's going to attack soon."

"Yes. Soon."

"Do you know when?"

"Not precisely," Severus said evasively. "But it won't be today, so you and I still have our responsibilities."

"Will I see you later?"

"Perhaps. In Potions, certainly."

"I will be here in the library this evening," Hermione offered.

Severus nodded. "I will keep that in mind. Have a good day, Hermione."

He sat in silence as Hermione left the small library. It seemed foolish to consider seeking her company that evening for a few minutes of imaginary peace. His peace would come when he was dead. But she seemed to want to see him, and she would remember it after everything was over. Perhaps one more brain holiday before the end . . .

Severus woke with a start. He had slept neither deeply nor well, but now he was wide awake as the Dark Lord summoned him. He flew out of bed, tore off his nightshirt, and pulled on pants, socks, trousers, shirt, braces, and a lightweight, knee-length black robe that he occasionally wore under his teaching robes. As he stuffed his feet into his boots, he Summoned his Death Eater robes and mask from the hidden compartment at the bottom of his wardrobe.

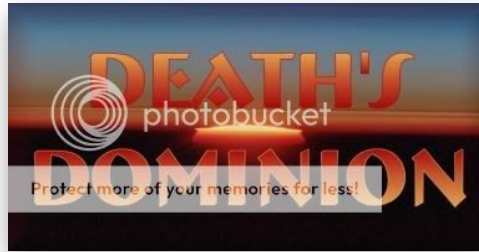
Carrying his Death Eater garb in a small bundle, he raced from his rooms to a lower level exit that led to the castle's dock. His pace did not slow as he climbed the steps that brought him to the east side of the castle. By the time Severus reached the gates, he had a stich in his side. Minerva had recently cast a charm on the gates that informed her whenever they were opened, and Severus sent her a mental apology as he whispered the password and grasped the heavy iron handle, pushing it down to raise the latch. She was no doubt being thumped on the shoulder at that moment. By the time she reached her window to look out at the gates, he would be gone.

Severus pulled the gate shut behind him, stepped into the grove of trees, and answered his false master's call.

Chapter Twenty-Seven: Shall not die windily

Chapter 28 of 34

Events bring Severus to the end of his service with his false master as Hogwarts prepares for its defence.



Chapter Twenty-Seven: *Shall not die windily*

23 25 May 1998

Severus surreptitiously took in his surroundings as he approached the Dark Lord, but it took him only a fraction of a moment to realise they were in the Shrieking Shack. Two Death Eaters in full robes, hats, and masks stood a few feet behind the Dark Lord. One of them Severus recognised as the traitor Pettigrew, despite the mask. There was no mistaking that bent and cowering figure.

Severus paid obeisance to Voldemort, but the Dark Lord impatiently ordered him to stand.

"Pettigrew tells me that the tunnel from this place is still open. Is that true?"

"I believe so, my lord," Severus responded. "It has not been warded as the tunnels into and out of the castle proper have been. Few have ever learned of the tunnel, few of those are currently alive, and fewer still are in residence at the castle. It is, however, unsuitable for bringing more than a few Death Eaters at a time onto the grounds. The way is narrow and it has a guard of sorts."

The Dark Lord's eyes became slits. "And you know the egress point and can emerge without causing any distracting reactions?" he asked, ignoring Severus's comments.

Severus nodded. "I do and I can. The Whomping Willow has its secrets, but they are known to me, as they are to Pettigrew."

"Then that is how we shall proceed." Voldemort looked around the room, then he gestured to the two standing behind him. "Go. Leave us."

"But, my lord," Pettigrew began in a stuttering voice.

"Do you wish my punishment?"

"No, my lord, but I can..."

"*Crucio!*"

The Dark Lord's punishment was brief, a mere instant, but Pettigrew collapsed, twitching. The rat had been subject to the curse so frequently in recent days that he had become hypersensitive to it. Severus felt no pity for the treacherous Gryffindor, though, despite the fact that Pettigrew was often tortured simply as a means for the Dark Lord to vent his anger or relieve his boredom and rarely for anything he had actually done or failed to do. Severus believed that, oddly, the Dark Lord had become fond of the rat...or perhaps "fond" was too strong a word. But the tyrant was attached to him and did give him regular treats. There was something about Pettigrew's existence and about his place at his side that gave the Dark Lord a boost to his self-image, perhaps as a symbol of the domination that he could achieve even over a supposed friend of Potter and ally of Dumbledore, a successful subversion that could be replicated. Severus suppressed a shudder at that thought. Or the Dark Lord could simply like having a lapdog who would cringe, crawl, beg, and fawn, despite the pain and punishment, in anticipation of those irregular pats on the head and the unpredictable but succulent treats tossed in his direction.

After both other Death Eaters had Disapparated, Voldemort indicated with a gesture that Severus should remove his mask, then said, "The tomb is not far from the tunnel exit, correct?"

"Correct, my lord." Severus removed his mask and waited, not wanting to elicit a *Crucio*.

"Then that is how we will enter the grounds and gain access to the rotting carcass of the old fool," Voldemort declared.

"As you wish, my lord, although if you desire only desecration of the tomb and the remains, there is no need for you to do so personally. I could do it alone, or you could send Pettigrew. He might enjoy such a task."

Voldemort raised a thin lip. "Did I say anything about 'desecration,' Severus? Disturbing the old man's grave would hardly be desecration, though it will certainly cause an uproar in the castle. If that was my only aim, I certainly would not consult you about it." He ran one long, bony finger along his wand. "Pettigrew would be up to that task, as you say. I have another objective in mind, and it will remain between the two of us. Do you understand me?"

Severus gave a slight bow. "It is always as you wish, my lord. I was simply concerned for your safety."

"My safety will not be in question. Only yours," the Dark Lord replied, sounding amused. "You may save your concern for yourself."

"Shall we go now, then, before dawn approaches? The entrance to the tunnel..."

"Did I say that we would do this now? No. Come here Monday morning at three-thirty. Do not be late."

"That . . . is a very good plan, my lord," Severus said obsequiously, but wondering why the Dark Lord would inform him in advance.

"And the wards?"

"It will now be a simple thing for me to lower the Anti-Apparition wards," Severus said. "Whenever you wish them to be lowered, you will have the freedom of the grounds, my lord. Say the word, and I could lower them now with no more delay than that required for me to return to Hogwarts."

"Very good. You continue to please me, Severus." The Dark Lord nodded in approval. "I had concerns about you, but you have learned your lessons well. I will reward you. Just as Malfoy has been an example of the consequences of incompetence and treachery, you will serve as an example of the rewards available to those who please me."

"I am humbled, my lord," Severus said, his head lowered. "I will endeavour to continue to do all I can to earn and deserve your favour."

"Reenter the Hogwarts ground using the tunnel. Ensure that the way will be clear on Monday. And kill that Gryffindor witch who has risen above her station." Voldemort

sounded venomous.

"I will do as you wish, my lord, though it would still please me to keep her longer, have her see me as rightful Headmaster. And she might still be useful."

Voldemort's eyes narrowed. "If I did not know of your loathing for all things Gryffindor, I would suspect you have developed a soft spot for the frigid witch. Do not allow your role as her comforter and confidant to confuse you, Severus. As for her usefulness . . . she may not be as formidable as she believed herself to be, but she could still be capable of some grand Gryffindor gesture of self-sacrifice and cause us some annoyance once she understands the new order of things. She could hardly be a threat to us, but it's better to be rid of her and any others who might distract us from our purpose. And you must give me Hogwarts with no irritating resistance from her and her friends."

"My pleasure in her humiliation is nothing in the face of that purpose," Severus said, trying to sound suitably apologetic.

"There are other witches whom you may choose. You will have pleasure enough when I take my rightful place," the Dark Lord replied with haughty dismissal.

"I live for that day, my lord," Severus said fervently.

"Do you have any inkling that there is a spy in our midst, Severus?"

Severus could not completely mask his surprise at the sudden change in topic. "No, my lord! If I had even the slightest suspicion of such a thing, I would tell you immediately!"

"You have heard nothing from the scrawny Scot or anyone else in the Order, nothing that might hint at a secret source of information?"

"No, I haven't . . . although there are occasionally meetings to which I am not privy, but I always know who the attendees are, and none are any who I believe are among your followers," Severus replied.

"You do not know all who have chosen to join me, Severus," the Dark Lord reminded him, an undercurrent of anger in his voice.

"Of course not, my lord, but I always inform you of those meetings and who attends them! The one at Grimmauld Place after the last regular meeting is the most recent one I know about. I already reported to you who was present at that meeting...McGonagall, Weasley, the werewolf, and that Tonks witch."

For obvious reasons, Severus had not reported that Crouch had attended at Minerva's side, and on Weasley and McGonagall's orders, he had been leaving out mention of Shackbolt for some time. The imposing Auror was crucial to the Order's defence of the Ministry, and he was one of the few Order members whom Voldemort would view as a serious threat. Although Severus did not entirely obscure the fact that Shackbolt still attended Order meetings, he greatly downplayed his role and conveyed the impression that Shackbolt was far more interested in maintaining his position at the Ministry than in helping the Order. He had even implied to the Dark Lord that Shackbolt might be a Ministry spy and that he was not entirely trusted by Arthur or Minerva. Now Severus wondered if that had been a mistake.

Did the Dark Lord have another spy among them? Did he test Severus's statements against those of the other spy? Could that spy even be Shackbolt? That seemed impossible, but perhaps someone else?

Severus clamped down and Occluded. He could give nothing away. The Dark Lord was testing him, and no one else was relevant. The question of whether there was another spy was an issue he could deal with later. If he showed any excessive interest in Shackbolt, the Dark Lord might deduce that he was more crucial to the Order than he had been led to believe, and that, in turn, could undermine the defence of the Ministry.

"And you, Severus?" Voldemort cocked his head to one side, considering him. "You have served me well, but in your comfort with the Headmistress, have you told her things you should not?"

Severus allowed surprise at the question to show on his face. "Absolutely not! McGonagall believes me, at most, a reluctant follower or even a pathetic turncoat. I tell her only what you instruct me to. We discuss little more than the security of Hogwarts. She believes that I have little knowledge of the Death Eaters and that I am unimportant to you." Severus sneered. "If she knew the rewards of serving you, my lord, and how very pathetic she and her paltry words of thanks are, how I despise everything about her, and how I relish her humiliation, she would be shocked."

Voldemort stared at him, but Severus detected no Legilimency. He relaxed his mind and left it unfocused, ready in case the Dark Lord decided to spring upon him with a sudden *Legilimens*.

"I believe there may be a spy among my followers at the Ministry," the Dark Lord said finally. "Someone who is attempting to compromise our activities these last few days."

Severus thought quickly. Recent Death Eater raids had elicited only the most cursory and almost feeble response by the Ministry. The attacks that were supposed to be distracting and exhausting the MLE, stretching it thin before the attacks on the Ministry and on Hogwarts, were barely causing a ripple...though the *Prophet* complained bitterly about the Ministry's inability to prevent the attacks and their lacklustre response to them. In addition, because of the Order's efforts to close businesses in wizarding Edinburgh and London, there were fewer good targets. Not that that always discouraged a scheduled attack, but burning down a building with no one inside it was not as satisfying as murder and mayhem.

It did not seem that the Dark Lord suspected that there had been anything beyond genuine accident and natural catastrophe prompting the initial closings. Now that the attacks were picking up, businesses were closing in reaction to them, not only in the larger wizarding districts in major cities, but even in smaller communities, and families with means were hiding in their homes and commissioning Gringotts goblins for expensive new wards...fearing that a witch or wizard hired might be a Death Eater.

"The *Prophet* complains of lack of Ministry action," Severus remarked thoughtfully. "It could be a sign that the Ministry has become demoralised and ineffective. They have always been incompetent. I am sure that when you have taken your rightful place and can present the wizarding world with strong leadership, everyone will welcome you and your strength."

Voldemort appeared to relax, and he nodded. "True. They all crave an iron hand, and when we have restored the supremacy of the wizarding race, they will enjoy the fruits of purification. They will understand that one must burn to cleanse and destroy to build." The Dark Lord's eyes shone at the thought, and his right hand gripped his wand tightly as he stroked it over the palm of his left hand. "My power will be supreme. There will be no weakness allowed in the wizarding world, no Muggle-loving, no Mudbloods, and the pureblood world will bow to me." He bared his teeth in glee.

Severus, sensing the Dark Lord's mood, fell to his knees and touched his forehead to the floor before straightening slightly and saying in a hushed voice, "It is an awesome and inspiring vision, my lord. Thank you for allowing me the privilege of serving you as you come into your own."

The Dark Lord's hideous smile grew. "Not all have been accorded that privilege, and some who were, squandered it. You are much like me, Severus. You recognise the weakness of the wizarding world, the fools and idiots who populate it, and you desire the supremacy that is your right...but," he added in a warning tone, "do not attempt to rise beyond the station I grant you. Only I convey any rights; continue to serve me well and your rewards will continue to be great."

Severus lowered his head meekly. "Only those who have earned your favour deserve anything, even a crust or a breath. I endeavour to always be deserving, my lord, and desire correction when I fail you. You set all standards and your might ensures that they are met. I always strive to attain those standards and thereby be deserving."

"You are my ultimate disciple, Severus. You have not yet reached your full potential, and you have many bad habits to break, but I forgive you," the Dark Lord said with clearly patronising generosity, "because you have been forced to serve me from afar for so many years, living among Muggle-lovers. When I take my place, you will have the opportunity finally to reach your potential. So many others do not understand me. They follow me, and they are, in their way, loyal and useful, but they seek to please me without the understanding you show. You know that my will sets all standards, that your will must be subjugated to those standards, and that your pleasure and satisfaction are dependent upon meeting those standards. You do not allow some fleeting but inconsequential desire of your own to distract you from obeying my will." He

nodded and stepped toward Severus where he still knelt on the hard, dirty floor. When the Dark Lord placed a long, bony hand on his shoulder, a mockery of an affectionate gesture, Severus did not react except to bow his head further. "Do not allow yourself to slip, Severus. As we approach victory, do not become distracted by any fleeting desires or bad habits. Your reward is dependent upon it."

Suddenly, the Dark Lord raised his hand and stepped back. "Do not forget Malfoy. The greater the rewards I have given, the greater the punishment for failure!"

Severus did not move, though he braced inwardly for the Cruciatius. When it was not immediately forthcoming, he said, "Malfoy was always interested only in himself and his short-term pleasure, my lord. He allowed himself to fall into the danger of failure because of it, regardless of what he believed of his own loyalty to you. I did not see it before, but it is clear now. His downfall will not be mine."

He heard the Dark Lord take in a breath and let it out in apparent satisfaction.

"Rise now and go. You will encounter a few Death Eaters outside the door. Tell them to join me."

In one more gesture of submission, Severus quickly touched his head to the floor before he rose, trying to stand fluidly and without effort despite the cramping in his joints.

"I was confused at first when he told me that we're to enter the Hogwarts grounds together on Monday morning," Severus said to Minerva. "I simply didn't understand why he would inform me in advance of something that could place him in a vulnerable position. But I think I understand now."

"Why did he, then?" Minerva asked, pouring them each more tea.

Severus had described the meeting to her as they shared a bracing pot of Assam. She had been dressed and waiting for him when he returned, and Robbie had joined them and was now apparently dozing in his wingback chair.

"I actually thought that that was why you had been called this morning," Minerva continued. "I stood at the window watching the tomb, waiting, and when you didn't appear, I became concerned about you."

"I think that the Dark Lord has found himself in a position where he believes he must rely on me and trust me...whether this is a conscious belief or not," Severus said slowly. "In order to become comfortable with something that he might perceive as a weakness, he is demonstrating to himself that he does, indeed, have reason to trust me. I also believe he won't be as vulnerable as we might think. Even unaware that we'd be unlikely to attack him at that point, he must have some other reason for thinking that he won't be vulnerable. In addition, over the past few weeks, he has encountered more frustration and failure than he had counted on...even the lack of resistance by the Ministry frustrates him and deprives him of the attention and flashy publicity he desires. He has come to fear that one of his minions in the Ministry may actually be a spy." Severus hesitated, then decided to wait until later to address his own concerns with Minerva about a possible spy. "In me, the Dark Lord has come to see what he most desires: a competent, loyal servant, not unambitious but willing to subjugate my own ambition to his, one whom he has carefully moulded and formed, one of his successes. It bolsters his self-image, and it's also very convenient for him since he sees me as his key to the gates and doors of Hogwarts. Of course, he phrases it differently when he speaks to me, emphasising to me that it is *my* reward that depends upon my loyalty and my carrying out his will."

Minerva nodded slightly. "I suppose that could be the case, and certainly you are better acquainted with him than any of us, but I also worry now that the trip to the Headmaster's tomb is a mere feint, and that it truly is you who will be vulnerable, that he has some ambush in mind for you, and perhaps for Hogwarts as a whole."

"That is possible," Severus acknowledged, "but I do not favour that interpretation. No doubt he has some plan in mind to punish or kill me if something goes wrong, but his manner this evening . . . he sent Pettigrew and the other Death Eater from the room, and although I did not believe we were truly alone, and indeed, there were several Death Eaters just outside the door, it was still an unusual gesture, particularly when not at one of the manors or the Riddle house."

"He met with you alone at the Grangers'," Minerva pointed out.

"There were others in the house, though, and I could occasionally hear them. I never believed we were alone then, whereas this morning, by sending the others away, the Dark Lord tried to give me the impression that it was just the two of us there, even though he must realise that I would guess that there were others nearby," Severus said. He gave a crooked grin. "Of course, the Dark Lord believes, not without reason, that I wouldn't dare to attack him alone even if I were a traitor. His wand was out the entire time, and I had pocketed mine as soon as I arrived, as none of us are allowed to simply have them casually in hand in his presence and we brandish them only at his behest or with his permission. I am also not so foolish as to be confident that I could defeat him even in a fair duel, not without a good deal of luck, anyway, and I would certainly be killed if I tried...if not by him, then by one of his guards. He only has reason to have fear with regard to what else I might do, what betrayal I might orchestrate. No, he met with me alone because he wants no others to know of our business, and he met with me alone in that particular place in order to demonstrate to me that he is according me special privileges. For himself, it was another test of my unquestioning loyalty, one that I passed."

"I'd like to view your memory of this meeting, Severus. We can do it together; you might notice something you didn't at the time."

Severus nodded, then reflexively cast a glance at the auburn-haired wizard, who had not stirred in the last several minutes.

Minerva smiled slightly. "I'm afraid that he was up most of the night and had only come to bed just before you were called. I'll tell him about it later."

Severus remembered his concerns about a spy. It seemed unlikely in the extreme that if there were a spy, it could be Crouch, even given Severus's own initial distrust of the wizard. Crouch simply didn't seem to have the opportunities required, especially if he were both spy and traitor...to either side. His time was well accounted for. He very rarely left Hogwarts; when he wasn't teaching, he was usually with Minerva, although that had changed somewhat in recent months. And the Dark Lord had never reacted in any way toward Crouch except to tell Severus to eliminate him if he was an obstacle.

Severus felt a curious sense of relief at being able to dismiss Crouch as a candidate, either as a spy or a double-agent; it would be personally difficult on Minerva if he were a traitor, and Severus wanted to believe that Crouch genuinely had the affection for Minerva that he appeared to. There was something else in that relief, but Severus couldn't identify it, unless it was simply that it was welcome to have one person, however little Severus may have once liked him, who was what he appeared to be. Besides, Crouch had turned out to be both competent and useful.

Despite that, he preferred to speak with Minerva alone about the possibility that there might be another double agent, whether it was for the Order or for the Ministry.

Severus stood. "We can view the memory now, if you like, and then we can discuss one particular point that I would like your opinion on."

After they had left the Headmistress's sitting room, Robbie opened his eyes. He took a long, deep breath and let it out slowly. He stood, stretched, and poured more tea into his cup, passing his hand over it to rewarm it, then he took a gelatin capsule from his pocket and swallowed it, washing it down with the tea, then grimacing slightly. He crossed over to the window where Minerva had stood in the dark and waited for Severus to reappear.

The auburn-haired wizard looked out the high tower window. Cold dawn light now revealed the Hogwarts grounds, though the Forbidden Forest was still a formless shadow. Tendrils of mist gently curled their way across the earth, wreathing the white marble tomb with ribbons of fog. A peculiar expression crossed the wizard's face, and he turned away.

In the bedroom, he stripped off his robes, then, holding his breath, he tore off a large white adhesive patch from his hip. He removed his wand from the wandpocket of his outer-robe and cast a nonverbal spell, incinerating the patch. He took another apparently identical patch from a small, password-protected drawer in the wardrobe, then snagged his silvery-grey dressing gown, tossed it over his shoulder, and proceeded to the bathroom and a bracing shower to prepare him for the day.

Down in the Headmistress's Office, Minerva and Severus emerged from the Pensieve and Severus restored his memory.

"You did very well, Severus," Minerva said. "When you told me about it, you underplayed your manipulation of him. It was impressive."

Severus could not hide his pleasure at her words. "It was satisfying."

"I enjoyed the way you sprinkled the truth in your statements, particularly when you declared that Malfoy's downfall would not be yours." Minerva smiled at him and gave his arm a squeeze. "I cannot sufficiently express my pride in you. I admire your strength, loyalty, and cunning. Thank you."

Severus inclined his head slightly. "I wish the Headmaster were here to share our successes," he said softly. "But it's his sacrifice that has enabled me to continue as I have. Any gratitude should be to him for that sacrifice. I just . . ." Severus swallowed. "I just wish he hadn't had to die and leave us both."

"You miss him. I know he would be proud of you, though," Minerva replied, rubbing his upper arm. "He had great faith in you."

Severus looked away, but did not pull back from her affectionate touch. "I didn't understand. I didn't understand until it was too late. I didn't want to understand." He gave a mirthless laugh. "The story of my life, isn't it, Minerva? To discover only after I've lost someone . . . lost them, driven them away, killed them . . . I used to tell myself that the Headmaster was just my other master, a master like *him*, the only difference being that I really did serve the Headmaster, though only because doing so also served my own purposes, which I defined narrowly, deliberately ignoring . . ." He let out a shaky breath.

"Albus did not think of himself as your master, Severus," Minerva said softly, her hand resting on his bicep. "Your boss, your leader, perhaps your commanding officer, to use a military term, and he wanted to believe he was also your friend, although that was hard for him with all of the other roles he had to play. He loves you like a son, despite the difficult road you both travelled to get to that point."

Severus turned his head, gazing down into her eyes with some amusement in his own. "Your habit is back, Minerva."

"Habit?"

"Referring to the Headmaster as still living."

"I didn't." She paused. "He does still love you, though."

"And you?"

"Me? Of course he still loves me."

Severus glanced toward the stairs to her suite.

"And I love him," Minerva continued, noting his glance. "But what is this?" she asked curiously, pausing as she felt something hard beneath the thin layers of his shirt and over-robe.

Severus stepped back. "The gift from your nephew. At his suggestion."

Minerva's eyebrows rose. "What was that?"

He frowned slightly and shook his head. "Never mind. It's nothing." He drew himself straighter. "In any event, it is time for me to return to my rooms, attire myself properly, and check on Slytherin House before breakfast, make sure that Zabini has survived another night."

"How is he coping?"

"Surprisingly well...or perhaps not so surprisingly...and I have the sense that he has, indeed, gathered other like-minded Slytherins to him these last few weeks."

"Perhaps another branch of Dumbledore's Army," Minerva suggested.

Severus snorted. "No, never. And I mean no disrespect to the late Headmaster, and he could be as clever and wily as any Slytherin when it was required of him, but whatever it is that Zabini may do, he would create no 'Dumbledore's Army' himself, and Dumbledore's Army, whether led by Potter or by Longbottom, would never have him or any other Slytherin."

"And what would you say if Longbottom did invite Slytherins to join Dumbledore's Army? Even Zabini?" Minerva asked.

"I would say he was a fool," Severus replied reluctantly.

Minerva made an open gesture with both hands. "You see?"

"Hmmpf. You will speak with Arthur and Shacklebolt about the spy? It concerns me. If there's someone whom the Ministry believes to be their spy, but who is actually serving the Dark Lord, all our work could be undermined. If they tell him anything..."

"Of course. I don't think there's another spy, though...other than any Ministry workers who have escaped detection...and you needn't worry. No one outside of the Order knows that you are providing such important information," Minerva reassured him, "and very few in the Order itself know precisely what that information is. Scrimgeour knows you are a loyal member of the Order and no doubt has correctly concluded where it is that Shacklebolt gets his intelligence. But even Gawain Robards is bypassed. Shacklebolt reports only to Scrimgeour."

"And the Order . . . there is no one else in the Order, or not in the Order itself, but perhaps a Death Eater who has come to a member claiming to want to betray his master?"

"I would know it if there were, I'm sure, unless there's some member who is operating on his or her own, but I've seen no evidence of that."

Severus nodded. "I think it's actually I whom the Dark Lord seeks, but he's blind to my true allegiance. I'll be unsurprised if he chooses a scapegoat to punish. If someone in the Ministry goes missing in the next few hours, we will know why."

"As long as he does not choose you, Severus."

"My moment will come, Minerva. It's only a short time off now." He raised his hand and fleetingly touched his fingertips to her cheek. "When he learns that you are not dead, he will certainly kill me. But I will do what I can to delay that moment until you are ready and it's too late for him to change his plans. And as I promised, I will not meekly lay my head upon the chopping block, despite any loss in dignity it might cost me. I doubt any death he metes out will be very dignified, in any case."

As he showered and then dressed for breakfast, Severus's thoughts turned to Hermione. They had met for an hour on Thursday evening. Rather taking than a "brain holiday," they had discussed Potter. She was convinced now of what it was that Potter had to do in order to defeat the Dark Lord, although she was not completely confident that he would succeed. Crouch's discussions with her had apparently helped her to hone her theories, although she told Severus that she never could have done it without his initial assistance, and Severus didn't believe that she was merely humouring him. It was difficult now for him to remember those earlier conversations, though, his life was so consumed by the present and by his anticipation of the next few days to come.

As he pulled on his boots, Severus wondered whether anyone would ever write his biography. It was not a far-fetched idea, given his role in the war. Minerva had said that, if she lived, she would tell everyone the truth of his allegiance, and Hermione knew it, too. Nonetheless, any biography of him was likely to be an unflattering portrayal, even if it acknowledged his importance in the Dark Lord's downfall. Unless, of course, it was written by one of his friends. One of his very few friends.

Severus thumped his heel on the hard stone floor of his bedroom, settling the boot onto his foot. Saturday morning now. On Monday morning, he would assist the Dark Lord in violating the Headmaster's tomb, then on Monday evening, he would loose a horde of Death Eaters upon Hogwarts. And then the Dark Lord would discover his betrayal and would kill him.

Fewer than three days before his final acts on this earth. If he could, he would see Hermione later and say good-bye to her. He'd made a habit of not appreciating those whom he cared about and who cared about him, not realising until it was too late to enjoy it and to express his appreciation. It was too late for many things, but he could at least try to let Hermione know that he appreciated her presence in his life. And if she thought him peculiar for it or did not return the sentiment, well, he had less than three days to endure any humiliation.

Oddly, he seemed to hear the Headmaster's voice in his head, asking him whether he would love someone who would be cruel to him . . . That moment seemed so long ago now, when he had lain curled up in agony on the floor of Minerva's sitting room and had admitted to Albus that he was suffering from the *Actus Adfectus Amor Verissimus*. Of course, this was entirely different. It wasn't as though he loved Hermione. Severus swallowed, closing his eyes as he tried to chase away the thought that he wished he had had the opportunity to come to love her. Perhaps even possessing that wish was a sign of love . . .

Friendship. It was losing the opportunity for friendship with her that he regretted. He would tell her that.

Severus had been resigned to death for so long, and had actually yearned for it to come take him sooner, that it surprised him to find that there were any things that he could wish he still had life left to do. A half smile crossed his face. It would even have been nice to have bought McGonagall that drink he owed him. These people, these friends he would never have . . .

Severus touched the flick knife hidden beneath the sleeves covering his left arm. It was little more than a talisman for him; it was unlikely that he would have any opportunity to defend himself, but he had it there, and he had carried it with him each of the last few times he had been summoned, and he would have it on the last day.

Hermione smiled up at him as he entered the Headmistress's library and closed the door behind him.

"I didn't know if I would see you today," she said.

Severus returned her smile with a small one of his own. "I was unsure myself whether I would find you here, though I hoped I would." He had vowed that, other than remembering the fact that he would be dead in a few days time, he would keep any thought of the Dark Lord, the war, and Potter from his mind, and focus on Hermione and try to be the friend to her that he wished he could be. "I wanted to see you."

"Have you had new ideas about Harry and Riddle?" Hermione asked.

"No, or if I have, they are irrelevant. I don't want to discuss them. I don't even want to take a brain holiday . . . just see you," he said awkwardly.

Hermione blushed. "Well, um, I'm kind of sick of going over all of that again and again, too. That and everything else."

Severus nodded as he pulled out a chair and sat down at the end of the table rather than across from her as he usually did.

"Was there something in particular that you did want to talk about, Professor?"

"Severus," he said. His cheek twitched in a slight smile. "As you have said, we are friends here. No, nothing in particular. Except that."

Recovering from her mild surprise at the explicit invitation to call him by his given name, Hermione asked, "Except what?"

"Just that we're friends . . ." He cleared his throat. "Friends of a sort. I appreciate it. I wanted you to know." He felt like a fool.

But Hermione smiled at him. "I appreciate it too. I'm really happy that we've had this time together. It's meant a lot to me. I'm glad you feel we're friends. I hope that after the war, we can do things that are more fun and that we'll be friends outside of this room."

"That's one of the other things I wanted to . . . that's a topic I wanted to address," Severus said awkwardly. "I can't say very much about it, but it's likely that this will be our last meeting. Events are moving rapidly, Hermione. I didn't want it all to end without having told you."

Hermione's expression grew more serious. "It's that close, then?"

"Yes, it's that close. But this has been a good thing in my life. I didn't do anything to deserve it, but I'm grateful. That's all I wanted to say. That and good-bye."

"No, not good-bye," Hermione replied. "Remember that hope and optimism thing we talked about? I can't say good-bye. Not yet, anyway." She reached over and laid her hand over his. "I'd rather think about some of the things we can do after."

Severus swallowed past the lump in his throat. This was harder than he'd thought it would be, though not at all for the reasons that he had imagined. He didn't want to say good-bye, either, but it seemed pointless to pretend that there would be any "after." Still, he could humour her and give her another good memory of him.

"All right. What would you like to do?"

"Well, after all the hoopla died down...because I'm sure that there will be celebrations, and maybe even one or both of us will have to recover from some injuries, and then there will probably be awards. You'll get an Order of Merlin, of course. But after all that is over . . . I think I'd just like to take a walk with you. It probably sounds silly, but it would be nice. Just the two of us, outside somewhere, and not hiding in a closed-up room without any windows," she said, looking around them. "And then I think I'd like to cook you a meal. Not that I'm much of a cook. But my parents will be back by then, and so my mum could help, and you could talk about history with my dad, and then after, we could take a bottle of wine and go sit in the back garden, just the two of us, and we could take a brain holiday. What about you? What would you like to do?"

"I would . . ." He shook his head. "I don't know. But your ideas sound very good. Although dinner with your parents . . ."

"Why not? I think you would enjoy it. Something ordinary, for one, and my parents are interesting people." Hermione giggled. "Every time I see them again, I'm always surprised by how much more intelligent and interesting they've become since the last time I saw them!"

Severus let himself smile at her joke. "I think it would take me a while to get used to not having to be friends in a closed, windowless room, that it would take time for me to get used to being able to have friends at all. And I think I would have no idea what to do with them or with myself."

"But it will be good, won't it? Good to be able to be yourself without being a spy and everything?" Hermione asked.

"Of course, Hermione, it would be very good," he said softly. It would not happen, but it would be nice.

"Severus," Hermione said, trying out his name, "you have to sound more positive than that if you are ever going to learn about hope and optimism. *Will* be good. And we will have dinner after everything has settled down. If you still want to be friends then, of course."

"In the highly unlikely event that I'm still alive and the Dark Lord is dead, then yes, I will want us to be friends." He turned his hand over and took hers gently, looking into her eyes. "The Headmistress, too, hopes that I will live, and I've asked that she forgive me if I don't. Please, Hermione, don't be angry with me when I do die. I will try to fight, but . . . I don't want to talk about this. It's the way it has to be. Let's just enjoy these few moments." He squeezed her hand.

Hermione nodded. "All right. As long as you know that I hope we do have that opportunity to become better friends."

"You tempt me, Hermione," he said softly. Fleeting, he thought of taking Hermione, leaving with her, going far away, but he could never escape the Dark Lord, and she would never agree to abandon her friends to evil. "But I do remember that if I choose any other path, you will be one of those with no opportunities at all, and I cannot allow that. Only the Dark Lord's defeat can create a world worth living in. I've long since come to terms with my role in his defeat."

"But after his defeat, if things go well for both of us, we can spend more time together," Hermione said.

"Yes, we can. We will."

"I think it is time," Minerva said on Sunday morning. "I'm going to bring Poppy to see you as we discussed last night."

"You know that I respect your decisions, but..."

"Poppy has taken too much on faith already, as have so many others. I'm sure she would do whatever I asked of her, whatever was required of her, even without knowing more, but I think it's time to tell her. Especially since there might be complications, particularly with the tomb opening tomorrow."

"She is no Occlumens. Severus..."

"...has no reason to practise any Legilimency on Poppy, and although she is no Occlumens, she also doesn't broadcast. Does she?"

Robbie sighed and shook his head. "No, she doesn't. Still, even one person beyond the circle of those who need to know..."

"It's no different from your involving Aberforth," Minerva argued.

"It is."

"No. We could have made the same requests of him without having him learn anything more than what he needed to know in order to help. I believe he would have agreed. This is my decision. You can think of it as a warm-up for our meeting with Hermione tomorrow. I am going to see Poppy now."

"As you wish," Robbie replied, bowing his head, acquiescing.

Minerva hesitated, looking up at him. "What is it you fear? I know that I decided, what now seems a very long time ago, that we would restrict who knew anything and how much or how little any of them would know, and it was my decision not to include Poppy in any of it at that time, but we are nearing the end now, and what I am asking of her is scarcely on the order of what I would have required sixteen or seventeen months ago. We are very close to the end of it all. I don't see the harm, and it could be helpful."

"It isn't simply a matter of restricting information for reasons of security. Poppy is of a very different disposition than Aberforth. Have you considered the effect on her? And she doesn't normally broadcast her thoughts and feelings, but with this . . . she's bound to be emotionally affected. It could be that something in her manner will change. Beyond that consideration, though, she may actually be more effective on Monday and Tuesday if she knows less. It could distract her. We don't know how she will react."

"That's possible, but not likely. I know she's likely to react differently than Aberforth did, especially as he claims that he always suspected. I'm certain that Poppy does not. But we will deal with that." Minerva looked at him speculatively. "I will bring her to the Heart of Hogwarts. I don't think there's any good way to tell her what we're doing. Meet us there. I will return with her in . . . twenty minutes. I will make the trapdoor available to you before I leave."

"You want me to . . ." The words were soft, barely a whisper.

"Yes. Before we get there, preferably."

"But..."

"I know. But she's a strong Hufflepuff. She can take it."

Minerva smiled at Poppy. "I wanted to thank you again for your help with Severus...taking care of him so well and then participating in our little melodrama."

"I've been wondering about that," Poppy admitted, "but I know that there's a lot you can't tell me. Did it help him?"

"Not as much as I had hoped, but some. Riddle was amused by it, and now he's come to believe that Severus exercises some control over me," Minerva replied. "I have more to ask of you, but before I do, I have some information for you. It isn't something that you strictly need to know, Poppy, but it's something that I need to share with you. Let's get on with it, if you're ready."

Poppy looked confused, but she nodded, unsure what she should be ready for.

"You have been in the Heart of Hogwarts before, haven't you?" Minerva asked as she led her to the library.

"Only once. It was very impressive."

"It is also quite secure, one of the two or three most secure places here in the castle, and that's saying a lot."

Minerva waved her wand and the trapdoor appeared. Another flick, and the door opened. Unlike when she had brought Draco into the Heart, she hadn't removed the wall along one side of the stairway, and there was a lit torch beside every third step. She'd wanted Draco unbalanced and out of his element. Poppy, on the other hand, she wanted as comfortable as possible.

"I'll go first. If you would close the trapdoor behind us, that would be helpful," Minerva said.

When she reached the tenth stair down, Poppy waved her wand and the door closed gently above them.

"Thank you. As I said, I have something to show you before we talk." Minerva made the turn to the final three steps, and she looked back up at Poppy. "I am so glad I can rely on you, Poppy."

"Always!"

Minerva opened the door at the bottom of the stairs, stepped through, then stood to one side to let Poppy by.

Poppy took in the dimly lit room. The ornately carved round table was as she remembered it from her single visit many years before. The room had been empty but for that table when she had seen it last; this time, there was a chair as well, across the room to her right, partly in shadow. A figure rose from the chair and turned toward them. Poppy blinked. Everything swam and went black. Minerva caught her as she fell.

"Hot, sweet tea. I'm becoming quite good at dispensing it lately," Minerva said, handing a cup of the same to Poppy.

Poppy took the tea and leaned back into the sofa again. "Something to share with me indeed!" she grumbled. "Really, Minerva! Don't you think it's a little late in life for you to begin developing a flair for the dramatic?"

"I have always had a flair for the dramatic," she replied primly. "I merely reserve it for special occasions! Now, while we wait for Robbie to return, let me tell you what we expect over the next two days . . ."

At three twenty-nine, Severus Apparated from the gates to the bedroom of the Shrieking Shack. The room was empty, and his apprehension increased. He fought to breathe calmly as he listened for any sign that there were others in the house. He heard nothing, but his skin prickled and he felt that there was someone else present.

The new moon cast no light, and amorphous shadows filled the room. Severus chanced *aLumos* and was immediately glad he had. He picked up the parchment he could now see lying on the ancient mattress.

Proceed as planned. Open the tomb and wait. Destroy this.

Severus presumed the Dark Lord wanted him to go through the tunnel to the grounds. He wasted no time, turning and leaving as soon as his eyes had scanned the short message, Vanishing the parchment as he did so.

This was only the fourth time he had been in the tunnel since that first occasion many years ago, and one of those trips he could not remember, since he'd been Stunned and dragged through it unconscious. He associated the tunnel with humiliation, danger, and pain, but he thrust those associations from his mind, concentrating on getting from one end of the tunnel to the other. The next part of his task didn't bear thinking about; it certainly didn't even bear doing, but he would.

As he hurried down the tunnel, Severus continued to have the feeling that there was someone nearby. He looked over his shoulder a few times, but saw no one. He exited from the base of the Whomping Willow, pressing the knot to calm the tree so that he could pass safely. Now he was certain there was someone else there, close behind him. If it wasn't the Dark Lord, he would be very surprised.

Severus hated wearing his robes and mask on the Hogwarts grounds, and he felt vulnerable as he crossed the open lawn. He knew, though, that Minerva was watching for him, so he waited until he was beside the tomb before Disillusioning himself. He glanced back toward the tree, but saw nothing. Beneath the Disillusionment Charm, his mask covered a grimace of distaste as Severus used his wand to attempt to raise the top of the tomb. The tomb seemed to be solid marble, however, and so he swallowed his bile, lifted his wand, cut through the air, and cast an *Abscidere*, violently separating the top of the tomb from its base.

The marble cracked irregularly, the top split in two, and then it fell apart. Severus did not allow himself to react to the sight of the corpse, though he took a step back and averted his eyes. He didn't dare look toward the castle, knowing his gaze would automatically be drawn to the Headmistress's Tower. Although he hadn't felt the Dark Lord's presence since he had stepped beyond the Willow's perimeter, Severus knew he must still be nearby, watching him.

The note had simply said to open the tomb and wait, and so Severus waited, and when he felt the air move beside him and heard a hissed laugh, his flesh crawled, but he did not move.

"Very good, Severus, very good indeed!"

As he saw the shroud first ripped down the middle and then torn from the body, Severus tamped down his disgust and Occluded, watching with detachment. The wand, which had been placed beneath the Headmaster's crossed wrists, slid out, floated from the tomb, and disappeared as the Dark Lord caught it in an invisible hand. The Headmaster's left arm rose, startling Severus at first, then he saw that the Dark Lord was removing the ring from the Headmaster's dead hand.

Revulsion filled Severus as he watched the corpse sit up in the tomb and then flop backward over the edge, head, torso, and arms dangling out and facing the castle. The Dark Lord hissed a laugh as he cast one final spell to split the Headmaster's thin robe down the front.

"Come, Severus. I must speak with you, but not here."

Severus assumed that the Dark Lord was returning to the Whomping Willow, and he walked quickly, hoping not to bump into the other wizard. He was himself only the faintest shimmer beneath his Disillusionment Charm, but the Dark Lord was completely invisible. Wishing this all to be over quickly was to wish to be closer to the moment of his death, which was approaching ever more rapidly, but Severus did not care. These minutes were not ones to be lived, only endured.

Avoiding the Whomping Willow's flailing branches, Severus reached out and pressed the knot once more, then hurried into the tunnel, feeling the Dark Lord close behind him.

"Remove the Disillusionment."

Severus obliged, and he felt a warm trickle as removed the charm. Voldemort did not do likewise, however, and Severus continued on to the Shrieking Shack, the invisible presence following with only a faint whisper of robes.

The Shack was as empty as it had been when Severus first arrived. Despite that, the roiling in his gut didn't cease.

"You did well, Severus," the Dark Lord said, "although you did not show the enthusiasm for the task you might have."

"I wished only to serve you, my lord. The pleasure in the moment was yours to take, not mine to steal from you, though I did savour the spectacle and my own small role," Severus replied, bowing his head.

The long silence that followed did nothing for the storm in his stomach, but Severus remained still and unmoving.

"That disgusting, Muggle-loving, shrivelled old cuntrag!"

At that acid invective, the storm in Severus's stomach raged more fiercely, but he did not move, only bracing himself for a *Cruciatus*. His tension grew as he heard the Dark Lord pace angrily, then the mattress exploded, and Severus closed his eyes and turned his face from flying shreds of ticking, horsehair, and mouse viscera.

Severus waited, but no *Crucio* came. Instead, the Dark Lord appeared in front of him.

"I should have cut off his dick and stuffed it down his throat," the Dark Lord spat. He was looking at the ring; he had apparently confirmed that the Horcrux in it had been destroyed.

"I find that more enjoyable when the subject is alive to experience it, my lord," Severus replied softly, hoping that the Dark Lord would not ask him to go and defile the corpse more than it already was. He could do it, but the mere thought sickened him.

The Dark Lord chuckled. "You are right, Severus. Dawn will come soon and the corpse will be exposed. A pity the Headmistress will not see it. Did she die in agony? I have heard nothing of her death."

"I have been providing her with sleeping draughts and other calming potions. The one I gave her yesterday contained some additional properties. Her body will be found soon, I imagine," Severus replied.

The Dark Lord frowned. "She was to be dead by teatime."

"I gave it to her then; she said she'd take it before retiring for the night. I did not wish to be present at her death, lest someone's suspicions might be raised too early, my lord, and if I pressed her to take it sooner, I was concerned that she might become contrary and not take it at all. She can be quite headstrong. I know how important it is to you that I be available to drop the wards; I did not want to be in a room somewhere answering questions from Aurors just at the moment of your need. I'm sorry if I misjudged that."

"As long as she is dead, you are Headmaster, and you drop the wards and give me Hogwarts. And Potter."

"When Potter hears of the tomb, he'll come."

"And if he does not cooperate, the Granger girl is still there. Keep an eye on her, Severus."

Severus bowed.

"Return to the castle. Drop the wards when I call you. I will not be patient."

With only the slightest snap, the Dark Lord Disapparated.

Severus let out a shuddering breath, then Apparated to the gates. He stripped off his Death Eater garb, Disillusioned himself, then used his password to open the gates. He avoided looking at the tomb as he hurried across the grounds, heading straight for the dungeons and the safety of his rooms. As soon as his door closed behind him, he felt nausea and bile rising in his throat, and fell to his knees and retched. His stomach had been nearly empty, but his muscles continued contracting painfully as his body tried to purge itself.

He collapsed back against the door and sat there several minutes with his eyes closed, cold sweat beaded on his forehead, then he drew his wand and banished the mess in front of him. He was just gathering the strength to get up and find a glass of water when there was a light knock on the door.

"Severus?"

"I'm..." Severus cleared his throat. "I'm here. Just a moment."

He pushed to his feet. He cast a quick breath-freshening charm, but the bitter taste remained in his mouth.

When he opened the door and saw the pain in Minerva's face, he felt ill again. Before he could say anything, though, she raised her hand to his cheek and said, "Oh, Severus, I am so sorry. So sorry."

"What? What has happened?" Severus hadn't thought that his adrenalin could spike any more than it had, but he felt panic surge through him and barely remembered to close the door behind her.

"Nothing! Nothing more! I am sorry that you had to do that. I saw it. I haven't gone out yet. I'll wait until someone else informs me. But I watched. It must have been very difficult."

"I didn't do it all. Just opening up the . . . just removing . . . I didn't do anything to him," Severus said.

"Even if you had, it wouldn't be your fault. And the body is nothing but an empty shell. But I'm sure it was awful for you."

Severus shrugged one shoulder, displaying a nonchalance he didn't feel. "It had to be done. It seems that it was another test of my loyalty." He sighed. "Come and sit down and I'll tell you everything over some tea."

Minerva set down her cup. "I am surprised that he was not angrier about my delayed death."

"So am I, but he wants me fit to help him take Hogwarts. He didn't even *Crucio* me when he discovered that the ring Horcrux was destroyed. I'm sure that he wanted to." He drank off the last of his tea, then reached for the bottle of nutritional potion that Twiskett had brought with it.

"At least we know what he expects next and where you will be," Minerva replied thoughtfully. "That means that once he calls you . . ."

"I won't be coming back," Severus finished for her.

"Perhaps not until after the toe-rag is dead. But do try. I wish you could drop the wards and not go to him."

"We have discussed that all before. I must go. And when I do, he will know or suspect, and I will leave him in no doubt. I will no longer pretend to serve him. I will do what I have to in order to frustrate and delay him."

Minerva sighed. "I had better leave so I can be in my quarters when the tomb is discovered. It shouldn't be long now."

"Before you go, perhaps you will help me with one last task?" Severus asked.

"What's that?"

Severus pointed to the black robes heaped by the door. "Destroying those."

"You may need them again."

"No. I am never putting them on again, Minerva."

"Then it will be my pleasure."

Hagrid had woken Pomona a few minutes before six, pounding on the Head of Hufflepuff's door. She could scarcely get a sensible word from him, and when she did, she used the Floo to go directly to the Headmistress's Office. She was too rattled to wonder at the fact that the Headmistress was up, dressed, and in her office. The two witches went to the window and looked out at the sight that had so disturbed Hagrid. Minerva turned away quickly.

"Cast a charm around the tomb so that others can't see it, then have Filius take a few photographs as evidence for the Ministry," Minerva instructed calmly. "Once Filius has finished . . ." Minerva swallowed and blinked. "Once he has finished, I will restore the Headmaster's dignity. Other than that, we will touch nothing until the Aurors arrive. But before we do any of that, Professor Crouch must check for traps. It is good that Hagrid had the sense not to touch anything."

"How could anyone do this?" Pomona cried.

"We have all witnessed worse atrocities in our lives," Minerva said softly. "This was calculated to be a blow to us, to weaken our resolve. We won't let it. You go now while I send a message to the Ministry. I'll send Poppy to take care of Hagrid..."

"I told him to stand outside the doors and make sure that no one leaves the castle or approaches the grave," Pomona said.

"Good. I'll tell the other staff. Professor MacAirt and Professor Snape will inform the prefects that there has been a disturbance and, until we are certain that the students are in no danger, everyone is to remain in their dormitories. No one is to move freely about the grounds, Pomona, no one. If you see anyone who is, stop them. Only you, Filius, and Robbie have any business being out on the grounds this morning. And no students are to roam the castle. Breakfast will be delayed."

"Are you all right, Minerva?"

"I have to be," she replied. "It's what I must do for Albus and for the school. Go now and get Filius; have him cast a charm to screen the tomb from view. Poppy will join you shortly. Don't allow anyone to approach the grave except Robbie. Filius is only to take photographs and wait for me. I do not want anyone to . . . it's my duty to . . . I wish to take care of the remains myself." Tears glittered in Minerva's eyes.

"Is, um, Professor Crouch nearby?" Pomona asked, trying to be tactful despite the circumstances.

Minerva shook her head. "He said he was going to his quarters. I'll send him to you. Please be quick, Pomona. I don't want others to look out their windows and see. Take the Floo to Filius's rooms. That will be fastest, and under the circumstances, I doubt he'll mind the unannounced arrival. Have him cast a privacy charm immediately. Don't let anyone else see this. Please."

"Of course, Minerva!"

Without further delay, Pomona left, using the Headmistress's Floo. Minerva cast one more glance out the window, then winced and turned away. Whatever she had said to Severus about the corpse being a mere shell, the sight was disturbing, even more now in the daylight than it had been when she had watched from her sitting room window. If Severus had to endure being there while the toe-rag despoiled the grave, then she could endure watching it from afar. She had known that it wouldn't satisfy Riddle to simply take what he wanted and leave. Any man who would do the other things he had done, everything from parricide to mass murder, would feel compelled to violate the dignity of a corpse.

Severus sat at Minerva's right as she made her announcement to the school: classes were cancelled for the day owing to the vandalism of the Headmaster's tomb. Aurors had already arrived and would be investigating the incident. There was no danger and no reason for fear, though out of an abundance of caution, students would be confined to their Houses for the day. Staff and prefects would escort everyone from the Great Hall after breakfast, and no one was to leave before that time. Lunch would be served in the common rooms, and an announcement would be made later regarding dinner. Each common room would have a member of the staff present at all times, no student was to go anywhere unaccompanied by a member of staff, and any student caught anywhere else in the castle during the extraordinary curfew would be a candidate for immediate expulsion.

It was her final pronouncement that caused the students to really sit up and take note, Severus thought, but when breakfast arrived, most of the students tucked in with no hesitation, though perhaps with less enthusiasm than usual. Hermione, he saw, only played with her food and didn't participate in the hushed conversations of those around her. She was wearing her floor-length school robe again. He didn't like that particular robe on her; its multiple pleats that began high on the chest made her look shapeless, even somewhat bulky despite the fact that she'd lost weight in recent weeks. Perhaps she was trying to hide that fact. Or she simply liked the robe. It did have an unusual stand-up collar and a fancy Gryffindor crest embroidered directly on the left shoulder, rather than a patch. She was wearing her hair in a loose ponytail that day, held in some kind of a Muggle hairclip. It was looking very shiny and full . . . very soft . . .

Severus averted his eyes from the Gryffindor table and shoved a forkful of eggs in his mouth. They tasted wretched, but he swallowed them and looked over at the Slytherin table. There were whispered conversations over there, too, but fewer disturbed expressions. Even Zabini and his clique appeared unperturbed. Indeed, they were quite expressionless. And they were the only ones at the Slytherin table who were not talking. Severus looked around the room. It seemed they were the only students in the Hall, other than Hermione, who weren't engaged in conversation and speculation. They were eating, almost mechanically, but they were eating, and when Kevin Harper pushed his plate away, most of his breakfast uneaten, Zabini nodded to Daphne Greengrass, who was sitting beside the younger Slytherin. She proceeded to slather a piece of toast with raspberry preserves, cut it into four triangles, take one for herself, then silently offer the others to Harper, who began to nibble a corner.

Severus willed away the lump in his throat and took a sip of tea. What would happen to his House, to his students? Would any of them be alive the next day? Any of them at all, the other students, Hermione, his colleagues, Minerva?

He glanced over at Minerva just as she turned toward Crouch and nodded. Crouch stood and walked down to Gryffindor table, where he stopped and said a few words to Hermione. He continued to the back of the Hall, stopping to speak to a few Gryffindors and Ravenclaws, then he took up position at the doors, relieving Alroy MacAirt to have a hurried breakfast.

It was clear to Severus that the purpose of Minerva's signal and Crouch's trip to the back of the Hall was not only in order to give the Gryffindor Head of House time to eat breakfast. Crouch had given Hermione a message. Severus worried about what they had in mind for her. Perhaps Potter was arriving...Minerva had sent him a Patronus...and they wanted her to explain her theories to the boy. That was a reasonable explanation, given Hermione's work over the last months, but Severus was inexplicably uneasy. He had had the sense in their last few private meetings that there was something that Hermione was keeping herself from saying. He hoped that it was only her fears for his safety that she'd been avoiding, but he felt there was something more.

As the prefects and staff prepared to lead the students from the Hall, first Hufflepuff, then Slytherin, then Ravenclaw, and finally Gryffindor, Severus saw that Crouch had joined the Gryffindors and was standing near Hermione. As he left with Slytherin, he wished he could stay behind and speak to them, but it was pointless.

The rest of the morning went tediously slowly. Two young Aurors questioned him briefly, ones chosen by Shackbolt and who had obviously been told to do whatever the Headmistress said to do and who still were close enough to their school years to feel uncomfortable in his presence.

Where was he when the tomb was vandalised? He didn't know when the tomb was vandalised, so he couldn't say. Where was he between midnight and six o'clock? In bed in his quarters. Had he noticed anything suspicious on the grounds before he retired for the night? Nothing. Did he know of anyone who might want to vandalise the tomb? He didn't care to speculate on such matters. Did he have any direct knowledge of anyone who expressed the desire to vandalise the tomb? None. Did he know how someone could enter the grounds to vandalise the tomb? The grounds were well warded and the gates protected; perhaps by broom, if they flew high enough.

Lunch in Slytherin House was peculiar. Again, Zabini and his group sat together and were nearly totally silent, and there was a clear distance between Zabini's Slytherins and the rest of the House. It was as though they existed in completely different spaces, neither group acknowledging the existence of the other. Sinistra had joined him in his baby-sitting duties, and he was careful to thank her, and from her smile, he believed that she knew he was thanking her for more than just helping him watch the Slytherins eat their lunch.

At a few minutes past one, he received a message from Poppy saying that she needed to see him immediately. Anticipating an emergency, Severus left his students in Sinistra's hands and went up to the matron's office.

"Nutritional potion?" he asked disbelievingly as she held the bottle out to him.

"If I know anything, it's that you will need your strength in the coming hours. Drink up, Severus! Then I want to cast some diagnostics on you."

Severus shook his head, but humoured the witch. It gave him something to do while waiting for his summons.

Five minutes later, Severus asked, "What was that last one? I didn't recognise it." It had felt more invasive somehow.

"Just another diagnostic, checking your magical reserves," Poppy said briskly.

"You've not cast it before." He frowned.

"It's something Minerva asked me to do. Just one more precaution, that's all. And you're in better shape than you were a month ago. You have a ways to go, but I'm

pleased."

Severus restrained himself from repeating his usual litany about death. "Thank you for your care, Madam Pomfrey."

Poppy smiled at him. "You'll need to take a holiday when this is all over, Severus. Eat, sleep, relax, get waited on hand and foot. It'll be good for you."

Severus looked at her and shook his head slightly. "Good bye, Poppy," he said softly.

After he left her office, Poppy picked up a small object from her desk, put it in her pocket, and left the infirmary.

The afternoon wore on. Minerva popped through his Floo at around three to tell him that the tomb had been restored, Gareth was back, several Order members had arrived, including Harry, Ron, and Luna, and the two Aurors had returned to the Ministry. Horace Slughorn had answered her call, as well, and would be helping with the defence of the castle.

"I hope he will look after my House, too," Severus said. "I've done so little for them . . . so little, and they're in so much danger, all of them, every one, and so young. Lock them up, Minerva. Don't let them make foolish mistakes that, if they live, they will live to regret. Even Goyle...he may never be a good human being, but he doesn't have to fall into such evil so young."

"We will do all we can for them, Severus. I promise."

"And Miss Granger . . . I hope you have no dangerous plans for her. She may feel loyalty toward Potter, but if she stands with him, she'll be a prime target. I know that she won't sit by and do nothing, and you wouldn't be able to make her, but I hope you might be able to keep her from being in too much danger."

"I promise you, Severus, she will not be with Potter during the battle. I hope that she'll escape being in any direct danger, although it's impossible to predict what will happen. And you take care of yourself." Tears suddenly sprung to her eyes. "Ah, Severus, I wish I could stay with you. I worry that the next time I look for you, you'll be gone. I don't want you to go, Severus."

"Shh, shh, Minerva. It will be a few hours yet, I am sure. We may even be together when he calls me the last time."

"I am so sorry, Severus, so sorry for everything, everything you've had to do. This morning, especially. I wish I could tell you not to go back to him." Tears rolled down her cheeks.

"I would have to go anyway," he replied.

"I know. And I don't want to make it harder for you." She wiped at her tears with the back of her hand

"Come here," Severus said softly, and he hugged her, blinking back his own tears and feeling better for the comfort he was giving her. "We probably won't have time to say good-bye later, so I'll say it now. Good bye, Minerva McGonagall. You have been one of the best friends I have ever had, and I couldn't have wished for better."

"No, no, don't say that, Severus," Minerva said, pushing out of his embrace and scrubbing at her tears. "I mean, I don't want to say good-bye. I still hope you'll return to us. And that you will forgive me for everything."

"And you shouldn't say that. There's nothing you need to be forgiven for, Minerva. But if there were," Severus added with a crooked grin, "I'd learn how to forgive for your sake. All right?"

Minerva gave a shaky chuckle. "That's good. Something else for you to live for, too. I wish I could stay, but I have to get back to my office. If you're still here after dinner, join me there. Dinner will be in the Great Hall, but the curfew will still be in place."

Word came of the attack on the Ministry. Severus waited for his summons. At six o'clock, it still hadn't come, and he accompanied his Slytherins to the Great Hall. Minerva made a brief announcement regarding the attack on the Ministry and explained that the extraordinary curfew was extended. Immediately after dinner, everyone was to return to their dormitories and remain there.

Severus couldn't eat and made no pretense of trying. When dinner ended and the Gryffindors left with Vector and Lupin, Severus let Slughorn and Sinistra lead the Slytherins to the dungeons. He would be called soon; he did not want to be with students when he was forced to betray them.

Severus was standing in the Headmistress's Office with Minerva and Robbie watching as a group of Ministry officials walked up to the castle when his Mark began an insistent burn.

"It is time," Severus said, his voice low.

"Do what you must," Minerva said, then turned to the other wizard. "Robbie, quickly."

Robbie nodded. "Good luck, Severus. We have all placed our hope in you; you can place your hope in us." With that, the wizard turned abruptly and left.

Severus drew his wand hesitantly, ignoring the burn.

"Do you want me to do it?" Minerva asked.

He shook his head, she passed him control of the wards, and a few moments later, the Anti-Apparition wards were down.

"Good bye, Minerva."

"Good luck." But she spoke to an empty room.

"Severus! You have graced us with your presence!" The Dark Lord's voice dripped with sarcasm.

"I Disapparated as soon as I lowered the wards," Severus replied. He would delay, but he would no longer grovel.

Voldemort bared his teeth in anger. "Do you know what this is?" he shouted.

Severus gazed placidly at the wand the Dark Lord held up in front of him. "It appears to be a stick. Perhaps a wand. Possibly the wand that was interred with the late Headmaster?"

"It might as well be a stick," Voldemort spat. "It is useless! Did you know this, Snape?"

Severus shrugged. "You wished access to the grave. I gave you the access. I assumed you wanted what you stole. Who was I to direct you otherwise?"

"You insolent worm...*Crucio!*"

Severus grimaced and fell to his knees with a grunt. As the pain continued, unrelenting, he lay on his side, every nerve screaming. Then it ended.

"Did Dumbledore have another wand?" the Dark Lord demanded.

"The one in your hands," Severus said with a gasp, "was one he acquired in nineteen forty-five, just as I told you. He had another. Wherever it is, I doubt you'll find it, and it wouldn't do you any good, anyway."

"You knew of this! This deception! It was a deception!"

"I gave you what you wished," Severus said, struggling to his feet. Other than the Dark Lord, there were seven Death Eaters in the small room, one of whom was certainly Pettigrew, and Nagini lay coiled beside her master. The air felt close, warm, and fetid, and seemed to vibrate with magical energy, much of it rolling off of the Dark Lord in waves of anger.

"And the McGonagall witch?! She lives! She has been seen; she is in control of the school!"

"She came to trust me, as I have said before, and I lowered the wards. I do not know when they will be raised again. Lowering them is easier than raising them," he lied, "though the Headmistress may cast some temporary Anti-Apparition jinxes on specific parts of the castle." Such as Slytherin House.

"Why is she not dead?" Voldemort hissed.

"She didn't take any poison potion. As I say, she is a stubborn witch." Severus shrugged, as though it was hardly a matter of any concern.

There was a crack of Apparition, then the door opened and a large, masked Death Eater entered and bowed to his master.

"We have confirmed that we can Apparate onto the grounds and Disapparate from them with ease. As you instructed, I left my crew there with the maggot. They are well hidden and await your arrival, my lord."

The maggot, Malfoy; Severus puzzled for a moment, wondering why they would have brought Malfoy to the grounds, then decided it was too late in life for an unsolved puzzle, and he put it out of his mind.

"Return. Continue to watch the castle. I will join you shortly. You, you, and you, go with him. Now! Did I tell you to dawdle?" the Dark Lord shouted.

The four Death Eaters Disapparated with a loud crack. The odds were still against him, but he would do what he could. He might at least be able to injure the toe-rag's pride before he died.

"You grew attached to the witch," Voldemort said, turning back to him. "I warned you against that, Severus. I cannot afford to have such weakness in my closest followers. You have disappointed me, and not only will you lose your rewards, you will be punished."

"I am attached to the witch," Severus admitted, wondering how long he could delay the Dark Lord and what damage he could do. He let his wand slip from his sleeve into his right hand. "In fact, I can say that I love her." He didn't wait for the toe-rag's outrage before continuing. "And I serve her, just as I served Dumbledore before her. I still serve Albus Dumbledore. I..."

Severus collapsed on the floor, writhing in pain. Pain. He was still alive. The pain subsided and his vision cleared. He struggled to his knees and then to his feet.

"That old fool..." the Dark Lord began.

"That old fool was like a father to me. You have been nothing but an albatross to me."

"You betray me?" There was still a note of disbelief in his voice.

"I have betrayed you for years," Severus said. "It was my reason for living."

The Dark Lord's face screwed up in fury. "And it will be your death! Nagini!"

As the Dark Lord called his snake's name, Severus slid his wand the rest of the way into his hand and raised it. Before he could cast a spell, the other wizard saw him.

"*Expelliarmus!*"

Though Severus tried to maintain hold on his wand, it flew from his fingers and landed with a rattle on the other side of the room, then rolled to a stop.

"Strike!"

Nagini, heavy and sleepy, raised her head. She moved toward him, and Severus took one step back, but received a shove from behind. Pettigrew, the rat.

Despite the hopelessness of it, as Nagini drew back her head then darted forward to bite him, Severus raised his right arm and deflected her beneath her jaw, but the move unbalanced him, and he fell to one knee. Voldemort screamed at the snake again, and she reared up, readying for another strike, her jaws open, her venomous fangs shining.

The snake's head lunged for his throat, and in that moment, there was a snick. Severus struck with his left hand, driving a blade into the underside of the snake's neck as he twisted away. Unfortunately, though he pierced her skin and drew blood, his blow did not stop her bite, and he let out a strangled cry as Nagini's jaws closed on his right shoulder, her top fangs easily penetrating his layers of clothing. As she injected her venom into him, Severus felt the flick knife torn from his grasp by another *Expelliarmus* from the Dark Lord, then there was darkness and unendurable pain as the *Cruciatus* seemed to come at him from every direction. When it ended, he opened his eyes and saw through blurred vision that the Dark Lord had healed the cut on his precious familiar and was now stroking her head and crooning in Parseltongue. It made Severus want to laugh, but he couldn't seem to catch his breath. He heard the Dark Wizard give one more command to strike, and he felt Nagini's jaws close around his right arm, both upper and lower fangs injecting their toxins into his flesh this time.

Severus tried to swallow, but it seemed his body did not want to obey him, and his saliva dribbled from the corner of his mouth. Just as he had told Minerva. No death without indignity.

He tried to pay attention to what was happening, but his wounds hurt, breathing was becoming more and more difficult, and there was something wrong with his vision. He couldn't seem to open his eyes all the way and what he saw was distorted and blurry. He did hear that Pettigrew was to amputate his limbs one at a time and feed them to the snake while he still lived. He heard something about his head on a pike. The rest of his body would be saved "for later."

Although his lungs burned, it seemed that the room was becoming increasingly cold, but he did not shiver. He heard the sounds of multiple Disapparitions and steeled himself for Pettigrew's merciless attentions, hoping to pass out before the rat began cutting off his arms or legs.

More pain, confusion, noise, shouting, bright light . . . hallucination, delusion, or death. He tried to blink. Severus hoped for hallucination and not death, for a precious face appeared above him, whispering words about breathing and calmness. He tried to smile. His breathing felt easier, though the pain and burning were there still and his vision was disturbed. But perhaps it was death after all, because he thought he heard another familiar voice, yet, strangely, he still felt pain.

It was even colder now, and his limbs were being stripped. Pettigrew would feed them to the snake. And there was more pain as something jabbed into his left arm. Cutting

him to pieces while he lived. The pain in his right arm grew sharper then disappeared entirely.

Severus tried to blink away the double vision. Hermione's face and another Hermione. And the glimpse of another familiar face, also doubled. Hallucination. Surely hallucination. And death not far off. But not a bad way to die, believing that Hermione's arms were holding him, that his head was in her lap, that his breath came easier. She would be glad if she knew his hallucination of her made his death easier. A brain holiday with Hermione.

His head lolled back. Gentle fingers stroked his jaw. He saw his vision of Death again. A friendly, blue-eyed Death. Death in a field of shining stars. It would be good to sleep. To rest. To join death finally, after such a long wait. With warmth surrounding him, Severus closed his eyes and felt someone sigh for him.

Chapter Twenty-Eight: Though they sink through the sea

Chapter 29 of 34

Minerva and Robbie meet with Hermione, Harry arrives at Hogwarts, we learn what happened when Melina cast the *Celebrare Adfectus Amor Ultimus*, the Ministry deals with Death Eaters, and Hermione rises to a challenge.

Warnings for mild sexual content, some violence.



Chapter Twenty-Eight: *Though they sink through the sea*

25 May 1998

The sight of the sausages and bacon made Hermione feel vaguely ill. The eggs were no more appealing. She took some toast and began to eat that, washing it down with her tea as the whispered conversations flowed around her. Professor Dumbledore's tomb vandalised, not just vandalised, but desecrated. The rumours were rife with speculation, some of it very far-fetched, but it seemed that the tomb had not simply had some graffiti defacing it, but that it had been opened and the body exposed. Knowing what she did, Hermione presumed that it had been some mission of Voldemort's to retrieve the false Deathly Hallows, the wand and the ring, or at least to retrieve the ring, which had been one of his Horcruxes.

Had Severus been required to participate in the desecration? It seemed highly likely. Perhaps he had even been the one to do it. Hermione didn't dare look up at the staff table; if she did, her gaze would immediately fall on Severus. The events of the morning had been disturbing enough without seeing his face and knowing the pain that it must mask, and better for him, too, not to have to see the worry in her own eyes and not to have to worry about her himself. His burdens were heavy enough without adding to them.

She heard someone say that Dumbledore's body had been taken from the tomb and had lain naked on the ground until Hagrid found him. She didn't know how these rumours started...one small bit of information, repeated, expanded on, and repeated again. But if something had been done to the corpse, and if Severus had had to do it, it would have been terrible for him. She remembered his distress when they had spoken of Dumbledore when he was recuperating from his wounds, how Severus, in his weakened condition, had seemed on the verge of tears.

Hermione sighed and took another sip of tea. It was hardly the worst thing he'd had to do, objectively speaking, but it had to have been one of the most difficult. Beyond that, it was probably a sign that the attack on Hogwarts was near and would likely be that very day. Severus had been quite definite that they were nearing the end of it all. He believed that end included the end of his life.

Severus. She felt warm as she remembered his awkwardness when he had invited her to call him by his first name and had said that they were friends. Severus. She hadn't let herself really even think of him by his first name before, except fleetingly, yet it seemed natural to her. They *were* friends. All that they had talked about, and what he had let himself reveal to her, some part of his private nature. They were friends.

She chanced a quick glance at the staff table. Severus was pretending to eat, but he was looking at the Slytherin table. The rest of the staff seemed subdued and pale. Strangely, Binns was there that morning. He never attended meals, unlike some of the House ghosts, who occasionally enjoyed socialising. He seemed even more transparent than usual. Hermione thought that Professor Flitwick, his nose red and his dark eyes sad, had been crying. A lump rose in her own throat, and she looked away. At least Professor McGonagall, though she looked tired, seemed in command of herself. She would certainly not allow herself to look anything less than confident in front of the school. People were relying on her, and she'd be a strong Gryffindor for them.

Hermione looked around the table at the students in her own House. There was nervousness and a little fear, but not very much. If the Headmistress had seemed panicked, Hermione was certain that even the Gryffindors would have been alarmed and frightened. Members of Dumbledore's Army seemed to have a certain sense of resolve about them. Whatever happened, they had been preparing for it as well as they were able and would do what they had to.

Hermione hoped that she was prepared. Professor McGonagall had been preparing her for something, with the Prospirator training and that very carefully packed medical kit. Unconsciously, she touched it through her robes. It wasn't heavy, nor even bulky, only somewhat awkward and lumpy. She'd begun wearing her most covering school robe, since even under her everyday robe, the lumps and bumps seemed to show. Although not painful like a hairshirt, it did serve as a reminder to her of what was to come, of the unknown task ahead, and if occasionally a jar or tube dug into her side or back, it simply heightened her awareness, and if it woke her at night, she practised her breathing and fell back to sleep knowing that others slept less well than she. She took comfort in her belief that whatever it was the Headmistress had in mind for her, it likely had to do with saving Severus's life. Her belief had been reinforced when Severus had said that Professor McGonagall, too, hoped that he would live.

Hermione was distracted from her reverie by a gentle hand on her shoulder. She looked up into Professor Crouch's grey eyes.

"Miss Granger, you and I will leave together this morning," he said softly.

She nodded in response, then he smiled and moved on.

Hermione and Professor Crouch walked with the Gryffindors as they left the Great Hall, gradually falling back until they were following behind them. When they reached the seventh floor, Crouch touched Hermione's elbow and nodded, gently steering her into a side corridor. As she followed him, she became confused. In seven years at Hogwarts, she had never seen these narrow corridors and short staircases. They took one final turn into an even narrower hallway with large windows along one side and several portraits along the other. Stopping at the fourth portrait, Crouch said, "*Aeternitas immortalis*."

The portrait and the door swung open, and Professor Crouch gestured Hermione to enter ahead of him. They were in a sitting room with large windows that looked out across the grounds and the lake.

"Where are we?" Hermione asked as Crouch closed the door behind them.

"Gryffindor Tower," he replied. "It doesn't feel like it because the route is circuitous, but we're not far from your dormitory. These rooms are unplotable and have been warded against students for many, many decades. If you tried to find them again on foot, you could not, but there are also two fireplaces in the castle that have a Floo connection through to them, and with the correct password, you could use one of those."

There was something different now about the cadence of Crouch's speech, but she couldn't say precisely what it was.

"I actually also meant to ask whose rooms these are," Hermione explained.

"Ah. They aren't occupied at the moment, though they are occasionally used." Crouch glanced at his wristwatch. "Professor McGonagall will be here soon. We need to wait for her."

Hermione nodded. "What really happened this morning? To the Headmaster's tomb, I mean. We weren't told very much."

"It was vandalised, as Professor McGonagall stated. It was actually opened and the wand and ring were stolen."

"Did you expect that?" Hermione asked.

"We anticipated it since before the tomb was erected," Crouch replied, "and we knew that it would happen before certain other events. Then Professor Snape was able to provide us with the precise timing. So yes, we expected it."

"It's still awful. And poor Professor Snape, to have to know about it and help with it."

"It's unpleasant," Crouch agreed with a nod, "and particularly for Professor Snape. Very disturbing that he had to participate."

The fireplace across the room flared green and the Headmistress stepped out.

"Good morning, Miss Granger. I'm sorry I was delayed, Robbie. I wanted to give additional instructions to Hutchins and Appleton before they began questioning the staff." She looked over at Hermione. "I presume that you haven't begun without me?"

"No, we waited," Robbie replied.

"Miss Granger...Hermione, please, have a seat," Minerva said, gesturing to the sofa. "We will be as brief as possible, but I think you will want to be comfortable."

Hermione sat on the couch and Minerva and Robbie each took a seat in an armchair.

"Where to begin . . ." Minerva thought a moment. She had decided to take a different approach with Hermione than she had with Poppy, but had hardly had time to consider what that approach might be. "I will begin by describing a few events that occurred in the summer of nineteen ninety-six, some of which you may know already. If we have time afterward, you may ask questions and we may be able to answer some of them, but at the moment, no matter how startling or unfamiliar the information, I think it's best if you wait. Unless, of course, there's something that you literally don't understand."

Hermione nodded her agreement.

"That summer, Professor Dumbledore tracked down one of the Horcruxes, the Gaunt ring, which you saw him wearing in public during the last months that he was Headmaster and which was taken from the tomb this morning. In destroying the Horcrux, Dumbledore released a curse on the ring. You saw the results of it on his wand hand. Although he and Severus were able to treat the immediate effects of the curse, they were unable to entirely cure it, and the curse remained in him, slowly wearing down his body and his magic.

"At first, Albus was concerned that the curse had carried the Horcrux with it and that he was now a Horcrux himself, but fortunately, that wasn't the case. He had simply been somewhat overconfident in his abilities and had failed to thoroughly investigate the ring for additional curses before using the Gryffindor sword on it."

Robbie shifted uncomfortably in his chair and opened his mouth, but then closed it again.

Minerva looked over at him and twitched a slight smile. "To his credit, any other wizard would likely have been killed outright, or at least have died within hours of being cursed, so his overconfidence in his abilities is somewhat understandable. At any rate, it became clear to both Severus and Dumbledore that the curse would kill him within a year, perhaps sooner. Severus began to brew Albus a potion that helped stave off the worse of the effects, though it would not forestall his death more than a few months at most.

"Severus, as you may imagine, began to experiment with the potion, and he devised two new ones that were far more effective both in reducing the uncomfortable effects of the curse and in staving off the end result, perhaps by a decade or more. Albus, however, refused these potions...no questions, Hermione. None yet," Minerva reminded Hermione when she leaned forward, her mouth open.

"That same summer," she continued, "for reasons we will not go into, although they were good ones, Severus took an Unbreakable Vow, part of which included a promise to, under certain conditions, kill Dumbledore."

Hermione's agitation was evident, but she gritted her teeth and restrained herself.

"I won't go into the details of the Vow, but Severus felt he had no choice but to take it, and because of the way the Vow was worded, he also was not aware that he was actually committing himself to killing Dumbledore. Dumbledore approved of the Vow, and he even approved of the promise to kill him. Over time, Severus became less and less willing to carry out that part of the Vow, though he did grudgingly agree to obey Dumbledore in that matter and to kill him when the time came.

"Events sometimes have a way of undoing what we might have done even before we act...although perhaps that makes little sense. But sometimes it seems we are saved from ourselves, whether we want to be or not, or we are given one final opportunity to save ourselves when we least expect to have any choices left. And that is what happened when Severus was struck by the *Actus Adfectus Amor Verissimus*. He looked on it then as a curse...and in many ways, the spell is a curse...but it was, perhaps, the beginning of salvation, and not just for him.

"I don't believe that it was mere happenstance that Severus was struck by a spell meant for Draco Malfoy. Part of the Vow that Severus took committed him to protecting Draco. Although Draco ducked the spell, if Severus hadn't been there when he was, perhaps Pansy would have cast again and hit him the second time, or perhaps something else would have been different and Draco would not have been able to duck in time. Without even intending to, Severus protected Draco from the spell.

"When the *Adfectus* released Severus, it did not erase the events of the previous five days from his mind, and there were effects on him that lasted beyond the lifespan of that spell. He had previously held me in regard; now he understood that his regard for me ran deeper than he had believed or had admitted to himself. He had been repulsed by the idea of killing Dumbledore before, but had committed to doing it nonetheless. After the *Adfectus*, he found it impossible to consider, and not only because his feelings in general had been unlocked, but because of his gratitude toward Albus and toward me." Minerva paused a moment, considering how much more to say. "You see, he learned that the . . . the gift he had been given that released the curse was somewhat different from what he'd believed...although he was grateful, in any case, and perhaps this only led him to come to his decision more quickly. After the *Adfectus* was lifted, Severus learned that Albus and I are, were, married."

This news didn't surprise Hermione, though she hadn't considered it before, but Robbie shifted in his chair again, and she presumed that the reminder of the Headmistress's late husband was somehow discomfiting for him.

"That knowledge changed his view on the outcome of the *Adfectus*, and his sense of indebtedness increased. I believe he would have come to the same decision to tell me about the curse and the Vow whether he had known or not, but in any case, just after Christmas, Severus told me about the situation. I was disturbed, to say the least. Albus had always assured me that the curse was no worse, and he'd never mentioned the Vow at all. Suffice it to say that after I'd spoken to Albus, I was clear that we couldn't take either of the paths he had considered. I decided to find a new one. What was most important to me was that Severus not kill Albus. But if Severus didn't kill Albus, the Vow would kill Severus, and that to me was also unacceptable. And not only did I not want Albus killed by Severus, I would have preferred him to live longer than the few months that he had allotted to himself. There were several other factors involved, as well, the most important of which, of course, was the war with Voldemort. Whatever I did, whatever we did, it could not hurt the Order and the wizarding world in their fight against Riddle.

"When Severus declared that he wouldn't kill him, Albus's back-up plan was to allow himself to die of the curse, but soon enough so that the circumstances under which Severus would be required to fulfill the Vow would never arise. I took that plan and I changed it."

Hermione opened her mouth and closed it again. She didn't see how it had been changed, since clearly Albus Dumbledore had died of the curse, but she had promised to allow the Headmistress to finish before asking any questions.

"Robbie, I think it's time for a demonstration," Minerva said. She pulled a small bottle from the pocket of her outer-robe and handed it to him.

"Robbie is about to take an antidote to a potion that he has been taking daily," Minerva explained as Robbie removed the small stopper from the bottle.

He smiled wanly at Hermione, raised the bottle, and said, "Cheers!"

The potion apparently didn't taste good; Robbie grimaced as he swallowed it. But Hermione scarcely noticed that, because within a few seconds of swallowing the antidote, Robbie's skin began to ripple and his muscles seemed to go into small spasms. She watched with amazement, very glad that she was sitting down.

"*Celebrare Adfectus Amor Ultimus*"

Albus blinked in confusion. Melina's spell hit Minerva, then as colour arced around Minerva and began to spread toward him, Melina was out the door and gone.

"Oh, Minerva, you couldn't," Albus said, sounding anguished as the colours swirled around her and rolled toward him, beginning to tickle his magic. "You didn't."

"I would have preferred to have waited, Albus, and to have given you a choice about this particular aspect of my plan, but once this is done, I hope you will be more agreeable and will listen to my plan with an open mind," Minerva said. Her eyes sparkled and her skin glowed beneath the warm, playful colours of the *Celebrare Adfectus Amor Ultimus*. She grinned. "I had no doubts about the *Amor Ultimus*, Albus. I hope you will allow me to fulfill the *Celebrare*."

"If we don't, these colours will continue to swim around us for days. There will be no hiding it." Albus felt the relaxing effects of the spell, its colours now surrounding him, but his fundamental displeasure and irritation at being ambushed were barely soothed.

Minerva shrugged. "It's up to you. Of course, if it had been only one-sided, at least you would have been spared the embarrassment of walking around with your colours showing. It is up to you, though. I wouldn't force you even if I could. You know that."

"It will become uncomfortable, particularly if we are apart," Albus pointed out.

"Uncomfortable, but not lethal. And if we stay apart for the next week or so, the auras should disappear and we will find it less uncomfortable with the passage of time."

"But the spell remains whether we act on it or not," Albus said, this time his irritation showing, and not only in his voice, but in the spikes of colour that danced out from his chest as he spoke. "We will never be able to make love again."

Minerva looked at him seriously, but with compassion. "That would have happened fairly soon, anyway, Albus, once you stopped taking any potions."

"You want to try to use the side effects of this spell to cure my hand, don't you? And once my hand is cured . . . That's what you meant by reaching a point of no return." Despite the warming, joyful effects of the spell, his anger was mounting. He could not believe that Minerva would do such a thing, particularly when he had told her repeatedly that he did not want them to use the *Celebrare*.

Minerva bit her lip. If he was this angry now, how angry would he have been without the effects of the spell? "Yes, that's what I meant."

"You counted on my participation, on my not allowing the *Celebrare* to remain unconsummated." Albus shook his head. "I do not appreciate being manipulated, Minerva, being put in this completely untenable position."

Minerva stepped toward him, soft, soothing pillows of blue reaching out and gentling his red spikes as she raised her hand and caressed his cheek. "My love, it is I who was in the untenable position before, and nothing you did would make it better. You would not help, you would not consider the possibility that there were other options we might look at. I have reversed our positions, and not simply because I wanted us to trade places that way, but because it was the only way I could see to make things better for both of us...and not just for us, either."

Albus sighed. "I am sorry for that." He shook his head and looked down into her eyes. "But what do we do now? As angry as I am . . . it's not just that I feel the pull of the *Celebrare*, but, obviously, I do love you, and I don't want to hurt you. It seems whatever course I choose, it will be a selfish one."

"Then let me choose, Albus. Can you trust me that much?"

Albus swallowed. "I can. And if you ask it now, I will. But won't you tell me more first?"

Minerva smoothed her hands over his chest. "I'll tell you much more later today. After we have celebrated. For now, will it suffice to say that in the end, I will kill you, though first I must cure you? We will see that the prophecy you believe in is fulfilled."

Albus pushed away as Minerva reached for the clasp at his throat. "No, no, that will not suffice, and I won't allow it."

"If you don't want me to try to cure you...although that may happen whether I consciously will it or not, and it may not work even if I want it to...then we will need to have Murdoch make up more of those potions. You will need to be in good shape to carry out your role," Minerva replied, unperturbed.

"No. You can't do that, Minerva. Any of it."

"You would ask Severus to kill you, but you won't allow me to fulfill the prophecy in a different way? You would prefer us both to suffer, and the wizarding world with us?"

"I explained that to you before. You have never killed a human being. I don't want you to do it."

"Albus, do have a little more faith in me. Please." She began to open his over-robe. "I will explain more. I promise you."

"I feared this," Albus said miserably, withdrawing from her touch and turning his head away. "Mated wands are said to bring a curse with them. This is our curse. I thought we were among the lucky few who had escaped such ill fortune."

Minerva laughed lightly. "Oh, Albus, you never used to believe such things! I said to have faith, to trust me. If anything, the mated wands are a part of our good fortune, if only because of the magical resonance they represent. I read those stories, too. Most of them are overblown and exaggerated. You do need this *Celebrare* spell, if for nothing else than to release you from your chains. You have chained yourself to your interpretation of the prophecy and to your belief that you must die, and that you have to die in a dreadful way, at that."

Albus let her remove his over-robe and lead him to the sofa.

"You really do have some plan, don't you? You think you can avert it all," Albus said softly.

"I have been telling you that." She swept some of his hair back, combing her fingers through it gently. "Honestly, though, there are still risks. There are things that could go wrong. You might still die in the spring, though I don't believe you will. I have no guarantees, but I do have an option for us, one that I believe has a very good chance of working."

"You said that you wanted to use the inevitable to our advantage."

"Yes. But believe me, my plan, if nothing goes wrong, will see that you, Severus, and Draco do not die. Or at least, that you all have a very good chance of survival for a good while longer. There's so much more to it. But let's discuss it later." She leaned forward and kissed him lightly on the lips, sighing happily as the spell responded.

"I won't be able to think at all if you do that again," Albus whispered.

"Do you need to think just now?" Minerva asked.

"Oh, Minerva." Albus sounded resigned. "I do. Just a while longer. You know that the *Celebrare* can create a bond between the two participants, and if you intend to try to heal me, a bond between us is quite likely going to be another side effect."

"I know it." She traced his features with her fingertips.

"I have always avoided such a thing between us."

"And I have always said that it didn't matter to me."

Albus closed his eyes for a moment, then opened them. "Do you intend to make it an unequal bond? To bind me to you?"

"No, of course not. I have no plans to initiate a bond. And from what I've read, if it arises spontaneously, the bond tends to be more or less equal," Minerva said. "I don't think that either of us has anything to worry about in that regard. I know you have always been concerned that whatever binding we might do, it would be unequal and in some way take away my independence and give it to you, but I think that is highly unlikely to happen, even though your magic is more powerful than mine. First, the *Celebrare* does not seem to create that kind of unequal bond; second, the bond tends to be somewhat amorphous and more of a heightened emotional and magical sensitivity than anything else, and we already have that to a great degree; and third, because the *Celebrare* was cast upon me and not upon you, any spontaneous binding, if one occurs, would originate with me and would therefore be unlikely to place you in a superior position. You could probably reject it if you felt it happening, though. You have quite a bit more power than I do. And, of course, you still have the power to tell me right now that we will have to shut ourselves away for the next week, however inconvenient that may be, and that we won't be fulfilling the *Celebrare*."

"I don't want to risk a spontaneous bond," Albus said.

"Then...?"

"If you sense that it is happening, I want you to take control of it, and I will submit," Albus said. "That way, if it is unequal, well, you will have the advantage, so to speak."

Minerva knit her brow. "You want me to bind you to me? Unequally? That sounds hardly fair. And as I say, the *Celebrare* bindings don't seem to be anything like some of the traditional ones...they don't enforce any chastity on either party, for example...though, of course, given the nature of the relationship between two people who would be affected by the *Amor Ultimus*, it is hardly likely that either person would even be tempted to enter into an affair with someone else. But I doubt that dominance and subservience come into play at all. I doubt very much that either of us could command the other any more than we are able to now."

"Nonetheless, promise me that you will do it. If you don't promise," Albus said, "then I will have to leave now." He gave a slight smile to soften his pronouncement and added, "Of course, if you kissed me again, I don't think I'd have any choice but to stay."

"Ah, so if I kissed you again, you would capitulate! Already subservient without the bond," Minerva teased. "I don't think we need one, then, since you are already so agreeable."

"It has always been difficult for me to refuse you anything," Albus replied, his eyes soft as he looked at her. "As you say, there would be hardly any change at all. Just promise me. Please."

"You truly are a silly wizard, Albus. Once and always a silly wizard." She laughed. "All right, if I become aware that the spell seems to be doing something to bind us and I am able to have any control over it, I will do as you ask and take control of it."

"You see, my sweet? I do trust you." He caressed her face and rested his hand on her shoulder. "I simply have feared that your love for me was causing you to be unrealistic. But if you say you have a plan . . . I don't know why I didn't listen before." He leaned forward and kissed her cheek. "I am sorry."

His whisper tickled her skin, then his lips moved to hers, and his kiss, soft and languidly sensual, put all thought of curses, death, and Dark Wizards from her mind. Her love and his wholeness were all her focus, and as they began to undress each other, kisses landing gently over newly bared skin, the *Celebrare* pulsed between them and through them, heightening their sensitivity and seeming to merge their individual pleasures into one.

The *Celebrare* held no imperative, as the *Actus Affectus Amor Verissimus* had held over Severus a few months before; the *Celebrare* held only a promise of shared sensation and shared emotion as it revealed the great love and devotion that one person had for another. And whereas the *Actus Affectus* only directly affected the person on whom it was cast, the *Celebrare* could reach out and equally affect the other party if the love was mutual in kind and quality. Although the *Celebrare* held little power

over the participants as the *Actus Adfectus* did, it was in essence a much more powerful spell when acted upon, and it had long ago been discovered that it could initiate the spontaneous healing of one celebrant, and that the healing could even be directed by the healthy party. In addition, while the *Celebrare* bound the participants during its consummation, that binding could also become permanent, but as Minerva had said, it was a benevolent and very basic bond of their magic.

Albus rested his forehead against Minerva's shoulder. He was quiet for a moment, then he said, "I don't know, Minerva. I don't know. I still have a sense that there is something wrong with this, that I am giving in to temptation. Not just the temptation to make love to you, my dear, of course not only that. But the temptation to escape the fate that awaits me."

He took a deep breath and sighed, turning his head and kissing her neck. "I do not want to die of this curse," he whispered. "But if I do not . . . it could be worse. Not just for me, but for Severus and for Harry. For everyone. It may sound egotistical, but I believe that my death is necessary for them to live and for Harry to defeat Riddle. It is selfish of me, giving in to this temptation now. And it will only put off the inevitable. I cannot think clearly, though. This spell has confused me, and it has increased my desire to believe you. But if I am wrong to believe, and if you are wrong, then it could be disastrous. I already live with too much responsibility, Minerva. I don't want to be responsible for the deaths of any more people. I don't want to be responsible for Riddle gaining more power."

"Come with me to bed, Albus," Minerva said, taking his hand. "It will be my responsibility, too. You don't need to bear it alone, whatever you have borne in the past. I believe in this plan of mine. I think we can save you, Severus, and Draco. And if we cannot save you, there will still be a chance for Severus and Draco. Come with me to bed and we will begin by trying to save you from this curse."

"How can it serve Severus or Draco if I live?" Albus asked.

Minerva sighed. "It is too complicated to explain now. But the Vow will become moot if my plan works. I assure you of that, Albus. And you may yet die in just a few months time. I don't want to consider that possibility myself, but I have to be honest with you about it. But give me the chance to try to save you. Whether I am successful in saving your life or not, I want to try to rid you of this curse today."

"You said yourself that the *Celebrare* might not work to do that. What then?"

"Then you will take those potions that Severus developed for you. Murdoch and Robert will work to improve them further. And we go ahead with the rest of my plan anyway. We can still work to avoid your death."

"There is something about this plan that I will not like, isn't there? That's why you won't tell me more."

"If you will give my idea a fair hearing, I believe you will accept it," Minerva answered. "But you have been in no mood to entertain any other possibilities as it is, let alone one that is as unconventional as this plan. Please, Albus, you said that you could have faith in me. Please do. After the *Celebrare*, after you have had a rest and when I can think more clearly myself, I will tell you more about it."

"I do not know . . ."

"Don't look at it as giving in to temptation. *That* is the selfish view; that's what is making it complicated for you, thinking of it as temptation. You think that wanting to live...or at least, not wanting to suffer and die...makes any other choice wrong. But what you want for yourself personally *can* actually coincide with what is right, you know. And if you think that this is an easy path that I am asking you to walk, I assure you, it will not be. And whether cured or not cured, as I said, your prophecy will be fulfilled. I will make certain of it. I promise, Albus."

Albus raised his head. "That is what I understand the least. How the prophecy can be fulfilled if you are trying to avoid my death."

"Complicated, remember? Come to bed, Albus. Come to bed. Don't you feel the *Celebrare*? It is calling us to joy, to love, and to life! No more talk of this now, no more thought of death just yet."

Minerva stood, and her loosened robes fell to the floor. She knelt at Albus's feet and pulled off first one boot then the other. She removed his socks, then tugged at his under-robe as she stood. Albus rose to his feet and helped her to pull his under-robe off.

"You need to be able to trust me," Minerva said softly, placing her hands on his shoulders and looking up at him. "You would trust me with a bond, won't you trust me with this plan? Trust me with your health? Put yourself in my hands?"

Albus put his left hand on her lower back and pulled her closer. Looking into her eyes, he nodded. "I have always trusted you with my life, Minerva . . . you know that. I have tried to protect you, and I don't think that was wrong, although perhaps I was wrong about what I should protect you from. I have made some unilateral decisions that have affected you, and you have trusted me." He sighed, smiling. "And I think that now I will leave the future to take care of the future for once, and trust that whatever today brings, we will work out tomorrow together. Right now, in this moment, all I want is to be here with you."

Albus bent and kissed her upturned face, and she slipped her hands around his neck and drew his lips to hers. She had intended to bring him to the bedroom, but as the *Celebrare* flowed between them, all sense of place and time left her. Her kisses grew in intensity and passion, and she pressed her body against his, bringing him back to lie beneath her on the couch. She kneaded his shoulders as her lips and tongue met his, repeating the love they had expressed many times before, but feeling utterly new.

Minerva's lips moved lower, kissing his chest; her hands lightly danced over his skin, colour and light following her fingertips. Albus raised his hips, pressing himself against her abdomen as his left hand stroked her back and buttocks. Minerva inched back up, raising herself with her right hand on the cushion beside his chest, the other caressing his face, and her pelvis pressed against his arousal. She could feel his desire coursing through the spell and into her, her own love and desire mingling with his. She closed her eyes, arching her back and savouring the multitude of sensations.

Albus's eyes travelled from Minerva's face to her breasts, and he urged her forward with his hand on her buttocks as he lifted his head and his lips sought her breast. Silver and bright golden rays of light arced from the colourful aura around Minerva, and strands of deeper, rich golden light joined them, reaching out from Albus's heart and lower abdomen.

As Albus's lips and tongue pleased first one nipple then the other, the fingers of his left hand sought her crux. Minerva parted her legs with a sighing cry of pleasure. This man whom she loved so very much, she would give him her life and her heart, her blood and her spirit; whatever he needed, she would give. As her passion grew, her left hand instinctively sought his right where it lay on the cushion above his head, and equally instinctively, rather than grasping the injured hand, she rested hers on top of it, the heel of her hand at his wrist and her fingers curled over his palm, fingertips barely grazing it.

His cursed right hand and lower arm emitted only a pale glow: a smoky grey, tendrils of rusty red and empty blackness snaking through the haze. Minerva remembered Albus whole and well, his vitality undiminished by the curse, his body, hale and strong. The *Celebrare* flowed between them, then surrounded and filled them. As the radiance grew and the *Celebrare* inhabited them both without distinction, there was no more distinguishing the magic that enveloped them.

Minerva's crux found his arousal, and as she slid down over him, her breasts brushing his beard, Albus let out a long breath, a sigh of delight as her pleasure and his joined through the magic that held them in a warm, joyous embrace. And now as she moved over him, the light that had become her hand drove the smoke and creeping darkness away, invading it with soft silver tendrils and gentle clouds of blue and green, followed by a sweeping golden brilliance.

Albus let out a low moan as his head went back. Sweet warmth was chasing the curse from his body and his magic, the curse burning furiously as it was driven outward toward his fingertips whence it had entered. Rivulets and streams of fire coursed through him, the *Celebrare* finding even the smallest threads of the curse where it had taken up residence deep within him. Soothing cool light followed, replacing the painful flames of the curse. Minerva felt the waves of fiery pain through the *Celebrare* that united them, and she drew on the magical resonance between them that she knew so well, bringing the *Celebrare* itself in tune with their magic.

With a burst of multicoloured light, the curse was ripped away, final shreds of sooty grey snaking from his fingertips before disappearing entirely. Albus's magic coursed back through him, powerful rolling waves of energy, supplemented by Minerva's strength flowing into him through the *Celebrare*. She grasped his hand, still withered black, and brought her full attention to it. No thought entered her mind, only the image and memory of his body whole, his hand strong, his physical vitality unmatched. Her magic and her body's memory held the hand that she had learned so many years ago, when she had loved him with the love of a child; they held the hand that had taken hers in friendship when she didn't dare love him as a woman; they held the hand whose palm and fingertips she had kissed when she declared that she loved him and longed for him; they held the hand that had held hers when she was ill, when she was injured, when she was in mourning. Her magic and her memory moulded his hand, reaching into it, saturating his cells with that memory, and Albus cried out as his body obeyed her will, happy to return his hand to its former shape and strength. Albus's pain at the transfiguration flowed between them, echoing, and each echo returning to him with healing and comfort.

The *Celebrare* took the echoes and began to build again, thrumming through them. The spell answered their love and dedication by strengthening the magic that held them in its radiant embrace. Minerva blinked, trying to remember herself. Herself. Albus. She looked down into the bright blue eyes that sparkled up at her from a face unlined with care and unshadowed by concealed pain. The *Celebrare* was binding their magic, weaving and melding it together, to leave its mark after it was itself dissipated and only memory.

Minerva had long been aware of Albus's magic, and when they made love, it seemed to mingle with her own, even sometimes flowing through hers, and her magic would reach out and caress his, but this was different. Now she understood what binding was, that it was more than the awareness and sharing of their magic, it was more than the resonance and harmony that their magic had always enjoyed. There was shared grief that their magic had been separate and unbound for so long, dancing together but never joining. Then Minerva remembered her promise, and she reached out with her magic with no spell, only intent, and she directed the *Celebrare* as it wove their energy together. She could feel Albus's heartbeat racing even as he relaxed his magic, handing it to her for her use.

She began to move over him faster as she conducted their magic, the aura of energy painting the colours of dawn around them. All that she loved of Albus and of her life passed through her mind as she continued to move. They shared the pleasure of his erection within her and of her warmth surrounding him, and that pleasure rippled through the light, leaving new colours in its wake.

As Minerva approached her peak, she lost all thought of the spell, only reaching out and holding Albus close with her magic, her love coursing through it and into him, wishing him wholeness and protection, willing him to nothing but the acceptance of her love and care. Then as she came, a tidal wave of ecstasy thrilled through her and rebounded through the radiance surrounding them, increasing it with an explosion of clear light, and she felt Albus reach out finally with his magic to encircle her.

She gasped and rode him harder, her eyes closing against the brilliance of the *Celebrare*, but still she saw it as it washed through her. Albus grasped her waist with both his hands, his breath now one long moan as her pleasure became his. He pushed up to meet her, and then he was coming, and his orgasm extended hers as it passed through the magic of the *Celebrare*.

"Ah, my sweet Minerva! Always yours, always, always." His grip tightened even as he gave himself over to her.

"Yours, yours, yours," Minerva chanted breathlessly. "To you, to you always, always yours. Love you, want you, need you, oh, Albus! My Albus!"

"Mine, mine, oh, my Minerva, my Minerva!" With one final gasp, he spent himself completely and pulled her down into his arms.

Minerva lay almost still, breathing heavily, her fingers gently whispering through his hair, her cheek resting on his shoulder. She slowly opened her eyes. The almost blinding white light was gone, but other soft colours still cradled them, shifting with a gentle ebb and flow.

She tilted her head back on the cushion, gazing at Albus's face, then she blinked and pushed herself up a little to look down at him.

"My word, Albus," she said with a soft chuckle. "I knew we would have to do something to hide your hand from the world, but it's more than your hand we will need to disguise."

Albus opened his eyes and looked up at her. "What do you mean?" he asked sleepily as the *Celebrare* colours, now gentle pastel hues, pulsed in time with their heartbeats.

"It's just . . . you'll have to look in a mirror and see for yourself."

It wasn't merely that his face no longer looked careworn as it hid the pain of the curse, but that he now held a remarkable glow that bespoke an underlying health and vigour. His hair was still as snowy as it had been when he had arisen that morning, but it seemed fuller and thicker than even his usual abundant mane did. His forehead still bore a crease or two, but they were not as deep; the pinched worry lines between his eyebrows had vanished entirely, yet the crinkly laugh lines around his eyes seemed more evident. Albus looked almost as he had two decades earlier, or perhaps as he would have appeared had the previous two decades been filled with less pain, grief, and burdensome responsibility.

Minerva pushed herself up a little more and took his right hand in hers. There was no need to inspect it, it was clearly healed and well again, but she marvelled at it nonetheless. Skin and sinew were all restored, and she could feel his magic flowing evenly through his hand, the curse's magic no longer interfering with it.

Albus stretched out his arm and flexed his fingers. He laughed. "It feels as good as it ever has." He laughed again and pulled her down into a hard embrace, squeezing her tightly. "And it feels so good to be able to hold you properly again."

He let her go as she pushed up to look down at him with a grin.

"You are a marvel, Minerva McGonagall," he said, then he reached out with his right hand and said, *Accio* wand."

When his wand flew into his hand, he laughed with delight, and she joined him. Albus pulled her back down into a kiss, then tucked a few stray hairs behind her ear, and said, "You mentioned the bed earlier. I think that sounds like a fine idea."

"Bed, then a shower, then bed again, perhaps? And food. And we'll have to discuss what to do about your hand and the rest of your robust good health. I have an idea about that."

"Food...what about lunch?" Albus asked, looking past Minerva to the clock on her chimneypiece. "It's not for a little while yet, but..."

"I spoke with Pomona and told her we would likely not be there for lunch and possibly not for dinner, either. She and Filius will look after everything for us."

"Good. I think we can fill that time quite well as the *Celebrare* lingers, don't you, my dear?"

"Absolutely." And Minerva began demonstrating one of her ideas for filling that time.

Scrimgeour stood and smiled at his guest. "Philomena! I am so delighted to see you." He came around his desk and bent, kissing each of the old witch's cheeks. "In these hard times, it is good to see an old friend."

Philomena Yaxley, one-time Head of the Department for International Magical Cooperation, returned his smile. "I know just what you mean, Rufus. That must be why I got it in my head to come see you. A longing for older, simpler times." She laughed. "Of course, that's probably just nostalgia talking. They probably were not as simple as we like to remember them. But ever since Albus died . . . it seemed the end of something, you know?"

"Yes, I know. I felt it, too."

"Of course, I know you and he didn't get along very well, at least not in those last couple years, but it was a great loss to us all."

"It was. I do agree with you there. And whatever our differences, he was more often right than wrong, and sometimes I think I would have done well to listen to him more," Rufus said as he guided his visitor to a comfortable armchair. "Don't tell anyone else that, though!" he added with a smile.

"Never!" Philomena laughed. "You know, are we still civilised enough to have tea at teatime? Do you think you could offer an old witch a cuppa? With all the security I had to go through to get in here, I am quite parched."

"Of course, my dear. In fact, I anticipated your request. Martha and Squingee baked apple turnovers yesterday, so I brought some of those from home, and I just warmed the teapot before you came in." He winked at her. "I do sometimes enjoy doing for myself. I am just an old Auror at heart, you know."

Philomena smiled brightly and asked after his wife and family.

Twenty minutes later, Philomena was just finishing her puffy apple-filled pastry, and the door burst open without even a knock first.

"They're here. A few on each level. Anti-Apparition wards are down." Scrimgeour's personal secretary paused to take a breath, then looked over at Madam Yaxley. "I'm sorry, ma'am, but it's best you leave now. Safest for you. If, um, if you can Disapparate."

"Of course I can Disapparate! I am hardly doddering!" Philomena said indignantly, drawing her wand. "But if you think that I'm going to leave when there's a fight, you're dead wrong, young man! Some of my best friends have been killed by this lot, and I'm going to get in my licks!"

"Sir?" The wizard looked up at Scrimgeour, who was towering above him even more than usual.

"She's right. She will stay. Particularly as they tried to use her against us...not now, Philomena. If we're both alive, I'll explain later."

"Then at least keep her in here with you," the young wizard said. Sounds of curses and breaking glass were reaching their ears now.

"I will keep her with me, but not in here." Scrimgeour looked over at Philomena. "As I said a few minutes ago, I am just an old Auror at heart."

"But, sir! The wizarding world..."

"Will not need a Minister for Magic if this lot wins. I'm not sitting it out cowering in some corner. Come on, Philomena! Let's get in our licks, eh?"

Less than an hour after Philomena Yaxley had arrived and taken tea with Minister Scrimgeour, she was lying on a stretcher waiting to be taken to St. Mungo's. She smiled up at Scrimgeour, who had just finished giving orders to three Aurors regarding the disposition of the captured Death Eaters.

"We got in our licks, didn't we, Philomena?" he asked softly.

"Sorry to be such a nuisance, Rufus," she replied. "I don't duck as well as I once did." She tried to laugh, but closed her eyes and winced.

"Not at all. You took out a few of them first." He squeezed her hand. "I'm afraid I have to leave. I need to look after things here, and then there's somewhere else I need to be. But they'll take good care of you at Mungo's."

"You go now. Do what you have to." She smiled. "You'll be a decent Minister for Magic yet."

"I am a better Auror." He bent and kissed her forehead, then was gone.

Mafalda Hopkirk looked baffled. It was bad enough to have to fight off Death Eaters in her own office...they had ruined her perfectly arranged filing system, she was certain...but now the Minister was asking her to do the most preposterous things.

"Ogden?" she asked again, certain she hadn't heard properly. That wizard was entering his third childhood, from what she'd heard. He had to be even older than that Yaxley witch, and she'd been to school with Dumbledore, for Merlin's sake! "Not *Tiberius* Ogden?"

"Yes, Tiberius Ogden," Scrimgeour replied. "Tell him to get here immediately as soon as you give him my letter. Shackbolt here has a Portkey for him. It will bring him directly to the Minister's offices. You can both use it."

"You want *me* to deliver the letter?" She was no Post Owl!

"Yes. You know where he lives. Don't delay. This is vital. Bring someone from the MLE with you if you want."

Mafalda looked down at the letter that Scrimgeour had dictated to her. Ogden was to act in his, Scrimgeour's, name until Scrimgeour himself returned or a new Minister was named. Until that time, he should be wary of everyone, though he could trust Minerva McGonagall, Kingsley Shackbolt, or Arthur Weasley if they contacted him. Robards would be in charge of security at the Ministry and the disposition of any prisoners who were captured, and Ogden could rely upon him for advice. It was absurd.

"This is *most* irregular!" Mafalda protested.

"These are most irregular times, Madam Hopkirk," Scrimgeour replied.

"I still believe that I should go and you should stay," Robards said quietly.

"I need someone I can trust here. When the mop up here is over, send as many Aurors to Hogsmeade as you can spare." Scrimgeour laid his hand on the Auror's shoulder. "This is the fight I was born for, Gawain. This is the leadership I can finally provide. It may be the first thing I've managed to do right since starting this bloody job. Don't take that from me. I am relying on you. These are my final orders to you as Minister. It is not too much to ask that you respect them."

Robards nodded once.

"Madam Hopkirk, one more thing before I go. Please owl Martha and tell her I won't be home for dinner. And tell her that I am sorry. For everything. I love her." Scrimgeour turned sharply on his heel and strode off with Shackbolt to meet Weasley and a few others who were waiting to leave with him.

Immediately after dinner, Hermione had separated from the Gryffindors, Disillusioned herself, and gone to Robbie's rooms. He wasn't there, but he had given her the password earlier so that she could use his Floo to return to the hidden rooms where he and the Headmistress had met with her that morning. He hadn't known when they would be leaving the castle, only that it would be after teatime. From Professor McGonagall's announcement at dinner about the attack on the Ministry, Hermione presumed that they had known when that attack would take place and that Hogwarts would be next. She had sat through dinner just waiting for the attack on Hogwarts to begin, and it looked as though most of the staff were in the same state. Severus hadn't eaten anything. He hadn't even pretended.

Now Hermione paced the sitting room and wondered when Robbie would arrive and how they would know when to leave and how to find Severus. She was now one of only

a few people at Hogwarts who knew anything of Professor McGonagall's overarching plan, and yet she still felt she knew very little. Apparently the only person other than Robbie and the Headmistress to have known anything about it until very recently was Professor MacAirt. McGonagall had said it was primarily because he was Robert Crouch's cousin, which was why she had chosen him to become Head of Gryffindor.

After McGonagall had left and Robbie had taken his potion again, this one in the form of a liquid-filled capsule, they had discussed Harry and what to tell him. Robbie wanted Harry told only enough to bring him through the initial confrontation with Riddle. Hermione had questioned that approach, but Robbie pointed out that until that had occurred, there was always the chance, however slight, that Riddle would be able to pick up some knowledge of their plan, and they couldn't risk that, particularly since they were counting on Riddle using the *Avada Kedavra* on Harry. Anything else would be disastrous.

"You know what the *Avada Kedavra* does, Hermione, why of all the curses that kill, it is the only one that is Unforgivable."

"It separates the soul from the body," Hermione replied mechanically. "I know. And we've discussed this before, and I have talked to Severus, Professor Snape about it, too, but I am still worried that something will go wrong."

"Something can always go wrong, Hermione. Just impress upon Harry that he must freely go to Riddle, not resist, and emphasise that he wants to be struck by the *Avada Kedavra* and not killed in some other way...or even by someone else."

She looked anguished. "I know that we have discussed this before, but couldn't the *Avada Kedavra* still kill Harry? Or, worse, separate Harry's soul and let Voldemort's alone?"

"Again, Hermione, remember your research, remember why that is unlikely to happen," Robbie said patiently.

"But it could."

"It could. If Harry doesn't resist, he has a much greater chance of being successful. And that is why you must speak with him when he arrives today. He cannot resist when Riddle casts the curse, and he must be willing to let the *Avada Kedavra* do what it does. Just tell him to relax and give Riddle back what is his."

And so when Hermione met with Harry that afternoon, she had done just that. Robbie had reassured her that he would tell Harry more later, when it was time. Harry was upset by the desecration of the Headmaster's tomb, but it didn't distract him, and although he had questions, in the end, he simply nodded.

"I haven't got any better plan," he said. "And I've been as worried about my own survival as I have been about his. Ever since I figured out that I was the last Horcrux and that he doesn't even know that he created it, I've assumed we would both have to die. But if you say not to resist . . . then that's the plan." He laughed slightly. "Not a very heroic death, just giving up, but I'll trust you."

"Professor Dumbledore would have told you the same thing if he were here, Harry. He was working on the same theory. We both hope that it will work right and you won't die."

"But I might."

Hermione sighed. "You might. But I don't think so. I think that everything will be all right. There are so many reasons why I think it will be all right, but I just don't think telling you any of them will help you to do what you have to do."

"And after? What about him?"

"Deal with that when the time comes," Hermione said. "Don't even think about it now."

Hermione had been uncomfortable leaving Harry with so little knowledge, but he seemed willing to do what he had to do, and she couldn't worry about it anymore. She had her own task ahead of her.

She looked out the window and saw a group of Ministry officials approaching the castle. There were a number of Aurors with them, and to her surprise, she recognised Scrimgeour among them, walking beside Arthur Weasley. She smiled as she saw that Percy had joined his father. Kingsley Shacklebolt, who Hermione had always thought was one of the sexiest wizards she'd ever met, took up the rear. Many of the other Order members had arrived earlier in the day, including a couple other Weasleys. On her way back to Gryffindor Tower after meeting with McGonagall and Robbie, she had seen the twins with Hooch. It didn't appear that Bill and Charlie had arrived yet, though, and they weren't with their father and younger brother. She hadn't seen Molly yet, either, but she assumed the Weasley matriarch would be there.

Hermione had no time to contemplate the possible whereabouts of any other Order members. The fireplace flared green and Robbie stepped out.

"We must leave now," he said, shedding his black teaching robe and leaving it in a heap. He swallowed his antidote and dropped the small bottle on the floor.

Hermione waited for him to stop shuddering before she spoke. "How are we following him?"

"As we said this morning, it is likely that Severus is in the Shrieking Shack, but I also have this, which will help us find him more precisely." He took something from his pocket and handed it to her.

It looked like a compass, but it had two swinging hands, and instead of the cardinal points, there were markings that said "Hot," "Cold," and "Up" and "Down." The indicators were now pointing halfway between Hot and Cold and Up and Down.

"I am going to Apparate us both into the tunnel just outside the Shack, then we'll go on foot from there. I will make us both invisible, but you have to remain in physical contact with me the entire time, or you will be seen. And remember what we discussed this morning: you are to do nothing until I release you. If you move too soon, we will all be lost and Severus will surely die. It will be difficult to watch and do nothing, but you must wait. If you cannot do this, tell me now before it's too late."

"No, sir. I can. I understand. I'll manage," Hermione replied.

"And one more thing. You carry this." He handed her the Sorting Hat. "Do you think you can use it?"

Hermione looked confused.

"On the snake, Nagini. I will take care of any Death Eaters, but if the snake is still there, we need to be able to take advantage of the opportunity."

"Yes, yes, of course I can." Hermione opened her robe and shoved the Hat between the medical kit and her shirt.

"Ready?"

Hermione had no time to do more than nod, let alone ask how they were to Disapparate while in the castle, when he had his arms around her from behind, she felt a tingling unlike usual Disillusionment, and then the unpleasant sensation of Side-Along Apparition overtook her.

They encountered no one in the tunnel, and Hermione started as the small compass suddenly appeared to float in front of her. The indicators swung wildly for a few moments, then suddenly stopped. One of them was very nearly pointing at "Hot," and the other pointed directly at "Up." The compass disappeared again, and she felt an invisible hand squeeze her shoulder.

Together, the two entered the shack, a more difficult proposition than usual, since Hermione could not step away or she would lose her invisibility. Two Death Eaters were standing guard, and when the door opened, they jumped and appeared confused. Hermione felt a ripple of magic, then another, and the two guards slumped to the floor. Her companion seemed to be considering what to do next, then the two unconscious bodies floated across the small room and back into the tunnel, where they were both disillusioned. Not a perfect solution, but they were out of the way for the moment.

The compass floated in front of them again briefly, and this time, one pointer was almost directly on "Hot," and the other was a degree or two off "Up." The compass vanished, and as quietly as possible, the two proceeded further into the house. As they creaked slowly up the stairs, Hermione grimaced; surely someone would hear. Approaching the upper levels of the house, however, it was clear that any Death Eaters between them and Severus would be listening to the raging voice coming from above and would pay no attention to any stray noises in the old house. There was a shouted *Crucio* followed by a loud crash as someone fell to the floor.

They carefully stepped past three Death Eaters at the top of the stairs, then took refuge in a shadowy corner just outside the closed door behind which Voldemort was raving. Reflexively, Hermione turned her head and looked back up at her companion, but they were both still invisible and she couldn't see him. She leaned back against his chest, shrinking away from a short witch who paced in front of them, and it seemed that his heart was pounding as fast and hard as her own.

Hermione gritted her teeth as they listened. Voldemort was asking why McGonagall wasn't dead, and Severus, his voice clear, though somewhat breathless from the last *Crucio*, explained that she hadn't taken any poison. Just then, a large, brawny Death Eater Apparated into the hallway only inches away from them. Hermione felt a push from behind, and they followed the Death Eater as he opened the door and entered the room.

Sidling carefully out of the doorway and along the wall, Hermione thought that her heartbeat must be audible to everyone in the room. She didn't see how they could remain undetected. There were eight Death Eaters, Voldemort, and Severus all in the one small room, and Nagini was coiled in one corner. Hermione shivered.

A moment later, though it felt like an eternity, the large Death Eater had Disapparated, as had three others, and Hermione breathed more easily. Her sense of relief disappeared as quickly as it had come, however, as she watched Voldemort become increasingly enraged and Severus become increasingly insolent. The only comfort she had was the sense that this was no easier for her companion than it was for her; whether the tightened grip on her shoulders was in reaction to the scene that played out before them or a reminder not to act too soon, Hermione was certain that the wizard behind her was as disturbed as she was.

She blinked back tears, reminding herself that she could not give their presence away, but Severus's bravery and defiance were difficult to watch without reaction, and when the Dark Wizard cast the *Crucio* on him, she closed her eyes to the sight. And then Severus attempted to draw his wand on the other wizard, but was disarmed, and Hermione stiffened, wondering how she could stay still any longer. The spectacle only became worse, though her pride and admiration for Severus's bravery grew with each passing second, and when he wounded the hideous snake, no matter how small the wound, she wished she could cheer out loud for him, but Severus was still bitten, and then he writhed in pain as the Death Eaters all cast *Crucio* on him simultaneously.

Hermione felt ill as she watched Voldemort heal Nagini, seeming to sing her a hissing, snakey love song. She watched numbly as Severus was bitten again; her shoulders felt bruised from the iron grip on them, but she scarcely noticed. The horror of Voldemort's orders seemed to make her blood run cold. Would they be able to save him? Would the Dark Lord remain until Severus was hacked to pieces and fed to the snake? How could they stand there and watch that?

"... make sure he's awake for it, one limb at a time," Voldemort said. "After she's fed, you can let him bleed out and save his body for later. We'll put his head on a pike and carry it with us if those at the castle dare oppose us. We will show them what will happen to their precious Headmistress if she does not hand us Potter and Hogwarts, and not just to her. We will decorate the walls and towers with the heads of those who are so foolishly stubborn. I will return soon, so don't waste time...and I will *want his head!*"

Voldemort Disapparated, bringing two of the Death Eaters with him and leaving Pettigrew and one other. Immediately, Hermione stepped forward, drawing the Gryffindor Sword from the Sorting Hat and taking hold of its hilt with both hands. As she had been instructed, she ignored the Death Eaters and went straight for Nagini. Her heart racing with fury, she raised the sword above her just as Nagini was raising her head and turning to look at her. With a loud shout, Hermione brought the sword down on the snake's neck. The sword went into the reptile's flesh with far greater ease than Hermione had expected, and Nagini didn't even thrash as her head flew off.

Hermione was vaguely aware that more Death Eaters were entering the room, but she paid no attention to them, instead falling to her knees beside Severus. He was lying on his stomach, and she gently rolled him over, bringing his head into her lap. She touched his chest; it didn't seem that he was breathing well, if at all.

"Stay calm, Severus; I'm here now and we'll breathe together." As the last Death Eater collapsed to the floor, Hermione took out her wand, pointed it at Severus, and said, "*Prospirote!*"

It was difficult for her to breathe slowly and deeply, her heart was racing so, but as she saw Severus's chest begin to rise and fall with her breath, she was encouraged. She began to unbutton his robe.

"No time for that, Hermione. We have to hurry."

Severus's sleeves were torn off, and as Hermione saw the damage that Nagini's bite had done, she couldn't suppress her tears any longer and they ran down her face as she choked back a sob.

"You're getting distracted. Cast the Prospirator again."

Alarmed, Hermione cast the spell again and concentrated on calming herself.

"You just breathe. I'll deal with his injuries." Albus looked up at her. "You're doing well, Hermione, very well. Just relax. We have him now."

Albus removed the vial of antivenin potion from his own medical kit, drew its contents into the syringe, tightened the tourniquet around Severus's left arm and took a moment to find a vein. He shook his head in frustration, then finally he found a vein that stood out and that didn't roll away. He injected the potion, removed the tourniquet, and turned his attention to Severus's right arm.

The first thing he did was immobilise the arm with a spell, then he cast another one to numb it before he wiped off the blood with the remnants of one of Severus's sleeves. The wounds were swollen and still bleeding. He took the Omnicoagulant Potion from his medical kit and put some of the thick goop on the bite marks. The bleeding stopped almost immediately. Next, Albus used his wand to cut away the fabric covering Severus's shoulder. Severus's head moved, and Albus smiled down at him.

"You will be fine, son," Albus whispered. "Hermione is taking very good care of you. You don't need to do a thing. Just relax." He touched his cheek gently then looked up at Hermione. "Reassure him, Hermione. Let him know that you are with him and he's not alone."

As Albus put Omnicoagulant Potion on the punctures on Severus's shoulder, Hermione caressed Severus's face.

"We're here, Severus. You will be all right." She paused to take another deep breath and let it out slowly, happy to see that she didn't have to cast the breathing spell again and that Severus's chest was rising and falling in sympathy with hers.

"Should I give him the Bezoar now, sir?"

Albus shook his head. "It's too late for a Bezoar to be effective. He's not swallowing properly, anyway. It could choke him."

He felt for Severus's pulse, then wiped the pallid wizard's face with his own sleeve.

"I want to give him more of the potion," Albus said. "Do you have yours?"

Hermione reached for the pocket with the antivenin potion and handed the vial to him.

"I don't think I can manage another injection," he said before he cast the spell to transfer the potion directly from the vial into Severus's circulating blood. "Put some of the antinecrotic potion on his shoulder. I'll put some on his arm. Then I have to leave." He glanced over at the unconscious Death Eaters, all of whom were bound and in a pile near the door.

"What about them?" Hermione asked. "And us?"

Albus handed her a plaid handkerchief. "This is a Portkey. It will take you and Severus to the Hog's Head. There will be additional help waiting for you there. My brother Aberforth is expecting you. You have to go now. When it's safe for you to return to Hogwarts . . . someone will get word to you. Don't leave him, Hermione."

"I won't." Not for anything. "But he'll know what happened. Riddle, I mean."

"That's why I'm burning down the Shrieking Shack as soon as you're gone." At her expression, he added, "I'll bring the unconscious Death Eaters with me and come back for the ones in the tunnel. I know of a witch who will be more than happy to look after them for a while. If there are any others in the building, I hope they will have time to escape. Leave the sword with me." Albus looked down at Severus. "You need to cast the Prospirator again."

"And Nagini's body?" Hermione asked after she had reinitiated the breathing spell and handed Dumbledore the Sorting Hat and Gryffindor Sword.

"Don't worry about anything but Severus right now."

"What about Harry?"

"You have done all you can for Harry. I will be there to help him, and there are others, as well."

Hermione looked down at Severus's face. He seemed to have passed out at some point while they were taking care of the bites. Perhaps that was for the best. She wiped at his mouth with the handkerchief.

"How do I activate the Portkey?" she asked.

"Just say, 'sanctuary.'"

"Good bye, Professor." She took one final deep breath for both Severus and herself, then said, *Sanctuary.*

Note: Some of you may recognise Philomena Yaxley's name. She was a character who appeared in *RaM*, an old friend of Albus's who met "Morag." She also appears in [Charming the Scottish Garden](#).

Chapter Twenty-Nine: They shall rise again

Chapter 30 of 34

Voldemort comes to Hogwarts, makes his demands, and is displeased by the reception he receives. The defenders implement their battle plans.

Warnings for violence, killing, and possibly disturbing, but brief, imagery in the battle scenes.



Chapter Twenty-Nine: *They shall rise again*

25 26 May 1998

Harry turned from the window and looked at his two companions. "I should go out there. He's come. He's come for me."

"No, Harry Potter! The Headmistress tells Dobby, 'Harry stays here, Dobby, he stays here with you until I call for him,' and so Harry Potter must stay here! The witch-who-is-a-cat knows much that Harry Potter does not. Harry Potter must listen and stay here with Dobby!"

Harry looked over at his other minder. The Bloody Baron simply floated in a slight turn to look at him. Harry thought that if a ghost had breath to sigh, the Baron just had, deeply.

The self-styled lord had Apparated onto the grounds moments before, accompanied by dozens of his Death Eaters, and stood now several yards from the front of the castle. His voice, unamplified by any spell, carried to the Headmistress's Tower.

"I have come to claim my right!" Voldemort cast a spell aimed at the doors, but although there was a thundering boom, the doors did not open to him. "You will step aside! I will take my place."

There was no response from the castle. The Dark Wizard's anger throbbed in Harry's scar.

The doors were struck by another spell. Although the spell exploded with another resounding boom, it didn't send even a shiver through the castle's old bones.

"You must face me, witch! I know you are in there. I know that your lapdog could not kill you, but he still betrayed you in the end. He has given me Hogwarts and I will take it! *And you will die!*"

Professor McGonagall's voice now rang out from the castle. "I have no lapdog, Tom, and no one could give you what can never be yours."

"It would not disturb you, then, to learn that Snape is dead? Or that he betrayed you? Snape's soft spot for you did not protect you or prevent him from betraying you," Voldemort said. "I just came from him. He is making a fine meal right about now. I killed him for his weakness. Weakness will not be tolerated in the new wizarding world!"

He gave a signal, and a dozen more Death Eaters Apparated just behind him. They had with them a filthy pile of rags. The Dark Wizard laughed and flicked the tip of his wand. The rags moved, then rolled over, and some of the filth seemed to take the shape of a face.

"Do you recognise this one? Was he one of your lapdogs, too, or was it only his son who was your bitch?" Voldemort laughed. "There are rewards for the faithful and wise . . . and then there is this. *Crucio!*"

The wreck that was once the proud Lucius Malfoy convulsed under the spell.

"So, what will it be, McGonagall?" Voldemort asked, addressing the Headmistress by name for the first time. "What will be your reward?"

"Your defeat will be my reward, Tom Riddle."

"Come out and talk to me, Minerva. We are old schoolmates, after all. I am sure you can be reasonable. You need my strength. You know that you do."

"She needs nothing from you, Voldemort."

Harry frowned. Scrimgeour. Hadn't he just been saved from another assassination attempt? What was he doing at Hogwarts?

"You. You probably think you are clever, with your rat holes and hiding places. Are you the Gryffindor bitch's new wizard? You think that you can hold Hogwarts and the wizarding world, Scrimgeour?" Voldemort scoffed. "Come out and see reason. You are no match for the strength of the true wizarding world," he said, gesturing at the assembled Death Eaters. "And this is merely my entourage. There are more awaiting my command. So come out and speak with me."

To Harry's dismay, one of the great oak doors opened and Scrimgeour stepped out onto the steps and down to the lawn. Harry breathed only a slight sigh of relief when he saw that the Minister was followed by several others, most of them in Auror red. But then he saw that among them were members of the Order, Remus, Arthur, and Molly Weasley...and now Percy, Ron, and Luna were with them, too. Harry tried to open the window to shout down to them; when the window wouldn't budge, he turned to leave the office, but Dobby was there, his hands raised against him, and Harry shouted in frustration and spun back to look out the window.

"I have only one thing to say to you, Voldemort...or should I say, Mr Riddle?" Scrimgeour's voice was hard. "Leave. Leave Hogwarts, leave Britain, and leave the wizarding world. Tell your lackeys to return to their homes and families and a peaceful life. Give me your wand, and I will snap it now and let you go."

"Aaarrrr!" Voldemort raised his wand and cast, his fury inhabiting the magic that blazed toward the Minister.

Shacklebolt and Weasley raised a shield in front of the Minister, but the old Auror was still thrown back.

"I need no wand to hold the wizarding world in my hands!" This time, Voldemort cast a wandless spell, but at an unexpected target, turning suddenly and aiming at the witch standing unshielded to Arthur's left.

"Molly! No!" But Arthur was too slow, and Molly's body flew back and struck the castle wall.

Scrimgeour regained his feet and cast a hex at Voldemort, and suddenly, it was a melee. Scrimgeour was down again, then Ron was pulling Luna from the path of a spell, but too late, and she was hit. The group of defenders was far outnumbered, then relief came as the doors behind them opened again. Harry could not see what was happening or who was at the doors now, but the Hogwarts contingent withdrew back into the castle, dragging their fallen with them.

Voldemort was not displeased by the retreat, and his eyes appeared to glow with crazed glee.

"So, McGonagall, you can still hold your wand," he said with a short laugh. "I may let you keep it. Give me Harry Potter and give me Hogwarts. Do that, and you may not spend the rest of your days praying for death."

"They are not mine to give you, and they are not yours to take," came the Headmistress's reply.

"You have until dawn. Give me Harry Potter. He will surrender to me as a token of your good will and compliance. Bring him to me. I will leave some of my faithful here to await you as you come to your senses. No one else must go beyond those steps, or they will die. If Potter comes to me by dawn, all of you will live. When you are ready, bring him out to join this maggot." Voldemort cast the *Crucio* on Malfoy once more.

"Excuse me, Tom," Minerva replied with exaggerated courtesy. "I must check the kitchen. It seems that someone left something unattended and it's now burning. I can smell the smoke."

Even from his distant vantage point, Harry could see Riddle's confusion. Off in the distance, though not very far from the Hogwarts gates, puffy clouds of smoke were rising. The Shrieking Shack was burning. It took a moment before Riddle realised that something was, indeed, on fire, and another moment before he saw that there was smoke coming from the direction of the Shrieking Shack, where he had left his beloved Nagini. But she was in good hands. He had left his most abject and sycophantic followers to care for her. They would save her before they worried about their own safety. Surely they would.

But the Shrieking Shack was on fire. And no one had come to notify him.

Something akin to panic entered Riddle's face. He gave very brief orders, then Disapparated with a half dozen Death Eaters. Another few dozen followed moments later. Those Death Eaters who remained moved further back from the main entrance to the castle, Malfoy dragging along behind them, not even accorded a *Mobilicorpus* to Levitate his battered body above the hard ground.

A tabby Patronus flew through the floor and immediately went to Harry. Harry turned his head and accepted the message.

"All right, Dobby. That was from 'the witch-who-is-a-cat,'" Harry said. "I'm to meet her in the Hospital Wing. You can come with me, if you like. Er, you, too, Mr Baron," Harry added awkwardly, unused to speaking with the Slytherin House Ghost and unsure why McGonagall would have sent him to watch with Dobby.

The Bloody Baron seemed to shimmer slightly, then he was gone.

"Scrimgeour knew that it was important to stall him," Minerva said quietly as she pulled the sheet up over his face. "So he did."

Harry felt frozen, his face, paralysed. He found his voice. "He did that for me."

"Yes, but not just for you." Minerva took Harry's arm and steered him away. "He knew we have specific plans. We didn't always get along, but we have known each other

for years, decades, and he was always a brave Auror. He did what he had to."

"I saw Mrs Weasley. Is she all right?"

Minerva shook her head. "She's alive, but I will be honest with you," she replied, her voice a whisper as she brought Harry into the school matron's office and closed the door. "It is unlikely that she will survive the night. Arthur and her children are with her, the ones who are here."

"And Luna?" Harry asked in a strangled voice. He should have been with them. He, Ron, Luna, they had been a team, and he had abandoned him.

"She should recover, although she will need to remain in the infirmary."

Minerva looked out the window that faced the open infirmary ward. There was quiet, orderly activity. Poppy had set some of the underage sixth-years to work, members of Dumbledore's Army who had insisted on helping. Minerva and Neville had worked out this compromise for them weeks before, and Minerva was glad that she had anticipated it. One less thing to worry about. But there were other worries, unexpected ones.

"The students are in safety, the younger ones," Minerva said, almost to herself, "but I don't know where Aurora is. She was supposed to return after sequestering the Slytherins."

As if in response, Remus Lupin gave a brief rap on the door, then opened it. With him was Kevin Harper.

"Sorry, Minerva, but Mr Harper insisted on seeing you, and from the little he told me, I thought you would want to see him yourself."

Minerva looked at the Slytherin prefect, who was pale and trembling, and her alarm mounted. Still, she betrayed nothing. "Yes, Mr Harper? Why are you not with your House?"

"Please, ma'am, Zabini sent me." The skinny boy swallowed hard. "He said to tell you that he's holding them, with help, but they might still get out. One already did. Goyle, ma'am. And, um, Professor Sinistra . . . Professor . . ." The boy struggled against his tears.

"Is she hurt?" Minerva asked, placing a hand on the boy's shoulder.

Harper shook his head hard. "She's dead." Harper gulped, trying to regain control of himself.

"You did well, Harper. Where is Zabini?"

"In the lowest dungeon, where Pro Pro Professor Sinistra took us. He sh sh shut them in but Goyle got away."

"Remus, you, Kingsley, and Slughorn go down to the dungeons. Horace will get you past any Slytherin wards that might remain. Help Zabini, look for Goyle, and use your judgment about what to do with the students. Remember that they are still Hogwarts students, whatever else they may be." Minerva's eyes were hard, though, thinking of Aurora Sinistra. "If you can't find Goyle easily, come to me. I have something that will help you."

"Should I go, too?" Harry asked.

"No, Harry. Your role will come later. Time to muster our forces." Minerva sent off three Patronuses, then thought a moment and cast two more. "We will gather with the others in the Great Hall. You can come with me unless you would like to stay here with your friends for a while."

Harry looked out into the infirmary, then down at Kevin Harper.

"What about me?" Kevin asked, his face pale but his tears under control.

"You stick with me," Harry said. He looked up at Minerva. "Right, Professor?"

Minerva hesitated. At fifteen, Harper was not only a minor, he wasn't even a sixth-year. "Are you staying in the infirmary?" she asked Harry.

Harper interrupted. "We heard he killed Professor Snape. Did he? Is Professor Snape dead, too?"

"Tom Riddle, the one who calls himself Lord Voldemort, claims that Professor Snape is dead. But Riddle was always a liar, and he was always overconfident," Minerva replied.

"Let him stay with me, Professor. At least for a while. There's still time," Harry said. He looked down at Harper again. There was something about the short, skinny Slytherin that tugged at him.

A falcon Patronus flew to Minerva. She paused, then nodded. "That was Professor Flitwick. Everyone is waiting for us in the Great Hall. You, too, Mr Harper."

As she led the two young wizards out of the infirmary, Minerva overheard Harry whisper, "I think Professor Snape's too tough to kill, don't you? But if he's dead, then he died the greatest Slytherin hero in all of history, and he was your Head of House. Just think of that."

Minerva gritted her teeth and focussed on the tasks ahead of her. She hadn't heard from Albus, but she didn't expect to. The Shrieking Shack was burning, and she presumed that was a positive sign. She wished she would hear something from the Hog's Head, though, but Aberforth never was the chatty sort, and it wouldn't occur to him to contact her; Hermione would be preoccupied with Severus; and her mother...it had been an oversight not to teach her how to send a message using a Patronus. Minerva wondered what other things she had neglected to do and would later regret.

"No, ma'am, Professor," Zabini said politely but firmly. "We're all staying." He looked around at the other Slytherins behind him, then back at the Headmistress. "But if you think the youngest ones can be useful in the Hospital Wing, I'm sure they'll be happy to help. Cavanaugh," he said, addressing a tall, heavysset fourth-year, "bring all the first-, second-, third-, and fourth-year students up to the infirmary. Any of the others who want to may join you. Do as you're told, stay out of the way of the Healers, and make sure that no Death Eaters invade the Hospital Wing."

Elizabeth Cavanaugh nodded and began to gather the younger students together, more than thirty of them. In addition to his select group of Slytherins, Zabini had brought with him all of the first- and second-years. Minerva supposed that was better than leaving them with older Slytherins of dubious intent, to say the least.

"Miss Cavanaugh, wait by the door. Professor Hagrid will accompany you up to the infirmary," Minerva directed. "Mr Zabini, you have shown yourself an exemplary member of your House. If it weren't entirely moot at this point, I would grant you more points than...than Potter here got during all six of his years at Hogwarts. But I cannot allow underage students to take part in Hogwarts defence."

"Ma'am, we are Snape's Slytherins, and we aren't going anywhere. We are here for him and for ourselves." The handsome young wizard pulled himself even straighter. "We will fight with you for Hogwarts, but we are here for Slytherin. The real Slytherin."

"Very well, Mr Zabini. But you will recognise my authority in all else, or I will clap you all in a storeroom somewhere...and don't think I can't do it," she said warningly.

"Yes, ma'am. You are the Headmistress." Blaise nodded.

Minerva looked at him for a long moment. "Good. Find a corner for yourselves, then. There are still some long hours before dawn. Eat some sandwiches and sleep if you

can."

Minerva was turning to look for Hagrid when Lupin and Shackbolt came through the doors. She met them halfway across the Great Hall.

"He was right where you said we'd find him," Lupin said softly. He looked to either side, then continued in a whisper, "Kingsley put him in restraints, and we locked him in the empty storeroom at the base of the North Tower, as you suggested. Dobby is there and will make sure that, um, nothing happens to him."

"Good. Where is Horace?"

"He returned to check on the welfare of the others in his House," Kingsley replied. "We ran into Amanda Teller returning from the kitchens, and she went with him. Another house-elf was with her. She said he had been Snape's elf."

"His name is Twiskett." Minerva restrained a sigh and wished for Headache Potion. The Muggle Studies teacher was not supposed to be wandering the dungeons with her former Head of House. "I told Teller to go to Sybill after checking on the house-elves in the kitchens. Did she say what changed her mind?"

Kingsley laughed, a deep, rich, and unexpected sound. "Sybill has locked her out. Said something about her 'Inner Eye' and told her to go away. Slughorn was happy to see her. I don't think he fancied checking on the Slytherins on his own, but he felt obligated to go back."

Minerva was just wondering whether she should be worried about the two when Twiskett appeared with a hollow pop.

"Hello, Twiskett. Are Professor Slughorn and Professor Teller all right?" she asked, aware by now that "yes-no" questions were best with Twiskett.

Twiskett nodded unblinkingly.

"Were you in the kitchens with Swelka?"

Twiskett nodded again.

"You didn't wish to remain there?"

Twiskett shivered slightly, then admitted his disobedience with a slight shake of his head.

"Perhaps you would like to help in the infirmary?" Minerva asked, very glad that she had increased the size of the Hospital Wing, and not only for the sake of any potential wounded. But a house-elf could always be useful in a busy infirmary, she imagined.

Twiskett shook his head again. The little grey elf seemed to shrink, then he looked across the room and saw Zabini and his group. He seemed to perk up. He pointed at them.

"I see," Minerva said softly. "You wish to be one of Snape's Slytherins? You know I won't order you to help defend the school."

Twiskett pointed again.

"Very well. You are one of Snape's Slytherins. You may join them."

Kingsley and Lupin both looked puzzled. "Snape's Slytherins?" Remus asked as Twiskett trotted toward the group of students.

"That's what they're calling themselves. Quite appropriately." Minerva looked away. She couldn't think about Severus at that moment. Or Sinistra or anyone else. There were still strategies to finalise, and she had to send Hagrid to accompany the youngest Slytherins to the Hospital Wing. She would think about it all later.

"You don't have to do it, you know, Harry," Minerva whispered, cupping the young man's stubbled jaw in her hand. "We can fight him, all of us. You do not have to do this."

Harry closed his eyes a moment, feeling the warmth of Professor McGonagall's gentle palm against his skin. He felt cold inside, cold and still, as though his heart had ceased beating. He opened his eyes again and looked into Professor McGonagall's eyes, and they warmed him.

"I do have to do it," he said softly. "You know that I do. If I don't, even if I . . . even if he dies, he won't really be completely dead. He could return. I have nightmares that he dies and then returns in me, that the bit of him that remains will take over and use me." He shook his head. "However it happened, it would happen, and he'd come back just as he came back this time. I have the ability to stop him from doing that, and I will. Too many people have died already. I don't want to see anyone else I love die without doing this. And Hermione said it would be okay." He quirked a slight grin. "Don't know where the girl got to, but that's the last thing she told me, and I believe her."

Minerva nodded. "Albus always believed that when it came to this, you would be safe, and I agree, but it is not guaranteed. We may be wrong, or Riddle may . . . he may not behave as we believe he will. He may not choose the *Avada Kedavra*."

"I know, but I have to do this." He looked beyond them, at the students, teachers, and Order members milling about the Great Hall. Their tension was palpable, but so was their resolve. Harry's own resolve solidified. "How can I not? I will do it for them and for everyone I love. Even for Snape. Do you think . . . was he lying, or is Snape really dead?"

"I don't know, Harry, but I hope he lives. It's what Hermione was sent to do."

Harry gave a short nod. "Will you walk with me? To the doors?"

Minerva placed her hand on his shoulder. "I will walk with you as far as I am able."

"Don't go out there, though. He wants you dead, too. He was very angry you aren't."

Minerva smiled. "I hope to disappoint him about that for at least a little while longer."

Harry looked back at the others again. "Don't let anyone stop me."

"I won't. And remember, I won't be the only one walking with you. You carry the others in your heart. Your mother, Lily, who loved you and gave you life and then gave her own life for you, your father...oh, he loved you so, Harry. He was so proud of you. He told me once that loving Lily made him try to be a better man and loving you helped him to succeed. And Sirius, he loved you fiercely, and there were so many others. And Albus loves you. He so wanted to protect you, but he couldn't protect you from everything, and he sometimes worried that he had chosen the wrong things to protect you from, but he loves you nonetheless."

Harry twitched a smile. "You speak about him like he's alive."

"Are any of our loved ones dead if we remember them and carry their love in our hearts, sharing it with others?" Minerva replied.

"I wish Professor Dumbledore had told me that I was . . . that I was one *of them*," Harry said, rubbing his scar. "He must have known for a long time."

"He suspected and then he knew, but the toe-rag...er, Riddle...did not know. But it wasn't only fear that somehow Riddle might learn of it through your knowledge, it was also . . . *none* of us wanted to tell you when we learned of it. If you had not come to the conclusion yourself, we would have, but . . . think of how you would have felt,

Harry. What fears you may have had, what actions you may have taken. Your burden was great enough. Hermione knew that, which is why she agreed not to tell you. She fought the knowledge for a long time, not wanting to believe it herself. What would you have done if someone had told you two or three years ago?"

Harry shook his head. "I don't know." His eyes glazed over for a moment. "I do not know how I could have lived with that knowledge for two or three years. I think . . . I think that after Sirius died . . . I might have tried to, to destroy the Horcrux," he said softly. "And later . . . I don't know." He took a deep breath and squared his shoulders. "It is time."

Minerva nodded and walked with him through the Great Hall, people moving out of their way as they approached the doors.

"No! No! Harry! Stop!" Ginny rushed forward from her hiding place in the shadowy corner. "You can't do this! Don't!"

Harry turned. "We already said good-bye, Gin," he said lightly. "Your mum wanted you up in the infirmary with the other underage sixth-years, and so do I." He pulled his arm from her grasp but leaned forward and kissed her cheek. "Don't worry. It will all be all right," he whispered.

Minerva took Harry's elbow, but they were stopped by a knot of people blocking the doors, Lupin at the front.

"Harry, you can't sacrifice yourself like this. You can't believe what he says," Remus said. "You can't go out there."

"You don't want to test me," Harry said, looking at them. "Come on, Remus, be a mate and step aside. Bring your friends with you. I'm going with Professor McGonagall. She'll take good care of me. It will be fine. Really."

Remus looked sceptical, but Alroy and Gareth had appeared on either side of Harry and Minerva, and so Remus stepped aside, the others behind him following his example. As soon as Harry and Minerva stepped through the doors, Harry turned quickly and used his wand to slam the doors shut. Minerva cast a Colloportus and the Hogwarts Headmistress's locking charm.

They ignored the pounding on the doors and the shouts of *"Finite Incantatum!"* and *"Alohomora!"* behind them. At the large oak doors, Harry turned and smiled at the Headmistress.

"Tell Hermione thanks for the advice," he said.

"I will if I see her before you do...but I do believe you will be fine, just as you told Remus and Ginny," Minerva said. "One other thing, Harry, if you manage it, could you let Malfoy know that his wife and son are alive and safe? Riddle told him that he tortured them to death. If you can. It would be a kindness."

Harry grimaced. He had no liking for the Malfoys, but that lump of flesh and bone out there, the horror of it made him ill. "I will try. I will say something if I have time."

"Thank you, Harry...for everything."

"Keep my wand for me?" Harry asked.

Minerva accepted the wand, nodding.

He reached for the door then paused, looking back at her. "Do you think it will hurt?"

"It might. But I don't think it will for long. Although . . . if he casts the *Crucio* first . . ."

"He's done it before," Harry said grimly. "Good bye, Professor."

"Good luck, Harry. And remember all of us who love you. I would do it for you if I could." For the first time in their conversation, tears rose in her eyes.

Harry grinned a typical Harry Potter grin. "I would rather do it for you and everybody else. Bye, Professor!"

Without another word, Harry opened one of the large oak doors and stepped out. He looked toward the east at the pale pre-dawn sky and wondered whether he would see the sun rise, then he began to walk toward the small knot of Death Eaters who had remained to wait and toward the huddled wreck that was Lucius Malfoy.

Voldemort would reappear soon, and the rest of his Death Eaters with him. Harry was not so naive to believe Voldemort's claim that everyone else in the castle would be spared if he surrendered himself. They certainly would not be spared if they resisted him, and Harry knew that they would fight, probably even harder after . . . after whatever happened to him happened. And Voldemort would kill any of those whom he believed to be future threats or against whom he had a particular grudge. He walked past the spot where Scrimgeour had fallen, but he did not look down and his steps did not falter.

Minerva waited until Harry was halfway to Lucius Malfoy, then she turned and silently lifted the locking spell. The Colloportus had already been broken. She flicked her wand again and opened the doors to the Great Hall.

The first thing she saw was Flitwick, Gareth, Pomona, and Alroy standing guard in front of the doors, all of them with their wands out and looking angry.

"What...?"

"They tried to convince Professor Flitwick to try to unlock the doors," Gareth said, his eyes flashing with anger. "When he wouldn't ~~someone~~ in here tried to Stun him."

"I am ashamed of you all!" Minerva said, her own wand out. "How will we defeat Voldemort and the Death Eaters if we behave like this? Come, now...Harry needs your support...your *silent* support. If you can behave properly, you can come out and witness his valour from the steps or you may watch from the windows of the Great Hall. Harry *does* know what he is doing." She looked around and saw that Kingsley, Moody, and a few other Order members had apparently assisted Alroy and her nephew in controlling the crowd. "Kingsley, Alastor, if any of these try to interfere with Harry's mission, do take care of them. No one is to go beyond the steps."

With that, Minerva turned and strode quickly out to the front of the castle. Harry had stopped several feet from Malfoy. She couldn't hear very well, but she thought that Harry was saying something, and the pathetic heap twitched in response. Two of the other Death Eaters stepped forward, their wands out.

Minerva turned, searching for Rolanda, and found her, dwarfed by the crowd and holding the hand of a weeping Hagrid. As much as she wished to stay where she was and watch Harry, Minerva made her way back through the crowd. When she reached Hooch, she placed her hand on her shoulder and bent to whisper in her ear.

"As soon as Harry falls, be ready to activate the Protean Charm. But wait...wait until the attack is underway. Use your own judgment if things move quickly and we do not speak again."

Rolanda looked up at her, her eyes wide. "There's no secret plan to save him? I thought..."

"Do not be alarmed, Rolanda. There is more to this than meets the eye..." Before Minerva could finish what she was saying, there were several loud cracks, and Voldemort was there, his branded servants behind him, more arriving with loud bursts of Apparition.

Voldemort's laughter sent chills down her spine, but Harry stepped closer, now standing beside Malfoy. She wished she could hear what the toe-rag was saying to Harry, but then she saw Harry slowly raise his arms out to his side, as if to embrace someone, and Voldemort screamed, *"Expelliarmus!"*

This time, Harry laughed, a light, youthful sound, reminding her of his laughter when he caught the Snitch in some daring move. Then his voice came, ringing clearly

across the grounds, though his back was to the castle.

"Do you think I need a wand to face you, Tom Riddle? You asked for me to come to you, and here I am, ready for you, you murdering scum." Harry laughed again. "Professor McGonagall calls you the toe-rag, you..."

Harry's words were cut off as he fell to the ground, a choking scream tearing from his throat as Voldemort cast a nonverbal *Crucio*. Minerva felt the crowd surge forward, and it was all she could do to stand in place herself, but Shackbolt, Moody, Gareth, and MacAirt were in front and able to keep anyone from moving further from the safety of the castle steps, but then one small figure darted out, her wand in her hand.

"Ginny, no!"

Focused entirely on Harry and his suffering, she did not heed the shout behind her, nor turn to look at her brother, who chased after her as she ran.

Voldemort raised his wand from his torture of Harry. With a lazy wave of his wand, he said, *Avada Kedavra!*"

Percy shouted his sister's name once more, then he took a flying leap, tackling her, but too late, and the streaking curse reached them as they fell.

Minerva stood, frozen in horror as Gareth ran to the two fallen Weasleys, and Ron and the twins struggled through the crowd, trying to reach their sister and older brother. Moody and Shackbolt raised a barrier, though, and none of the straining bodies could follow her nephew out onto the grounds. Minerva grasped her wand more tightly and swallowed past the dread in her throat as she watched Voldemort point his wand in Gareth's direction. Gareth was kneeling beside the two and reached over to touch Percy's head.

Voldemort stepped forward, his nearly lipless mouth forming a hideous sneer, and prepared to cast again. *Ava...*"

A peculiar, hoarse sound interrupted the curse. The bloody bundle of rags rolled over, baring its filthy body to the skies. "Toe-rag!"

Malfoy's voice was scarcely recognisable, but he seemed to be laughing convulsively. Harry raised himself to his knees and looked down at the emaciated wizard, reaching out to him with one hand.

Malfoy was trying to push himself up on one arm. "Toe-rag!" he said again, his voice rasping hoarsely.

Voldemort, enraged, turned his wand and cast the Killing Curse at the pathetic wretch. Harry looked up at the contorted, inhuman face above them, and as he pushed Malfoy away with one arm, he thrust up with his legs, lurching between Voldemort and his target.

The green curse hit Harry in the centre of his chest just as Gareth lifted Ginny over one shoulder and began to stand. Ginny raised her head and screamed as Harry fell backward, landing on top of Malfoy's wrecked body, the curse seeming to explode above the two collapsed wizards.

"Inside, inside, everyone!" Minerva commanded.

Shackbolt, Moody, and MacAirt repeated the command, and the crowd began to shuffle backwards.

"Look! Look!" One of the twins, Minerva couldn't tell which one, began to shout and point. "A phoenix! It's Fawkes!"

Minerva held her breath as the phoenix landed on Harry. Oh, gods, Voldemort was raising his wand again, and so were the Death Eaters around him! Please, please, please . . . she did not know with whom she was pleading, but then there was another shouted curse, this one from her nephew, who had turned, still with Ginny over his shoulder.

"*TERRAQUATERE!*" Gareth roared.

A bronze-coloured spell issued from his wand, spreading out and flowing toward the Death Eaters. McGonagall stood facing Voldemort, the spell continuing to course from his wand. The ground began to tremble and a fissure opened up at Voldemort's feet. The earth heaved and threw the Death Eaters to the ground, Voldemort himself losing his footing, stepping back, and then landing hard on his arse. Even as the earth cracked open, the phoenix rose into the air, singing loudly, almost trumpeting, Harry's limp body held by one arm. Voldemort tried to follow the bird and the boy with his wand, but cried out in frustration when they seemed to vanish without a sound, the phoenix call abruptly ending. Voldemort took to the air himself, rising straight up, seeking his prey, but they were nowhere to be seen.

Gareth struggled to the steps, Ginny pounding her fists on his back, and he was grateful when her brothers took her from him. He tottered on his feet. Neville grabbed him under one shoulder, but when Gareth merely collapsed against him, almost dragging him to the stone steps with his weight, the younger wizard flicked his wand and raised him up with a *Mobilicorpus*.

Shaken from their amazement by Shackbolt and Moody and their repeated commands to get inside, the group turned to go back into the castle, but their way was blocked by those who had been watching from the windows and who now wanted to go out onto the grounds. Minerva raised her wand and a small explosion issued from it.

"Back, back inside! Inside the Hall! Now!" Minerva said in her most stern Headmistress voice. Harry was safe now, and it was time for them all to carry on with the rest of the plan...as far as they were able.

Gareth took the square of chocolate from Remus and leaned back against the doorframe, half-perched on the ornate moulding. "Thanks, mate. D'you see where Ginny went? I have her wand."

"Fred and George brought her up to the Hospital Wing, where she should have been in the first place," Minerva replied. "Arthur will be upset. His wife, two of his children . . ."

"I think Ginny's okay," Gareth said. "It only hit her brother. We should try to get his body inside once the door opens again."

"Right now, I'm more concerned about the living," Minerva said, "and keeping them alive."

"Molly died," Remus whispered. "I just heard someone telling Ron."

"I'm sorry," Minerva said. It hadn't looked good for the Weasley matriarch, so she was not surprised, but it was still a difficult truth to swallow. She would wait and think about it later, about her and all the others; then she could grieve.

"So am I," Gareth said softly. "I didn't really know her, but I know she loved her family. And if Percy's any indication, she raised her children well."

Remus and Minerva looked at each other, both of them aware of the irony of Gareth's observation and of Percy's final act, yet the truth of the statement, as well.

"What did you think you were doing, Gareth? Not that I'm not glad you did something, but that hole in the ground," Minerva said, shaking her head but looking toward her cousin, Caroline Mayfield, who was working with Filius and Shackbolt to reinforce the huge windows of the Great Hall to the strength of thick stone walls. They were already opaque from the outside so that the defenders could see out but the Death Eaters could not see in.

"I just thought that since the wards were lifted, I would try that. I thought it would disrupt them all. Couldn't let even one of them get off a curse," Gareth replied around the chocolate melting in his mouth.

"You silly boy," Minerva said, ruffling his hair as she used to when he was a child. "It's the Anti-Apparition wards that we took down, not all of the wards, and certainly not the ones helping to maintain the integrity of the castle and grounds. And I recast the Anti-Apparition wards protecting the interior of the castle...not that Riddle knows any of that, of course. He really hasn't a clue."

"Oh." Gareth swallowed his chocolate and shrugged. "No wonder that was so hard." He looked up at his aunt and grinned. "Sorry about the damage."

"Hmmp. With any luck, maybe a few Death Eaters will trip over their shoelaces and fall in," she replied.

Remus tried to smile at Minerva's joke. "It was unexpected. I'd never seen anyone use an earthquake spell before."

"It was one of my dad's," Gareth said. "He could cast it nonverbally, with either hand, and even do a modified wandless version of it. I'm just glad I could do it at all and knock that pretender on his arse."

"Voldemort didn't look pleased," Lupin said.

"I wish I had seen his expression," a voice said from the open doorway.

Remus dropped his chocolate. Gareth caught it with an *Arresto Momentum* and flicked it into his hand.

"Some chocolate, Harry?" Gareth asked, holding it out to him.

Harry nodded and took the foil-wrapped Honeydukes. "Thanks. I stopped by the infirmary on the way down. Thanks for getting Ginny, sir."

"It's Gareth," the older wizard replied.

"Harry?!" Remus regained his power of speech. "Harry! Harry!"

Remus grabbed Harry with both hands, then he picked him up and swung him around, crying and shouting. Gareth caught the chocolate again when Harry lost his hold on it, then he leaned forward and rested his head on his aunt's shoulder from behind, one arm around her, as they watched the Great Hall erupt with shrieks and shouts. He pulled her back out of the human tidal wave that surged toward them.

"I thought he was supposed to stay hidden until we were ready for Voldemort to see him," Gareth murmured.

"I guess that plan changed," Minerva said, sounding resigned but not entirely pleased.

"Where is my uncle, do you think?" Gareth asked quietly.

"Possibly in my office, perhaps still in the come and go room. He will be here." Her gaze went unfocussed and Gareth felt her stiffen. "He is here. Very near. In the front hall behind everyone, I think, but I can feel him."

Gareth grinned. "Good. Then with him, Harry Potter, and you, we have that little toe-rag beat already."

Minerva laughed.

"He's back." Shacklebolt's deep voice rang through the Great Hall above the commotion. "Voldemort is back and he's coming this way."

"Filius, Pomona, Alroy, you know what to do," Minerva said. "Everyone, follow your Heads of House...adults, too...unless you're flying with Hooch's squadron. We are prepared. Ravenclaws, all to the Towers and battlements; follow Flitwick's orders. Hufflepuffs, follow Professor Sprout down to the exit at the base of the North Tower...it should still be clear. If not, Pomona, you know where to go. Hagrid, go with Sprout; get to the paddock and loose the Thestrals. Firenze will meet you there. Gryffindors, you all wait here with Professor MacAirt...you will defend from the front of the castle. Teller, go to the infirmary; you will work with Pomfrey and O'Donald. Harry, you stay here with me. Remus, send the signal to Charlie. Hooch, you take your flyers to the Astronomy Tower. Wait until the first hex has been cast, then activate the Protean Charm and follow your battleplan. Don't just stand there! Go! Go!" Minerva clapped her hands.

"Did you intend me to follow Flitwick?" Shacklebolt asked, surprised.

"They could use you, Kingsley, but if you would prefer to stay down here..."

The tall, assertive Auror appeared torn for a moment, but then he bowed his head quickly and turned to follow his fellow Ravenclaws up to the roofs.

"Kingsley?" Minerva called.

He turned his head.

"Stop in the infirmary. If Arthur is able, send him down here. Have the twins go join Hooch," Minerva said. "And tell Poppy to expect more casualties."

"Shacklebolt!" Gareth tossed Ginny's wand to the Auror, who caught it neatly then hurried from the room.

"What about us?" Blaise asked as the last of the Hufflepuffs and Ravenclaws streamed from the Great Hall.

"Ah, you, my sweet Slytherins," Minerva said turning to Snape's Slytherins, "you will have your role and make your Head of House proud." She looked over at Slughorn, who had been watching from the corner. "Horace, would you like to join Snape's Slytherins? Serve as their temporary Head of House?"

"I would be honoured," Slughorn said.

"Good." Minerva nodded briskly. "MacAirt will lead the Gryffindors in an assault, then we will follow...Harry, Snape's Slytherins, I, and one other, who will be joining us just before we leave the castle. You'll be with us, Caroline?" she asked her cousin, wondering whether the Slytherin glass-charmer might not prefer to join her old friend Filius.

"Of course," Caroline replied.

A lynx Patronus emerged from the ceiling and entered Minerva's ear, bearing Kingsley's message. She nodded.

"Arthur's on his way down. As soon as he gets here, we open the doors. He will speak for us. And then we attack."

"All of us through the front doors?" Remus asked, looking around him. Even with the Hufflepuffs and Ravenclaws gone, there were a good number of people there, and he thought they would be too much of a target if they all walked out at once.

"No. Do you forget that I am the Headmistress? I will open another door for you here...or one of these windows, actually. Half will leave through the main doors, and the others, through a door at the far end of the Hall. Not perfect, but you will have covering fire from above. The Ravenclaws should all be in pos..." A loud bang interrupted Minerva.

"He's outside, just yards away!" Colin shouted from his spot by the reinforced windows. Minerva had no time to wonder how he had escaped from the Hospital Wing.

There was another loud bang as a hex hit one of the castle walls.

"Too late now...Alroy, you'll have to..."

Arthur huffed into the doorway. "I am here, I am ready, and I will speak to him as we planned." He was pale and his eyes were blood-shot, but he stood straight, his wand ready. "I will stall him as long as possible, then strike the first blow."

"Very good!" Minerva said. "Longbottom and Dumbledore's Army, you follow Weasley. You, too, Moody. Wait in the Entrance Hall for Weasley's signal. The rest of you, stay in here with MacAirt and be prepared to leave through the windows at the end of the Great Hall. Alroy, watch for the Ravenclaws, then choose your moment. Nick? Binns?" The two ghosts flew to her. "You know what to do...as soon as the Gryffindors are on the grounds, join them."

Minerva turned from the ghosts and waved her wand, and the broad, high windows at the far end of the Great Hall shimmered for a moment. Alroy led the remaining Gryffindors to that end of the room. He waved his own wand and created two steps up to the windowsill. Ron watched the Gryffindors gather, and when the Headmistress said nothing to him, he moved closer to the group of Slytherins. He was not leaving Harry again.

They could hear Arthur, his voice amplified by the Sonorous Charm, speaking with Voldemort, claiming that the Headmistress had been overcome by nervous exhaustion and that he was there to speak for all those remaining in the castle.

"This is no parlay, Weasley. You will drop your wand and stand aside. You will allow us entry and tell the children to offer no foolish resistance. We will kill any who draw a wand against us. There is no more Ministry. You saw Scrimgeour fall. I am the Ministry. I am the wizarding world. Your fate is in my hands. If you do not wish to die where you stand, you will tell everyone to surrender. I will take Hogwarts as my seat and rule from here. You and what's left of your yammering redheaded brood may live if you cooperate."

As Voldemort spoke, Minerva drew Blaise, Slughorn, and the other Slytherins near to her, Twiskett standing close beside Kevin Harper, trying to avoid being stepped upon in the huddle. Minerva nodded to Ron, acknowledging his presence among the Slytherins.

"After the Gryffindors are out, the Hufflepuffs have joined them, and all are engaged, we will follow. We will all accompany Harry...will you do that, Zabini?" Minerva asked.

The Slytherin nodded.

"Good. Help him get as close as he can to Riddle...that's Voldemort. I will be with you, as will one other. Harry and the other wizard will remain concealed until we are close enough to confront Riddle. Ronald, you may join Snape's Slytherins, but I would like you particularly to cover us from behind." She looked over at Gareth. "Since you did not follow your Head of House, Gareth, see if you can find your uncle. Stay with him. You may join us as we leave."

Gareth nodded and was gone in a moment.

"So, Snape's Slytherins will make their stand with Harry Potter." Minerva looked from Blaise to Harry. "Agreed?"

Harry glanced at Blaise, and the two nodded, then there was a shout as Arthur answered Voldemort's final ultimatum with a curse, and then there was another sharp yell. They could hear the great oak doors slam closed. Hexes began to strike the heavy doors, but then shouts and screams began coming from the Death Eaters as the Ravenclaws attacked from the roof and the towers.

Minerva walked over to the reinforced windows and looked out. The Death Eaters who had followed Voldemort to within yards of the front entrance were backing up, some turning and running. Charmed iron spheres the size of cricket balls were landing among them, creating large pocks in the earth where they hit the ground, or great gaping wounds where they struck flesh. Other peculiar golden projectiles seemed to explode on contact with a human body, causing no obvious injury, but the Death Eaters hit by them began to tear at their clothes then roll on the ground.

An iron ball glanced off Voldemort's left shoulder, but he seemed scarcely to notice it, though he ceased casting spells at the castle and began backing up and shouting orders at his followers. In that moment, the doors opened again, and Arthur, Moody, and the Gryffindors in Dumbledore's Army emerged, Arthur and Moody at the front, Moody casting curses as Arthur raised a shield charm. The Gryffindors followed fast in twos, staggered, but behind the two older wizards until they could break off to the left or right, running full-tilt toward the Death Eaters who were trying to back away from the onslaught from the Ravenclaws above. Minerva felt chills run through her as she saw a few of the Death Eaters fall to Gryffindor curses before they had a moment to cast any spells themselves. And now, scarcely seconds later, the heavy oak doors slammed shut again, and Arthur and Moody were duelling Voldemort as Neville and Dean stood back to back a few feet apart and fended off the Death Eaters who would come to their master's assistance.

MacAirt opened the windows and led his Gryffindors out onto the grounds. As soon as they were gone, Minerva closed the Charmed windows again, sealing them. The Gryffindors were duelling with Death Eaters as hexes and projectiles still rained down from above. Minerva could have sworn that crystal balls were landing among the Death Eaters, as well, and many hitting their marks. There were three suits of armour swinging swords and axes that had followed MacAirt out the window, but they were quickly blasted into bits by the harassed Death Eaters. The group of Hufflepuffs led by Sprout now rounded the castle, coming into view and entering the fray. Nearly-Headless Nick swooped down to her, speaking rapidly and pointing. Pomona nodded and sent four of her group off in the direction the ghost had indicated, three students and one Auror.

Dean and Neville had engaged two Death Eaters, Yaxley and Macnair, Minerva believed. It was an uneven match and she feared for the two students, yet she was proud of how well they defended themselves against the older and more experienced wizards, and not simply defending, but attacking. Minerva gasped when Neville, duelling with Macnair, cast a dark red curse and Macnair's head flew off, separated from his body, and then rolled blinking toward where they all stood watching at the window.

"The Thestrals!" Daphne shrieked.

Minerva looked up to see several Thestrals, their sharp hooves slashing the air, diving into the Death Eaters at the rear. Buckbeak had joined them and had torn off someone's arm. He tossed it into the air. She could see Peeves darting among the Death Eaters, apparently throwing mud in their eyes. Or perhaps it was some of Pomona's dragon dung fertiliser. Then there were five loud explosions almost simultaneously, and Bill Weasley, Ritchie Connolly, Oliver Wood, and Viktor Krum appeared on their brooms, and flying beside Viktor, Helena Benetti. The five had Apparated in from the cardinal directions and immediately began aiming and casting curses from above. Without delay, Hooch and her flyers joined them from the roofs, then Minerva spotted several more riders on broomstick soaring in from the direction of Hogsmeade.

Minerva let out a barely audible expletive when she saw Fawkes flare onto the grounds, a witch holding onto his tail feathers with her left hand before letting go and drawing her wand. Fawkes circled the field, but Minerva's gaze remained on the one-armed witch, who, somewhat incongruously, stood amongst the centaurs at the edge of the fray and was already engaged in a duel with a very tall Death Eater. The Death Eater went down, and the witch stepped over his body, running toward the castle, right into the mass of Death Eaters. The centaurs' arrows flew around her, and it seemed that it was only some kind of divine grace that kept them from striking the grey-haired witch as she raced forward, casting hexes as she ran. Minerva hoped that Gareth had not seen her arrive.

"Who is that one-armed witch?" Ron asked.

"My nephew Gareth's mother," Minerva replied, her voice tight.

"Look, look at Hagrid!" Harry shouted.

"Where?" Pansy asked, craning her neck. It was a confused melee, and she couldn't tell anything except that the Death Eaters were almost completely surrounded.

"There, near the centaurs," Harry said, pointing, then doing a double-take as he realised that Pansy was among Snape's Slytherins. What had led to that allegiance, he couldn't begin to imagine.

Pansy scarcely had time to register that Hagrid was hurling projectiles at the Death Eaters using some kind of slingshot when Minerva said, "Right, the centaurs have arrived. Time for us to go, too."

The Headmistress turned to the Slytherins behind her, a fierce gleam in her eyes. "Ready to avenge Severus Snape? Good!" Minerva began to lead them to the doors. "Oh, and you may find yourself surprised in a moment. Don't let that distract you! Remember that our goal is to get Harry to Riddle." If they were true Slytherins, she thought, they would only be startled briefly, and they would not be distracted.

Sure enough, when they walked into the Entrance Hall and saw Gareth and his companion, Ron looked gob-smacked, but although the Slytherins reacted with gasps and various colourfully imaginative expletives, they didn't fly into a tizzy. Minerva only hoped that Albus's appearance with Harry would distract Riddle and the Death Eaters but not the Hogwarts defenders.

"We are ready, my dear?" the older wizard asked.

"We are. Gareth, I want you and Twiskett to try to get to Malfoy. If he's still alive, bring him to the Hospital Wing," she said, adding, "Poppy will be sending house-elves down to the Entrance Hall to Apparate the injured up to the infirmary, but I'd like you and Twiskett to bring Malfoy directly there yourselves...I have raised the Anti-Apparition wards over the entire grounds again, so if he must be Apparated, Twiskett will have to do it on his own."

Gareth grinned at the house-elf. "We're a team, eh, Twiskett?"

The pale little elf nodded solemnly and went to stand by him, taking hold of the edge of his kilt like a child afraid of becoming lost in a crowd.

"Harry? Your Invisibility Cloak?" Minerva said.

"Oi, Ron! My Cloak!"

"Oh, um, yeah." Ronald, still looking dazed, pulled up his jumper and tugged the front of his shirt from his trousers, then he reached under his shirt and pulled out the Invisibility Cloak. "Sorry if it's all sweaty."

Harry just shrugged. That sort of thing never seemed to affect the Cloak.

"I will take the leading edge with Zabini at my right," Minerva said. "The rest of you, form a wedge behind us, flaring outward. Ron, you, Harper, Caroline, and Gareth close the V behind Harry. Gareth, when we clear the steps, you and Twiskett break off and find Malfoy. Horace, you're behind me and to my left."

Blaise stood beside Minerva and looked over at her. She smiled. "Ready then? For Snape!"

"For Snape!" everyone echoed, even the young wizard beneath the Invisibility Cloak.

Minerva pointed her wand and the doors flew open. She immediately shielded against stray hexes and strode forward.

Gareth looked up as he stepped from the castle. Fuck. Dementors. Casting the Patronus would distract the Hogwarts defenders from the battle, leaving them open to the Death Eaters. Then he grinned. The Ravenclaw contingent had ceased attacking those on the ground...good thing, too, since it would now be harder to avoid hitting those on their own side...and they were now casting Patronuses, as were many of those on broomstick. The Dementors were being driven off, but Gareth saw with alarm one of the broomstick squad being chased along the perimeter of the battlefield. The dark-haired wizard seemed barely able to hold onto his broom, the effect of the Dementor was so great. Gareth raised his own wand to cast his Patronus, but then a Death Eater cast a curse at him, and Gareth's attention was pulled back to the battle on the ground.

Gareth was too late to cast any shield charm, and if he ducked, the curse would hit one of the two invisible wizards behind him. He steeled himself, ready for the unknown hex to hit and hoping it was something his Graphornhide tunic could deflect, or at least partially absorb, but it never struck. Twiskett's wandless house-elf magic repulsed the spell, sending it back on the Death Eater who had cast it, and the Death Eater fell to the ground, Stunned by his own spell. Gareth grinned. His smile quickly disappeared when he saw someone falling from the air. He cast an *Arresto Momentum*, slowing the fall, but the person landed too far away for Gareth to get to him. He also had his own assignment: find Lucius Malfoy.

Gareth had no hope that the wretch still lived, but it was Minerva's wish, and he knew that Malfoy had occasionally assisted Snape when he needed it. He'd find him and see if he was breathing, then get him to safety if he was.

"Come on, Twiskett, time to find Malfoy."

Twiskett tugged on his kilt, indicating the direction they should go. Gareth followed the little elf, casting the occasional Slicing Hex or Shield Charm, but not allowing himself to become engaged with any opponent. One Death Eater, however, turned from the Hufflepuff whom he had dropped with something nasty, and cast a strong *Petrificus*. Twiskett shielded Gareth as Gareth cast a Stunner. The slim Death Eater avoided the hex and cast another of his own. Gareth cast a quick *Percido*, and the punching hex caused the Death Eater to stumble backward.

Impatient, Gareth cast another punching hex as he reached down and pulled his sgian dubh from its sheath in his left sock. The small dagger was not meant for throwing, but Gareth had charmed his, and it would fly according to his will and then return to him, handle first. Gareth cast one more *Percido* as Twiskett shielded him again, and then he let his sgian dubh fly from his hand. The Death Eater looked down at his chest, shocked, but the short knife was already returning to its wizard. Gareth did not see the Death Eater first crumble to his knees and then collapse; he was already turned away, looking for Malfoy.

He kept his dagger ready in his left hand, not caring about the bright blood dripping from it. Wizards rarely expected anything that mundane and physical in a fight, and although he had only had the very rare opportunity to use it in a real fight, and never by throwing it, Gareth had practised with it during long, bored hours on the island over the last year. He was glad now that he had.

Twiskett tugged at the hem of his kilt again, and Gareth almost tripped over the body. Too foul and ragged to be anyone but Malfoy.

Trusting that Twiskett would shield him, Gareth knelt beside the corpse. This man had to be dead. Still, Gareth was gentle as he rolled the body toward him. There was no resistance, nothing that would indicate that this limp assemblage of bone and skin was alive. Gareth was only vaguely aware of someone casting a hex that Twiskett deflected. Gareth returned his sgian dubh to its sheath, and in a vain attempt to clean away some filth and reveal any remaining humanity, he wiped his hand over the man's livid face. There was no reaction. Gareth moved his hand down to the wizard's neck, fingers seeking the carotid artery and not finding it. He rested his ear against his chest, ignoring the stench of the body and the sounds of the battle around him. He sat up and shook his head. He thought he had heard a flutter of a heart.

Gareth paused a moment and focussed, then he cast a diagnostic spell, one he had seen many times but had never cast himself. He was surprised. This body had a pulse.

Gareth raised his wand and distractedly Petrified the Death Eater who had been duelling with Twiskett and a skinny girl with short brown hair. As the wizard tumbled several feet into the crack in the earth, Gareth turned to the house-elf.

"Time to get him to the infirmary. You take him. I'm afraid if we tried to Levitate him, it would kill him."

The solemn elf nodded and took Lucius's head between two long-fingered hands. As he and the moribund wizard vanished with a loud crack, Gareth wondered whether Snape's house-elf was mute or if he simply preferred not to speak.

Gareth stood and turned in a circle, searching for Minerva and Snape's Slytherins. Where were they? Now he saw. The Death Eaters had noted the odd formation of attacking students led by the Headmistress. It seemed they were surrounded, but they still moved steadily forward, bodies occasionally literally flung out of their way. Gareth fought his way toward them, reaching them his only goal. He had no compunction about striking a Death Eater in the back. He had no intention of engaging any of them in a duel. They were obstacles to be rid of. The Death Eaters themselves seemed to have no particular strategy other than to disable or kill the Hogwarts defenders.

An exhausted Ernie Macmillan and Hannah Abbot looked at Gareth in relief and gratitude when the Death Eater they had been duelling tipped over, Petrified by Gareth, but Gareth did not see them; he simply moved on to the next target in his path, an ugly, squat Death Eater who had lost his hat and his mask and who had just Stupefied Terry Boot and was now duelling Anthony Goldstein. Noting abstractly that Flitwick must have sent at least some of the Ravenclaws down from the Towers, Gareth cast another *Petrificus*, but the Death Eater countered it. Goldstein cast a Slicing Hex as the ugly wizard cast a Stunner at Gareth. Gareth gritted his teeth, hoped for the best, and cast a Jelly Legs Jinx just before the hex struck him.

The Stunner knocked him backward, and Gareth landed hard, feeling the curse seeming to crawl over his body like a prickly wave of hot needles, most of it absorbed by the Graphornhide tunic. Gareth rolled quickly to one side, just avoiding another hex from a different direction. He cast a *Massuilius* at the attacking wizard's head, flinching and looking away as his opponent's skull exploded. Wiping blood and brain from his face with his shirt sleeve as he stood, Gareth discovered he was now just feet from young Malcolm Baddock, one of Snape's Slytherins and far too young to be on this or any battlefield. The boy was pale, but standing. At least three of the Slytherins had been lost in the few minutes since he had left them, but Twiskett had rejoined them and was repelling Death Eater spells. Slughorn was still there, battling Fenrir Greyback with Daphne, and Gareth could see Minerva and Blaise engaged with the Lestrangle witch and Dolohov. The Weasley boy and one of the Slytherin girls were fighting off an older masked witch.

Blaise and Dolohov were closest. Gareth sent a cudgel hex at Dolohov, but the wizard moved and it scarcely missed hitting Blaise. The grass was slippery with blood, and Gareth almost tripped over someone's head in his attempt to get closer to Minerva and Blaise. He looked down. Someone's head. No body. He looked away, toward the living who were battling around him. A very tall, broad-shouldered wizard in Death Eater's robes turned from the student he had just killed, saw Gareth, and smiled cruelly as he raised his wand, no doubt anticipating another kill. But then Kevin Harper, the short, skinny, blue-eyed Slytherin who had let Twiskett hold on to him, stepped forward and shouted a *Stupefy*. The Death Eater flicked his wand as if at an annoying insect and blocked the Stunner. Gareth quickly cast a *Percido*, not a particularly powerful hex, but easily cast. The punching spell landed on the wizard's jaw, but he didn't seem to notice it. Gareth cast another one as he bent and pulled his Charmed dagger from its sheath.

The tall Death Eater cast a *Petrificus* as Gareth countered with a *Protego*. The other wizard raised his wand to cast again, and Gareth let his dagger fly. It stabbed the large man in the throat, right through his trachea. The sgian dubh flew back into Gareth's hand as he cast a *Stupefy* at the wizard, who crumpled to the earth, one hand on his throat, blood leaking through limp fingers.

Gareth was about to turn to assist Blaise with Dolohov when he saw him. Voldemort. The toe-rag, his aunt called him. Ugly as sin. Gareth let out an involuntary cry as he saw Voldemort curse a blond Hufflepuff before cutting down a middle-aged witch in Auror's robes with the *Avada Kedavra*. Pomona Sprout leapt forward and cast a nonverbal curse, but it seemed to simply bounce off of Voldemort and he ignored it.

Gareth rushed forward as Pomona cast again, this time sending out a streaking yellow spell toward the vile wizard. It struck, charring a hole in his robes. Voldemort turned toward her this time, a lipless snarl on his face. Gareth stood beside Pomona and cast a nonverbal *Paralakkalkan*, deflecting Voldemort's purple curse in an explosion of pale green shards of light.

But now Minerva was there, the steadfast black Slytherin still at her side, and Voldemort cared no more for the Hufflepuff Head of House and her curly-haired defender in a kilt.

"So, the Headmistress of Hogwarts is not suffering from nervous exhaustion any longer," he hissed, his voice unnaturally loud and echoing. The sounds of battle faded away as everyone, Death Eater and defender alike, stopped to hear Voldemort's words.

"You think you can challenge me?" he continued, his slitted eyes narrowing as he appraised Minerva's appearance. "I remember you as a girl. A prim, rule-bound little chit, always basking in others' light."

"No, Tom, you never knew me. I knew you, though, nasty, chicken-hearted little toe-rag that you were," Minerva replied.

Riddle seemed prepared for such a speech now, and he allowed himself a hissed laugh but did not lose control of his temper.

"Be a good witch, McGonagall. Turn yourself and the castle over to me and I will be merciful. I will give you new rules to follow. You should not find it too onerous. Don't let more of your little cubs die for nothing."

"Not for nothing, Tom, and not only cubs," Minerva declared.

Zabini stepped forward.

"Misguided little Slytherins, no doubt suffering from having such a pathetic Head of House for so many years. First the old charlatan's lapdog and then yours." Voldemort looked at Zabini. "Come to me and share the power of Slytherin. I will welcome and reward you."

"Like you rewarded Professor Snape? Or Mr Malfoy?" Blaise asked, continuing boldly, "We are the true Slytherins. We are Snape's Slytherins."

The other Slytherins behind him each took a step forward, and Gareth was impressed by their courage and the looks of determination on their faces. He wished that Snape were there to see them, to hear the pride with which they used his name.

"We fight for ourselves and for Professor Snape. We are Slytherin," Blaise declared unflinchingly.

Gareth could feel Voldemort's anger rolling off of him and a movement of his arm betrayed his intent to cast a curse.

"Patricide! Murderer! You're a petty thief, Riddle!" Gareth shouted, remembering Malfoy's earlier distraction. "Not even a wizard! Something half human! A pathetic, nasty, thieving..."

Gareth's taunts were cut off as Bellatrix cast a *Crucio*. Everything was pain. His vision was filled with the red of blood and fire. He could not even scream, only let out a harsh, rasping breath. Then it ended and he rolled over to look at the sky, a few brooms still in the air, circling above, a Hippogriff with them.

"Do not prolong this, McGonagall," Gareth heard Voldemort say, and he was confused for a moment until he realised the Dark Wizard was addressing his aunt. "You cannot win."

"Maybe she can't win alone, but she isn't alone," a strong, youthful voice said.

Gareth rose to his knees to see Harry shedding his Invisibility Cloak and stepping up beside Minerva.

"You! You are dead! I killed you!" Voldemort roared.

"Guess you aren't so strong, after all," Harry said cheekily. "Second time, too!"

Albus now appeared on Harry's other side.

"Hello, Tom. I'm afraid that I must add my objections to your requests," Albus said. "We simply cannot permit it, you see." Albus looked around him. "And you are outnumbered quite easily. You give up to us now, and you and your followers will be treated as prisoners in the custody of the British Ministry. No more need die this day."

"You aren't him. You can't be! I know that old fool is dead," Voldemort hissed.

"Oh, Tom, Tom," Albus chuckled. "You needn't have a Horcrux to defeat death, you know; you don't need to destroy your soul. Sometimes love and a little modern wizarding science is all you need. But then, you have to have someone who loves you and you have to be able to fully trust yourself to someone else, give yourself over, lose all control. You are incapable of that, I am afraid. I am indeed the wizard who met you all those years ago in that Muggle orphanage, the one who was your Transfiguration teacher, the Headmaster of Hogwarts who refused you a teaching position. I am the Albus Dumbledore who died. And I do beg the forgiveness of all those who mourned me aforesaid, but as you see, I am now quite alive!"

Voldemort backed up slightly, coming even to where Gareth still knelt in the trampled, dark-stained grass. The Dark Wizard's breath was coming faster, and despite the twisted wizard's inhuman features, Gareth believed he saw fear on his face.

And now he felt fear clench his own heart. His mother! What the fuck was she doing there? Wilsy and Gluffy were supposed to keep her on the island!

Gertrude Gamp silently stepped up beside Zabini on the other side of Minerva.

"What is this? A convention of the dead?" Voldemort cried, seeing Gertrude. "Or was Snape a traitor even then?"

Gertrude did not answer. She simply stared at him with cold grey eyes, her wand held ready in her left hand.

"You never managed to entirely twist Severus Snape," Minerva said. "He never completely belonged to you, and you never could have held his loyalty. And these Slytherins with us are an example of the finest of that House, and you will not have them or any others!" Minerva's voice had grown louder and more angry as she spoke, and as she finished, her wand whipped through the air and a curse rocked the Dark Wizard, though it did not seem to harm him otherwise.

Voldemort bared his teeth and began to point his wand at Minerva, but Harry quickly stepped forward, casting an *Expelliarmus*, and in the same moment, Albus cast a nonverbal Stunner and Gareth let his sgian dubh fly. Although his wand remained firmly within his grasp and he did not fall, Voldemort's wand arm was jerked up and back, and he staggered as he defended against the force of the Stunner. The short dagger buried itself to the hilt in his right side, and the Dark Wizard let out a cry like the squeal of a pig. Gareth pushed to his feet as he caught his returning knife with his left hand. He had anticipated the onslaught of spells, and he had already raised a *Protego* as Pomona, Zabini, and Harper began to fight off angered Death Eaters on his behalf.

Gareth had expected Voldemort himself to turn to him and strike him dead for his daring, but the Dark Wizard now seemed to be engaged in a battle of pure intentional magic with Potter, perhaps something that had begun as *Expelliarmus* but was now something beyond any verbal spell. Albus and Minerva on either side of Harry had raised a shield in front of him and themselves, not even a *Protego connex*, but something stronger still, yet it did not disrupt the stream of magic that seemed to join Potter and the fraudulent lord.

Blood oozed from Riddle's side, and Gareth thought he detected some weakening of this Heir of Slytherin. Potter merely looked determined, focussed only on his opponent. There was no anger, fear, or joy in his face, merely an ageless concentration. Finally, there was a burst of golden light, and the connection between the two wizards was broken and Riddle stumbled back.

"You have something of mine, Tom Riddle," Harry said, his voice hard and even. "You have something of mine; you took it and I want it back. I returned what was yours and you destroyed it, and now you will return what was *mine!*" Harry slashed his wand through the air, his gaze fixed unblinking on the near-reptilian creature before him.

"*Mine!*" Harry shouted again, and Gareth saw now that the blood running from Riddle's chest was no longer trickling down his side, but was flowing faster and beginning to gather and course toward Harry, seeming to be drawn toward his wand.

"No!" Voldemort screamed, but his flesh seemed to shrink as his blood flowed from him.

The stream of blood hit Albus and Minerva's shield, and as it did, it dissipated in a shower of gentle white light and shards of gleaming obsidian black, then simply vanished in the early morning light. Riddle stepped back, terror on his face, and Gertrude Gamp raised her one arm and cast an *Expelliarmus*. The Dark Wizard's wand was almost tugged from his grasp this time, and he fell backward, but he struggled to his knees and made one more effort to attack, to defend, to live, and he raised his wand against Minerva, intent on breaking the shield that was destroying him while it protected Potter. Whether he had not enough energy to cast an *Avada Kedavra* or he was simply preserving what energy remained him, Riddle cast the *Crucio*, a spell that was as easy for him as an *Accio* for any other witch or wizard.

The shield that Albus and Minerva had raised in front of Harry didn't protect only him, though, and the *Crucio* scattered in a burst of muddy yellow light. Gareth could see rivulets of sweat on Minerva's face, and Harry was breathing hard even as he repeated, *mine, to me, mine, to me*, and the young wizard's arm was trembling.

Gareth stood and threw his knife again, but it was turned from its path by a spell from Bella, who had been struggling to reach her master. She was being held at bay by Slughorn, Pomona, and two of Snape's Slytherins, the Parkinson girl and Harper. Other nearby Death Eaters were in similar conflicts with a motley assortment of Ministry Aurors, Hogwarts teachers, and students, some of whom looked much too young to be on the battlefield. Gareth was unsurprised to see that some Death Eaters, however, were beginning to edge away, preparing to flee.

Gareth jabbed his wand at Voldemort, casting a powerful *Frangere*, hoping it would weaken him more. The Dark Wizard fell over, then he made one last effort, attempting to Disapparate, but Minerva had raised the Anti-Apparition wards again, and nothing happened.

"You are trapped, Tom," Albus said, his voice surprisingly gentle. "You can go nowhere now but into the arms of death. Try to find some remorse in your soul, look for mercy!"

Voldemort, now barely a shell, collapsed completely, dying eyes turned toward Albus. Gareth thought he saw the Dark Wizard's mouth form the word, "never," and then the flow of blood became a trickle, his eyes went completely blank, and a peculiar sighing breath wheezed from his throat.

Harry began to lower his wand, but Albus stopped him, saying, "All of it, Harry."

Gareth was unable to continue watching to see the last drop drained from the body. Bella had managed to defeat three of her attackers, though he could not tell whether they were dead or not, and Pomona was now duelling her alone. He sprang into the breach to stand beside the Herbology teacher.

Bella was crazed, and Gareth ducked a hex, but he felt it grazing his cheek, opening it up, a sharp, burning pain. There was a wordless shout from behind him, and Longbottom was casting a *Massuius* at Bella. It barely missed hitting Gareth on its way to its target, but it hit Bella's right arm, shattering her bones and causing her to drop her wand.

Longbottom was now beside Gareth, raising his wand again.

"*Exen...*"

Gareth pushed Neville's arm down. "No! Bind her." Gareth turned and saw the fury of battle in the young wizard's face. "Bind her!"

Neville turned back toward Bella, but Pomona had already Stunned her and was binding the unconscious witch with some kind of vines that were issuing from her wand.

"She deserves to suffer! She deserves to die!" Neville shouted.

Gareth looked into his eyes. "Perhaps. But you deserve better than to kill her as she lies helpless."

"She destroyed my parents!"

"Do not let her control you." Gareth gestured broadly. "Go. There are more of them out there!"

Gareth didn't wait for the young wizard's reaction, but turned and sought another target, another Death Eater who was still a threat. He found his target and cast *Stupefy*, freeing two more of Dumbledore's Army to fight others.

Albus had been right: the Death Eaters were now far outnumbered, and their ability to flee, constricted. If only his father were here to see their triumph. Gareth wiped at the blood oozing from his cheek. He understood Neville's fury only too well. Too many were dead, lost, or forever wounded. With a roar, he raised his wand above his head and the driving wail of bagpipes and thunder of drums followed him as he leapt over the fissure and chased down two Death Eaters who were fleeing in the direction of the Quidditch stadium, hoping, no doubt, to scale the wall beyond and escape. They did not make it far, and they fell with fear in their eyes. Gareth cast ropes to hold them if they woke, though his Stunners were unlikely to wear off soon.

The remaining Death Eaters were fighting with increasing desperation, but trying now more to make their escape than to kill even in revenge. They could not flee into the Forbidden Forest without encountering Grawp, Hagrid, and the centaurs. Villagers and Aurors had arrived from Hogsmeade and were defending the gates, cutting off escape from that route. And now appeared a dragon in the air, two figures mounted on it, circling the perimeter of the battlefield, spitting fire and terrifying those below. One of the figures, a short witch, cast hexes from the peculiar mount, Stunning those who were attempting to flee...whether by running past the Quidditch stadium to the high wall at the edge of the grounds, or towards the Forest, willing to risk the centaurs' wrath in their desperation to escape...as the other rider, a red-haired wizard, probably a Weasley, attempted to control the flight of the untame beast.

Gareth turned and cast a powerful *Dolor* at a rabbit-looking Death Eater, knocking him over with a strong blow, but then he saw with alarm that some Death Eaters were running in the direction of the castle, perhaps hoping to find a tunnel that would lead them to freedom or to hostages whom they could hold and use to bargain for the same.

They could not be allowed entry to the castle, Gareth knew that. The vigorous piping still following him and feeding his energy, he hurtled back over the crevice and ran after them. More concerned with conserving energy and making it back to the castle than in disabling anyone, he cast only light hexes as he went, tripping jinxes and punching and cudgelling spells. He was right: there was now a small huddle of Death Eaters attempting to get up the stairs to the great oak doors.

Filius Flitwick, his size no indication of his magical gifts, was battling two of them at once. A handful of Ravenclaws stood with him, but the Death Eaters were both ruthless and desperate, and Gareth felt a scream of anguish in his heart as one of them cast a powerful slicing hex, felling one of the witches, a large bloody wound opened across her abdomen. Gareth's anger, stronger than ever, fuelled his *Massuellius*, which hit the responsible Death Eater square in the back. The Death Eater's arms flew up as he dropped his wand and fell forward. Gareth did not care whether the wizard was dead or alive as long as he was down and unable to hurt anyone else; Gareth cast again, this spell aimed at one of the Death Eaters duelling Flitwick. His *Petrificus Totalus* hit its target and the wizard tipped over.

Gareth grinned in triumph as another of his spells Stunned a Death Eater who had been duelling one of the Patil sisters. He winked at her before she turned to help Lisa Turpin. Alroy had come up from the other direction and joined him in obstructing the Death Eaters' access to the castle. The redheaded Gryffindor cast a Stunner at a wizard who had just managed to blast a small hole in one of the oak doors, but his *Stupefy* missed, and the unmasked Death Eater turned on him. It was one of the Lestranges, madness in his eyes, and he looked for the wizard who had attacked him.

Gareth heard others running up behind him; he whirled to confront them, but it was Albus, Minerva, and his mother, come to defend the castle against those last desperate Death Eaters. He turned to help Alroy battle Lestrangle. His hand was shaking from fatigue, but he would fight until he fell or until every Death Eater was captured or dead.

Out of the corner of his eye, Gareth saw Rookwood casting a curse at Alroy's back as the latter still duelled Lestrangle. Then time slowed as Gareth shouted, raising his wand, but too late to do anything but watch as his mother leapt in front of the curse meant for Alroy. She landed hard as Alroy turned and saw her fall. Rage in his eyes, MacAirt flung a *Massuellius* at Rookwood before the Death Eater knew what was happening. The curse hit him in the centre of his chest. His eyes widened, then he fell backward, dead before he hit the ground.

The pipes and drums ceased as Gareth dashed to his mother's side and fell to his knees beside her. His breath was fire in his throat as he reached to touch her. Just a few strides, and Alroy was there with him.

"What was it? What hit her?" Gareth asked.

Alroy shook his head. He didn't know. His fingers found a weak pulse. "She lives. I will get her to the infirmary."

Gareth looked toward the front doors. There were still several desperate Death Eaters fighting to reach them. "You'll have to get to another entrance, but I think they're all sealed. Do you have access?"

"I can do better," Alroy said.

With a shimmer and a pop, an Aethonian stood and pawed the ground impatiently. Gareth lifted his mother onto Alroy's back, then leapt up behind her to hold her securely. Alroy spread his wings and took to the air. Gareth hoped that any Death Eaters still fighting were too busy trying to save their skins to worry about cursing a flying horse.

Alroy reached the infirmary windows, and Gareth tried opening them, but his spells were ineffective. Finally, he cast several blasting hexes, which simply bounced off but made a lot of noise. Poppy appeared in the window, her wand raised threateningly; when she saw who it was, she grimaced and shook her head. Obviously, she couldn't open the windows, either. Poppy gestured with her wand, and Gareth nodded.

He leaned forward and said, "To the Astronomy Tower, Alroy."

There were already two house-elves, clad in bright blue tea-towels, there waiting for them when Alroy set down. Gareth watched them Disapparate with his mother, and was torn, but he remounted Alroy, who nodded and gave him a ride back down to the front of the castle.

He slid from Alroy's back and looked around him. There were only a few Death Eaters still fighting out on the lawn, and the grounds seemed littered with dead and wounded. There were several house-elves appearing among them and transporting them to the infirmary. Aurors and members of Dumbledore's Army were now binding the remaining, uninjured Death Eaters and moving them all to a spot closer to the castle. A small group of centaurs was marching several bedraggled-looking Death Eaters toward the castle, and Nick was diving amongst the bodies on the ground to find the wounded and direct the house-elves to them. Binns was nowhere to be seen, but Peeves was flying beside the tail of the dragon, having the time of his life.

Not far from the front steps, Albus was duelling with a Death Eater...an ugly, squat wizard who had lost his mask...but it was a short duel, and the other wizard was quickly disarmed then Stunned. Albus turned toward where Flitwick, Minerva, and a few others were still defending the front doors, and Gareth took a few steps forward to join him. Too late, he was aware that someone behind him was casting a spell. He made a move to turn, but the curse hit before he could. The last thing he saw as his body flew forward was a large chunk of masonry, part of a gargoyle, perhaps, falling from the castle and striking Minerva in the head. Then pain engulfed him, followed by blackness and peace.

Note: I forgot to mention in my notes at the end of the last chapter that the "mated wands" first appear in *Resolving a Misunderstanding*. If you've read *RaM* and want to refresh your memories, they are explained in "A Tale of Two Wands" and "Ever Green." The outlandish stories about them are in the chapter "Mates."

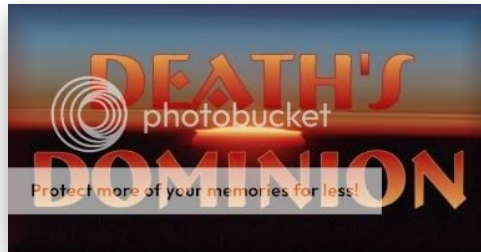
You may have noticed that the Muggle Studies teacher isn't the one from DH. That's because I cannot read her name without seeing in my mind the single disturbing scene she has. In the DD world, she is off raising prize roses and degnoming her gardens. ;-)

I hope you all continue to enjoy the story!

Chapter Thirty: And death shall have no dominion

Chapter 31 of 34

Severus wakes up to a new reality.



Chapter Thirty: *And death shall have no dominion*

26 28 May 1998

Poppy looked out the window, leaning one arm against its frame. She didn't remember the last time she had been that tired. She couldn't have slept if she had wanted to, though, even now that many patients had been moved to St. Mungo's and staff from the hospital had arrived to help care for those patients who remained at Hogwarts.

Albus and Harry had returned from the Forbidden Forest over an hour before, and Albus had immediately returned to Minerva's side. He asked about Gareth's condition, then he called for Alastor Moody and asked to speak with him alone. After Moody left, a peculiar dazed expression on his face, Albus called Poppy back into the room.

"You should sleep, Albus. Go rest. When Minerva wakes up, I'll have one of the elves fetch you." She hadn't thought that Albus would take her advice, and he didn't.

"That's all right, Poppy." He held Minerva's hand, massaging her fingers and palm. "I'll rest here. When she wakes up, I want to be here." He looked up at Poppy, suddenly seeming far from the powerful, confident wizard who had helped lead Hogwarts to victory, finally Stunning three Death Eaters simultaneously in order to reach Minerva, then turning and Petrifying two more before picking her up and carrying her into the castle. "She will wake up...soon, I mean. Won't she?"

"Not very soon," Poppy said truthfully. "It will be at least several hours. Even though you deflected the stone as it hit her, it still cracked her skull. She was also somewhat depleted by that point. She'll be fine, though. We could wake her sooner, but the Healers all say it is better for her to remain unconscious for a while. Let her body and magic recover. I'm sure she will wake up, and sooner rather than later. You should go rest for a while. There is time for you to get some sleep."

Albus shook his head, but at least he didn't repeat what he had said a dozen times after he and Minerva first arrived in the infirmary, that he should have been faster, that it was his fault she had been injured. "Not yet," he said. "And another patient will arrive soon. I sent Alastor to get him. I don't want anyone but you, Melina, or Egeria to treat him."

So now Poppy waited at the window. Her head nodded as she began to fall asleep on her feet, and she stood up straighter and blinked. There they were, entering the gate, an odd procession, Alastor at the front, Aberforth at the rear, and Hermione and Egeria on either side of a Charmed stretcher. She smiled, and tears of exhaustion and relief welled in her eyes. One who had been so certain he would die, lived. Severus Snape lived and Tom Riddle was dead.

Severus shifted and blinked. His eyelids felt heavy. His first coherent thought was that he didn't seem to be dead. The second was that he was someplace clean, bright, and comfortable, and he had all four limbs. He thought. He wiggled his fingers and toes. They seemed all to be there.

"Severus! You are awake!" Poppy's soft voice confirmed that it was unlikely he was dead.

He swallowed and tried to move his head toward the direction her voice had come from.

"Don't move too much, Severus. You still have some healing wounds, and they may hurt if you move." She raised the head of his bed. "Are you thirsty?"

He nodded slightly, and he felt a straw at his lips. He didn't know whether he had the energy to sip the water, but the straw was charmed; the water flowed gently into his mouth, and he swallowed. He sighed as the straw was withdrawn.

"Good," he said, or tried to say. His voice was hoarse. He opened his eyes further. Poppy was there. Surely that was a good thing. The Dark Lord wouldn't let Poppy take care of him. "How...what happened?" he whispered.

"Harry survived and defeated him. Riddle is dead. You are alive. Hermione helped save you. Do you remember any of it?"

Severus's eyes went unfocussed. It was all confused. "Nagini. He had her bite me. Then I thought I saw Hermione."

"You did. She was there with you. She treated you, then she brought you to a safe place until you could return to the castle."

"She's all right?"

"Yes, she's fine. She stayed with you. Minerva's mother, Healer Egidius, helped treat you, but Hermione wouldn't leave your side. She was with you constantly; even after she didn't need to breathe for you, she didn't leave you. I finally sent her to get some rest about an hour ago, but she's here in the infirmary. I'll get her for you. First I want to check a few things."

Severus closed his eyes. Breathed for him? He opened his eyes again as Poppy cast a diagnostic spell that seemed to vibrate through his body.

"Breathed for me?"

"Yes. One of the effects of Nagini's bite is to stop your breathing. The muscles are paralysed. So Hermione used a spell and breathed for you. Now, how many fingers do you see?"

Severus blinked slowly. "Two."

"Good."

"I saw two of her. I thought I was hallucinating. I did hallucinate," he said, remembering his vision of Death, which seemed so like Albus. "But she was real."

"Yes," Poppy said, patting his hand. "She was very real."

He turned his head toward her. He lived. Potter lived. Who had died? "Who . . . who died? There was a battle?"

"Yes, there was a battle. Several people died. A number of Death Eaters were killed, but more were captured. Almost none escaped."

"Who died?"

"There will be time enough later for you to think about all that, Severus. Just rest."

"No!" What was she keeping from him? He struggled to sit up more. "Who died? Minerva? Did Minerva?" How could he have lived if she had died?

"Minerva isn't dead, Severus. Calm yourself." Poppy put her hand on his left shoulder. "She was injured, but she's here in the infirmary, just in the next room, and you will be able to see her soon."

"Who else?"

"Who would you like to know about? There were many dozens involved in the battle on both sides. When you're better, I'm sure there will be people who can answer all of your questions, and you can see lists of the dead and injured, if you like. For now, though, is there anyone specific you are concerned about?"

Everyone. No one. "The students."

"Many were wounded, a few were killed. A number of Slytherins are here in the infirmary."

Severus looked away. He didn't need to be told why they were there.

"They fought bravely to defend Hogwarts," Poppy said softly.

He looked back at her incredulously. "They defended the school?"

"They did. They were crucial. They stood with Minerva and Harry when the final confrontation came. I was here and watched them from the infirmary windows. They were very brave. Blaise Zabini led them. They called themselves Snape's Slytherins, and they defied Riddle in your name."

It must have been Nagini's venom still in his system, because Severus felt tears rise in his eyes, and he couldn't swallow them back or blink them away. He felt as though he was crumbling.

Poppy smiled at him and squeezed his left arm. "You would have been so proud, Severus. They have wanted to see you, of course, but we told them that you had to have time to recover first." Poppy paused. "Except for one of Snape's Slytherins, who was particularly stubborn. I finally let him sleep under your bed." Her lips twitched in amusement at Severus's wide-eyed expression.

"Under my bed!?"

"Let's see if he's awake," Poppy said, barely restraining her laughter.

Severus could hear her whispering, and he wondered if perhaps he weren't still delusional, but then a small grey head popped up next to his bed and a shy finger reached out and touched his arm, then quickly withdrew.

"Twiskett," Severus said, trying to sit up a bit straighter. "You have comported yourself well for Madam Pomfrey?"

Twiskett looked up at Poppy with questioning eyes, then he looked back at Severus and nodded.

"Good. You may return to your duties."

Twiskett reached out and placed his fingertips lightly on Severus's elbow.

"Very well. You may remain. But you must assist Madam Pomfrey as she requires," Severus said.

Twiskett's face wrinkled into a happy smile, then, to Poppy's shock, he whispered, "Thank you."

"Hmmpf. When I have visitors, you may wait outside." He might be in a generous mood, but he did still want *some* privacy. That, after all, was one of the things he appreciated about the quiet house-elf.

Twiskett nodded seriously, then disappeared back under the bed.

"What of the staff?" Severus asked.

"Some were injured, most not very badly."

"Did any die?"

"Sinistra. She was one of the first killed." He could find out later that it had been Slytherin students who had done it. "Filch was very badly injured. There was a stray Death Eater loose in the castle," she said, a slight lie, as she didn't believe that Goyle had borne the Dark Mark. "Filch was in the wrong place at the wrong time and then he wasn't found right away. He will live, but he will probably have to retire. Hooch was hurt and will have a long recovery, but it looks as though she will live."

"Anyone else killed?"

"There were some other losses."

"That many that you cannot tell me?" A sudden thought occurred to him. "What about McGonagall? Gareth?"

"He is here in the infirmary. When he is well enough to be moved, he will probably go to St. Mungo's for further assessment and treatment."

"What happened to him?"

"They think it was a *Frangere*. It hit him in the back. Fortunately, he was wearing his Graphornhide tunic, or it probably would have killed him. As it was, it broke his spine in several places, and a few ribs, too."

"Will he be all right?" Severus felt unaccountably concerned about the younger wizard.

"We think so. His spinal cord was not directly affected, though there was a lot of swelling . . . we think he will be fine. He just needs to be seen by the specialist at Mungo's."

"And Crouch?"

"He is unhurt," Poppy said, busying herself with his sheets and adjusting his pillows.

"Who in the Order was killed?"

"Oh, Severus, you really should wait."

"Who?"

"I don't know everyone who belonged to the Order or who didn't," Poppy said with a sigh, resigning herself to reciting at least enough names to satisfy Severus, "but Viktor Krum flew with Hooch's squadron, and he was killed. Molly Weasley was killed in the initial assault on the castle. Scrimgeour was killed then, too. Then when Harry went out the first time, there was a small skirmish and Percy Weasley was killed by a curse meant for his sister." Poppy shook her head. "More of them died than us, Severus. Why don't I get Hermione, and then you can rest?"

Severus nodded, suddenly very tired again. "What time is it?" he asked before the matron reached the door.

"Almost ten. At night. The battle was this morning, just after dawn."

Severus settled back against the pillows and closed his eyes. His arm and shoulder hurt and he felt generally sick, but he was alive. It seemed impossible.

Poppy turned back suddenly. "I don't know whether you care or not, but Lucius Malfoy is still alive. Gareth and Twiskett rescued him. It looks like he might make it, too. They brought him to Mungo's just before you got here."

Severus didn't care. Not much. "When can I see Minerva?"

"After you've rested. She's not awake yet, anyway. I'll get Hermione for you."

Severus had fallen asleep again after Poppy left, and when he woke up, he was being examined by a witch whom he didn't recognise.

"Shh." The witch continued casting diagnostic spells as she nodded in the direction of the chair on the other side of his bed.

Hermione was asleep; the chair had been Transfigured from the standard infirmary issue, and Hermione's head rested against a high, well-padded wing.

"We can wake her when I'm done," the witch whispered. "She didn't want to disturb you, but she wanted to be here when you woke up next."

Severus nodded, wondering who this witch was. There was something familiar about her, but it might simply be the easy, efficient manner with which she cast the spells, a manner that so many experienced Healers possessed: no wasted wand movement, a relaxed but well-controlled flow of magic, and an almost seamless progression from one spell to the next. The witch had to be well over one hundred, but she was slim, straight, and vital, her eyes bright.

"I am quite well-acquainted with you, Professor, but you are probably wondering who this strange witch is," the Healer said softly after she cast one final spell, which relieved the ache in his shoulder and arm. "I'm Egeria Egidius. I looked after you while we were waiting to return you to Hogwarts." Egeria smiled. "Perhaps I should more properly say, I helped Hermione look after you."

"You're Minerva's mother." Severus had never met Egeria before, though he had heard her name.

Egeria nodded. She looked over at Hermione. "She'll want to stay with you, but try to encourage her to get some real rest. She breathed for you almost nonstop for more than six hours, and that wasn't the half of what she did. She was quite remarkable. You are a lucky wizard, Professor. Even though you received timely attention, you were still very near death. That snake's venom had some very nasty properties, both chemical and magical. I may have worked on your blood and body, but it was Hermione's dedication that saved you."

Egeria touched Severus's wrist, a light gesture, then she was gone.

Severus watched Hermione sleep for a few minutes, then he called her name. She stirred slightly, and he repeated her name.

"Severus! You're awake!" Hermione passed her hand over her eyes, clearing them of sleep.

"Yes. Thanks to you," Severus said. "I don't remember much, but I remember that you were there. Madam Pomfrey and Healer Egidius told me that you treated me, that you saved my life."

Hermione shrugged. "It was what I could do. I am just very glad I didn't fail. Egeria did all the real Healing." She leaned forward and looked at him more closely, brushing some of his hair back in an intimate gesture. She blushed and leaned back. "You look better. Almost like yourself again. How do you feel?"

Severus winced as he tried to shrug. "Much better than I did when I thought I was dying," he replied. "Could you ask Twiskett to wait outside? He's under the bed, I think."

Hermione smiled. "Yes, he was pretty insistent."

After Hermione had knelt and asked Twiskett if he would leave them alone for a few minutes, Severus raised his left hand and touched her arm, the slight pressure an almost imperceptible invitation to sit beside him.

"How did you do it? I remember enough that I don't understand how it was possible. There were Death Eaters there, and Nagini...what happened to her? How did you find me and get me out of there?"

Hermione perched on the edge of the bed, hesitating. Everyone had agreed that until he was more recovered, it was better not to shock Severus with the news of Albus's survival. She was sure that Severus would find the information not only shocking, but disturbing, given the depth of his grief and guilt over the Headmaster's death.

"We knew you'd probably be in the Shrieking Shack, remember? Professor McGonagall had her niece train me with the *Prospirator* spell; they believed it likely that you'd be bitten by Nagini. Melina and her father had worked on a potion that they hoped would treat the effects of the venom, and it did help. I snuck into the Shrieking Shack about the same time you got there. Professor Crouch helped me. We were Disillusioned. Everyone was so distracted by Riddle's rantings, no one detected us."

Severus frowned. He wouldn't have believed such a thing possible, but clearly, it was, since he was there in the Hospital Wing. "And Nagini?"

"She was a Horcrux, aside from being dangerous. I killed her with the Gryffindor Sword." Hermione grew pale as she thought of those moments. "It was all so horrible, being there, seeing and hearing what was happening to you, but unable to do anything until after Riddle left." Hermione blinked rapidly against her tears. "I'm sorry. I shouldn't upset you."

Severus took her hand. "I'm fine, Hermione," he said softly. "After doing what you did, you shouldn't worry about that, about upsetting me."

"I was all right, or almost all right, once we got to you and I was able to help you. It gave me something to concentrate on. But now . . ." She swallowed hard.

"You need some sleep, Hermione. A good, long sleep." He twitched a smile. "I doubt I'll be going anywhere soon, and I'm feeling tired, myself. Come see me when you wake up. You can give me all the news that Poppy was so reluctant to share with me." He released her hand and brushed his fingers through the few tears on her cheeks. "If it weren't so utterly inadequate," he whispered, "I would say thank-you."

Hermione took his hand in hers and held it to her face for a moment, her eyes closed. When she opened them, she blushed and laid his hand back on the bed, but only slowly releasing it. "I'm sorry. I just am very glad you are alive."

"Come back when you wake up, Hermione. I never believed I would live to see this day, you know. I don't know what to think or do, but I do know that we are supposed to take a brain holiday together." His lips formed a small smile. "You know, after Nagini bit me, I thought I was hallucinating. I thought you were a hallucination, but I was happy, thinking about one last brain holiday with you. We can see each other later, after you have rested, and take a real brain holiday together."

"All right," Hermione said softly, sliding from the bed. "I'm sure you need to sleep, too. I'll see you later. We'll have our brain holiday then."

She quickly bent and kissed his cheek, then rushed from the room, leaving him startled but oddly warmed.

When Melina stepped into the room fifteen minutes later, Severus was asleep again, his face relaxed. She thought he looked better in that moment than she had ever seen him, despite the lingering effects of the snake's venom and all his other physical ills. Twiskett was back under the bed, and Melina bent and whispered to him to call her if Professor Snape woke up. They were taking his care in turns, she, her grandmother, and Poppy, though they had an infirmary full of other patients they were helping to treat, too. Poppy and Egeria were both asleep, dead to the world on small beds that had been set up in Poppy's office.

Melina cast a few diagnostic spells, ones that wouldn't wake her patient, and was satisfied with what she saw. He could begin eating mild solid foods later that morning. She would start him with a little egg custard and see how he felt. They had been transferring nutritional potion directly into his stomach, but that was hardly ideal, no matter how good the potion, and he would probably want to go to the toilet naturally soon, too. It would be good for him to get out of bed, stand, walk the few feet to the toilet and back. They would give him an exercise programme, as well, primarily just some walking, but also a few gentle exercises for his right arm. Spells and potions were all very well, but despite the lack of necrosis and the rapid treatment he had received, the muscles of his right arm and shoulder still would need some rehabilitation after the nasty effects of Nagini's venom. As a Potions master, Severus would need to regain his strength and full range of movement in that arm.

Melina used her wand to raise the sheet and open the right sleeve of Severus's gown. She was pleased by what she saw. There should be almost no scarring. In a few weeks, even she would have a hard time finding where he had been bitten, particularly if he did his exercises and built up his right bicep. There were potions that would help the muscles regenerate, but they were more effective when coupled with exercise.

Yes, physically, Severus should recover quite well. Melina was less certain about his psychological well-being. Right now, he was still coming to terms with the fact that he was alive when he had expected to die. But now he had a future, one he hadn't thought he would have, and finding a new purpose while dealing with his past, with all he had done and all he had been subject to, that would not be easy for him, and Melina didn't know whether Severus had the tools to cope with it all.

She closed up his gown and covered him with the sheet again, then dimmed the lamp even further. His room was one of the only ones with a window, but heavy curtains covered it, and the dawn that would arrive shortly would not wake him. Albus might even be able to sneak in and see him again, though she agreed with Poppy that Albus should wait before doing that again. It could be too much of a shock if Severus were to wake up while Albus was there. She hoped that she wouldn't have to be the one to tell him that Albus was alive.

"Blaise wants to see you," Hermione said apologetically after they had chatted a few minutes and she reassured him that she had slept well and had eaten. "I didn't know what to tell him. He knew I was going to see you this morning, and I couldn't lie to him about that. Well, I could have, but it seemed silly. He's outside. Melina said it's all right if you feel up to it."

Severus nodded. From the little he had been told, he had good reason to be proud of Zabini. "He can come in."

Hermione let Blaise in, then discreetly left the two alone, closing the door behind her.

"Professor Snape," Blaise said with a nod. If he felt awkward or nervous, he didn't show it.

"Zabini." Severus looked up at the young man in front of him. Snape's Slytherins. "Have a seat."

Blaise sat gracefully. "How are you, sir?"

"Surprised to be here," Severus said honestly. "People tell me that you acquitted yourself well."

"I did what was necessary. Slytherin House did their part. Except for a few whose enthusiasms were other than ours, sir."

"More than a few, I am sure."

Blaise sidestepped the implied question. "Everyone is looking forward to seeing you. Professor Slughorn is looking after those of us who are still in the castle...many students went home this morning after breakfast...but you're our Head of House." Blaise opened the book bag he was carrying and pulled out a packet of letters. "These are from your Slytherins, sir."

Severus took the letters and cards, which were tied together with a piece of green cord. "This many?" he whispered.

"There are forty-six." Blaise smiled, looking awkward for the first time. "One from me, too."

"Forty-six," Severus repeated.

"All of your Slytherins, the ones who were with me yesterday," Blaise explained. "I tried to take care of them as you asked me to, sir. I didn't leave any of the first- or second-years with the others. They and some of the third- and fourth-years stayed in the Hospital Wing, out of danger. The rest of us were with Potter and the Headmistress. There were fourteen of us facing him together."

Severus just looked at Blaise, uncomprehending. How could there be so many? He hadn't believed there could have been.

Blaise quirked a smile. "I can be persuasive, Professor. And not everyone was as happy with the prospect of a Dark Lord as they believed they should be. I think that once they had an alternative they could take, they were happy to leave brutes like Goyle to their own destruction, particularly after...Well, I thought it was just Daphne and I from our year, but Parkinson surprised me. I hadn't even tried to persuade her, she'd always been so thick with the others, but when she saw what was happening, she asked to join us. Of course, she knew what we would do to her if she decided to change her mind in the middle of things, but she didn't even retreat to the Hospital Wing with the

younger ones before the battle like I thought she might. Not until she was injured. She's all right now, though. Still the same bitchy princess she always was, so no change there." He smiled at his own joke.

"What happened? You said something happened, and . . . people aren't telling me everything," Snape said.

"Ah, well . . ." Blaise thought only a moment. "Of course, we believed that you'd been killed. That was bad. But then . . . I am sorry, sir, but I didn't know what was happening. They killed Sinistra. Goyle and Nott. I hadn't thought Nott had it in him, and Goyle . . . I just thought he was too incompetent. I miscalculated," he said softly. "I know you had wanted me to protect them, too, and I didn't."

Sinistra. He felt sick. It was no surprise to him that Poppy hadn't told him about Goyle and Nott. Those two, and any who had helped them, would have no future. "What happened to them?"

"Goyle was caught and locked up by Professor Slughorn, Lupin, and an Auror. Then in the afternoon, he was sent to some new jail the Ministry has. Nott was, too. The rest of the others were let out of the lower dungeons last night and went home this morning, except for some younger ones whose parents were killed and captured. They're staying in Slytherin until the Ministry figures out what to do with them."

Severus nodded. He would let others worry about that. Slughorn, Minerva, the Ministry. His brain felt foggy. "Thank you for coming, Zabini. You did well." He touched the packet of letters. "I will have to read these later."

"Of course, sir. I'll let you rest now." The young wizard stood. "I am thinking of applying to the Ministry for guardianship of all the underage Slytherins who have no parents. Even the ones who weren't with us yesterday morning."

Severus blinked and looked up at Blaise. "What?"

"My family has resources. I don't think that the Ministry will be opposed. It will be one less thing for them to worry about. If it's something you approve of."

"Yes, of course. If that is what you want to do." Severus tried to comprehend it. "All of them? Are there many? Of course there are . . ." A generation of Slytherins with debts to the Zabinis. It could be worse, much worse.

"Then I will do that." Blaise picked up his bag. "I will let everyone know you are recovering and that you have their letters."

Severus watched blankly as the young Slytherin left the room.

"Are you all right?" Hermione asked as she came back in.

Severus looked at her and let out a breath. "I don't know."

"Should I call Melina? Are you in pain?" Hermione asked worriedly.

"I . . . no, don't call her. I am uncomfortable, but it's not that. I just feel that I don't understand anything. Everything is strange."

"That is probably partly because you're still not one hundred percent," Hermione said. "And it's all a little strange. What are these?" She indicated the packet of letters which his hand rested on.

"Letters. Get-well cards, I presume. From some of the Slytherins."

Hermione smiled. "Snape's Slytherins. You have more post waiting for you. Madam Pomfrey is keeping it for you until you're well." She sat on the edge of the bed again. "Blaise isn't the only one who wanted to see you, you know. He was here representing all of Slytherin House, of course. But Harry has asked about you, Neville was hovering about yesterday afternoon wondering how you were, and both Professor Flitwick and Professor Sprout visited you briefly while you were still unconscious. They were very happy to see you. Professor Flitwick, especially. Professor Slughorn came up as soon as we arrived in the infirmary yesterday afternoon. And Professor MacAirt has asked about you, too. Of course, they're quite busy with the school. Since you're still recuperating, Professor Flitwick has sort of become Acting Headmaster."

"How is the Headmistress?"

"She's doing better. She woke up earlier this morning. Healer Baton seems to think she'll be up and around in just a few days."

"Baton?"

"He's from St. Mungo's. On loan, sort of. There are a couple mediwitches, too. A lot of wounded were transferred to St. Mungo's, including most of the Death Eaters, but those whose conditions were very serious and who couldn't be moved remained here, as did those with very minor injuries. Most of them were actually released this morning, so it's calming down."

"I've only seen Poppy, Melina, and Healer Egidius."

"You get the VIP treatment, of course!" Hermione explained, plumping his pillows then flicking her wand to adjust the head of the bed. "Only the best for you."

"I want to see Minerva."

"I'll tell Melina. I'm sure you can see her soon."

"Now," he said, pushing himself upright. The room swam, but he didn't lie back down. No one had told him how Sinistra had died. What else were they hiding from him?

"Let me talk to Melina." Hermione looked at him with concern. "Lie back down, Severus."

"Poppy and Melina wouldn't tell me anything earlier. And I asked for a *Daily Prophet* and they said they didn't have one. I find that hard to believe. Is Minerva dead or dying? Is that what everyone is hiding from me?"

"No! Of course not!" Hermione remembered some of the headlines of that morning's *Prophet*: *You-Know-Who Dead! Dumbledore Lives! Boy-Who-Lived Lives Again!* The pictures on the front page included ones of Albus and Harry returning from the Forbidden Forest where they had incinerated Riddle's body. There was very good reason the newspaper had been kept from him. "The Headmistress will be fine. She had a cracked skull and some magical depletion...on top of just being in the battle, she helped Harry with Riddle, from what I understand, and that was tiring...but she is alive. Listen, I'll find copies of the *Prophet* for you. I'll keep them and you can read all about everything once you're feeling better."

Severus leaned back. "I still want to see her."

An hour later, Severus shuffled into a dimly lit room. He registered that Hermione was saying something about waiting for him outside, but his focus was on the slight figure in the bed before him. It had been a short walk, but his legs were trembling from the exertion despite the cane that he had reluctantly accepted. He sank down into the chair beside the bed.

Minerva was asleep, and she looked thin and pale to him. She still had gauze on one side of her head and much of her hair had been closely cropped. But she was there

and alive.

Severus leaned forward and touched her. "Minerva? Minerva?"

"Hmmm. Albus?" Minerva's eyes opened slowly.

"It's Severus."

"Oh, Severus." She smiled slightly. "I am glad to see you. Though I wish I could see you better."

"I don't have my wand." He wondered where it was, if Hermione had saved it. "I'm sorry."

"Come closer. Can you come closer?" She took his hand as he scooted forward on the chair. "I didn't think I'd be seeing you for another day or so. They told me you were still fairly ill. Visiting you was first on my list of things to do once they let me up. Other than having a proper visit to the loo."

He smiled at her joke. "I was worried about you. I'm glad you'll be all right."

She nodded. "I'm fine, just a headache now. I'll be happy when Poppy gets more hair-growth potion in, though. Apparently she didn't think it necessary to stock up on that one." She raised one hand to her head. "I'm sure you've seen me looking better."

"I'm just glad to see you."

"Have you seen Gareth? They said that they'd bring him to St. Mungo's later today. I want to see him, but they won't let me up yet even though I feel fine. I know he's in good hands, but you know how people are, wanting to spare you bad news."

Severus nodded. "That's why I wanted to see you myself. I didn't know if they were keeping something from me. Poppy told me that Sinistra was dead, but I didn't know how she was killed until Zabini came to see me. I was worried. It still feels as though there's something they aren't telling me."

"That's probably just because so much has happened; it's hard to know where to begin," Minerva said. "I am glad you saw Zabini. He is a fine wizard. He and the others who were loyal to the school called themselves 'Snape's Slytherins,' and when Riddle was trying to get them to turn on us, let me see . . . I will try to remember his words. He said, 'We are the true Slytherins. We are Snape's Slytherins. We fight for ourselves and Professor Snape.' You thought that you hadn't done a good job with them, Severus, but they took you for their example."

Severus nodded. "I still cannot quite believe it," he said softly. "It is one incredible thing after another. Waking up alive was only the first surprise."

"There are a few more for you," Minerva said, trying to sit up, pulling a pillow around behind her. "For example, do you know who joined Snape's Slytherins, other than your students?"

"Twiskett," Severus answered promptly. "He has set up housekeeping under my bed."

Minerva smiled at that. "Yes, but there was another: Ronald Weasley."

"He just didn't want to leave Potter," Severus said cynically.

"True, but he was content to call himself one of Snape's Slytherins when he was interviewed by the *Prophet*, so I wouldn't dismiss him so quickly. And Harry was worried about you. He knew that we hoped Hermione had saved you, but we hadn't had any word from anyone. He was glad to hear you survived." Minerva squeezed his hand gently. "You've created a new role model for what a Slytherin might be."

"As long as they don't look too far into my past," Severus replied. "I also still half expect to be carted off to Azkaban as a Death Eater."

"That could never happen. We would all go with you before we let that happen, even if we had to go out and . . . and start casting spells in the middle Piccadilly Circus to get arrested! Besides, the new Minister will be closing Azkaban permanently. The last few prisoners will be moved as soon as they have a new location for them."

"Have you read the *Prophet*?" Severus asked, looking around the room for the newspaper.

"No. Someone just read me bits and pieces."

"Oh." Severus frowned. "Poppy and Melina said they didn't have a copy."

"I doubt that reading the newspaper has been high on their list of priorities," Minerva replied. She yawned. "You know, Severus, you still look like you should be in bed, and much as I would prefer to sit here and chat with you, I'm beginning to feel sleepy again. All these potions they're giving me, I expect. But if you feel up to it, could you see if you can peek in on Gareth for me? I don't know if they'll let me see him before he has to be transferred."

Severus nodded. "I think I can shuffle that far," he said drily. "Do you have a message for him?"

"No, just look in on him for me. Everyone tells me how good he looks, but they say it with these cheery smiles on their faces that make me doubt that he looks good at all. I don't think I could love him more if he were my own son, Severus, and he is so very like my brother. I'd rather know the truth. I know I can trust you not to sugarcoat anything."

Severus nodded. "I understand."

Much to Hermione's distress, since Egeria and Madam Pomfrey had been quite clear that Severus was to return directly to bed after visiting Minerva, Severus duly shuffled off to find Gareth. Rather than have him overtake himself looking for the Ravenclaw, and it was obvious he was going to do just that, Hermione led him directly to the curtained area where Gareth lay. Severus could hear soft voices coming from behind the white curtain.

"Now, Professor Snape, Gareth is here behind these curtains," Hermione said in what he considered an unnecessarily loud voice, particularly given the other patients who were no doubt lying behind the other curtains.

Hermione pulled aside one of the long white curtains and peeked in. "Oh, well, he has a visitor. I don't know if he's allowed any others," she said.

"I don't want to disturb him, just see him." Severus was getting tired. He was also beginning to think that Minerva was right, and they were hiding something from her. Even Hermione seemed to be a part of it.

The curtain moved further aside and Neville Longbottom stepped out. "It's all right, Hermione. I'm just leaving. I was just thanking him for keeping me from doing something I'd regret." He looked up at Severus. "I'm glad to see you, too, sir."

Severus nodded. He was tired. He wanted to see McGonagall and go back to his own bed.

Neville moved aside and Severus stepped in, leaning heavily on his cane and closely followed by Hermione. McGonagall was lying flat on his back.

"Is that Snape?" Gareth's eyes moved toward them.

"Yes," Severus replied.

"Sorry if I don't get up," Gareth said. "They have me immobilised. It's damned annoying. Can't even move my head. Can you move around so I can see you?"

Severus made his way to the head of the bed. Gareth's colour was good, but his stillness was disturbing. He was usually so filled with energy, to see him like that was disconcerting.

Gareth grinned. "I knew they couldn't kill an old bastard like you, Snape! So, when do I get my drink? Did you think I'd forgotten?"

Severus looked down the other wizard's motionless body. "When we're both out of here, McGonagall. It is good to see you are as intolerable as ever."

"Glad you appreciate my finer qualities. You look like hell, though. You should sit down."

"He *should* be in bed. Madam Pomfrey is going to kill me," Hermione said, agitated.

"I hear that my gift was useful," Gareth said, ignoring her.

Severus lowered himself carefully into the wooden chair by the head of the bed. "It was satisfying to have it."

"Riddle was really upset you cut his precious Nagini," Hermione said. "It was disgusting, him hissing away at her, petting her, hissing and hissing, then telling her that she could eat the wizard who did that to her." Hermione shuddered at the memory.

"He must have come completely unhinged when he saw what you did to her," Severus said.

"I don't know if he ever knew exactly what happened to her. After we left, the Shrieking Shack burned down to the ground."

"It's gone?" He appeared shocked.

"I'll tell you all about it later," Hermione said. "I think you need to get back to bed."

Severus looked back over at Gareth. "You don't look very good. Can you move at all?"

"Fingers and toes. See?" Gareth wiggled them in demonstration. "They tell me I'd be able to move more if they removed the immobilisation, but they don't want to do that yet. Something about swelling, my spinal cord, danger of paralysis, that kind of thing. They want to check me out at St. Mungo's before they remove the spell. I'm not too uncomfortable, though."

"You will recover? Be able to move, use a wand . . . walk?"

"So they tell me. I hope they're right. When the potions begin wearing off, I do have pain, which I find encouraging. To a point."

"I understand," Severus said with a nod. "I will inform Minerva. She was concerned."

"I'm looking forward to moving to St. Mungo's, to be honest. Mum is there, and I'm hoping to see her. But you are tired and I think I probably need to have something done to me soon. See you later, Hermione. And don't forget our drink, Snape. I'm sure I'll have quite a thirst when I get out of there."

Severus squinted at the sudden light. Poppy was pulling back the curtains and letting in the morning sun.

"Good morning, Severus!" she said cheerfully. "I thought you might like to see the sun this morning. You have a choice of breakfasts today: porridge with skimmed milk or a plain omelette. Egeria also wants you to have some fruit, and we have pureed pears or apple sauce."

Severus lifted his lip in disgust. "They both sound vile. And I don't like plain omelettes. Cheese, at least, something sharp. I do not understand why I am required to eat baby food. The snake bit my arm, not my stomach," Severus grumbled. "And skimmed milk is abominable at any time."

Poppy laughed. "I can probably get you some fresh berries if you prefer, but I don't know how well they will sit on your stomach, and if you don't want a plain omelette, I suppose you could have a couple soft-cooked eggs instead."

Severus raised an eyebrow. "You did that on purpose. Holding back another alternative, the one you knew would be the least distasteful to me."

"It's not only our Headmistress who can be a little Slytherin at times, Severus. She's better at it than I am, though. You saw through me immediately."

"Hmmp. You are not as transparent as some are, though."

"Speaking of Gryffindors..."

"Were we speaking of Gryffindors?" Severus asked as Poppy raised the head of his bed.

"I was. Harry was here earlier. He said he'd be back after breakfast. If you don't want to see him, I can tell him you're too tired."

"The hero of the wizarding world? Why would I turn down an opportunity to meet with him? What are they calling him now? The Boy-Who-Didn't-Die-Twice?"

Poppy smiled. "Something like that, I'm sure. So you'll see him?"

"It would be more diverting than sitting here staring at the walls." He sounded morose.

"You will have plenty of diversion later today, Severus. Melina has designed an exercise programme for you. You are to begin this afternoon. You will even have your own coach who will make certain you don't shirk!"

"Lovely." Surviving the Dark Lord was just one party after another.

"Good to see you, Snape."

"I'm sure. Disappointed you again, no doubt," Severus said.

Harry laughed. "I just wanted to thank you. I talked to Zabini at dinner last night. He said he saw you yesterday. I figured I'd look in on you today."

"You have seen me."

"You look pretty good for a man who was supposed to be dead." Harry pulled up a chair.

"And you are alive. I presume that he used the *Avada Kedavra* on you and destroyed his own Horcrux?"

Harry nodded.

"And him. Did you draw his blood from him?"

"Yes...you seem to know all about it. We were going to use the Gryffindor Sword, but then Gareth McGonagall threw a knife at him, and that was all I needed."

"I *don't* know all about it," Severus said with irritation. "No one will tell me anything and I haven't seen a newspaper. I only know what we had determined were the possible outcomes. What happened when he cursed you?"

Harry rubbed his scar. What had happened when he was cursed . . . "Riddle wanted me to surrender at dawn, so I did. Ginny Weasley was supposed to be in the infirmary, but she wasn't. She didn't understand what I was doing, and she ran out from the castle." Harry sighed. "Percy stopped her, but Riddle cast a Killing Curse and it hit him. Riddle was getting ready to cast another *Avada Kedavra* at Ginny and Gareth, who had run out to get them, but Malfoy distracted him. I had told Riddle that Professor McGonagall called him the toe-rag, so Malfoy taunted him with that. Riddle cast the *Avada Kedavra* at Malfoy. I knew I had to be hit by that curse, so I thought that would be as good a moment as any, and I might be able to save Malfoy at the same time. He never did kill Malfoy. Anyway, the curse pulled his bit of soul from my body, the magic around it already attracted to the magic of the curse. It felt like . . . like being at a rock concert and having one of the speakers blow up next to you. I actually did think I was dead for a little while, but . . . obviously, I wasn't."

"I thought I was dead," Severus said softly, almost in a whisper, his gaze unfocussed. "I saw Hermione, but I also thought I saw Death. He looked like Albus."

"Harry! Harry! Wake up now!"

Harry blinked up at the indistinct figure above him, then blinked again, still seeing stars in a midnight sky.

"You were dreaming, Harry. It's time to wake up. Riddle will be back and we have to be ready."

"Dreaming," Harry said stupidly, sitting up. He looked around him. "I'm still dreaming."

"No, you're not. We're actually in the Room of Requirement. I suppose this is the room it thought we would require."

It was Dumbledore's office, all the whizzing and spinning gadgets around them, Fawkes's perch, the large desk that Professor McGonagall still used.

"We were in King's Cross Station," Harry said, blinking. "Now we're here. It didn't work, did it? I'm dead. I won't have to kill Riddle after all."

"I'm sorry, Harry, but you are going to have to kill him. An interesting dream you had, but you must have heard me calling you, and brought me into your dream. I cast *Renervate* and then called to you."

"But you're dead, sir. You might not realise it," Harry said gently, thinking perhaps Dumbledore was confused; he had been very ill when he died, after all, "but you are dead. So I must be, too."

Albus laughed. "That is impeccable logic, Harry, but unfortunately, one of your premises is false. When we have more time to sit and talk, I will tell you more about how we did it, but I didn't die. Well, I did die, but only a little, not all the way, and when I was resuscitated, I was renamed. As I say, I can explain more later, or if I really am killed, Minerva or Melina can. But for now, simply understand that it was all a ruse, a deception. And we have to continue it just a little bit longer."

Albus held out his hand and helped the young wizard to his feet.

"Your hand! Are you sure you aren't dead, sir?"

"Quite. We healed that a few months before we faked my death. Let's sit down now and I'll take a few minutes to explain how you can kill Riddle. You gave back what you had of his, and now you must reclaim what he stole from you." He held up the Sorting Hat and pulled the Gryffindor Sword from it. "I will attempt to strike him with this. With any luck, I'll be able to get in a killing blow, but that's hardly likely. It is more probable that I will simply be able to slash him and then, perhaps, be killed myself as a consequence...though I will try to avoid that, of course. If I am killed and have not been able to strike him, Minerva has Slytherin's copper knife, and she will attempt to use that. I think that once I have tried to attack him with the sword, though, he will be expecting a physical attack, and so even if she succeeds in nicking him, he'll likely kill her, too. Perhaps as he's distracted, though, you will be able to cast a slicing hex of some sort if he's not already cut. It is important to draw blood, any amount, even if you just punch him and give him a bloody nose."

"My blood. He took my blood when he created his new body. He took it forcefully," Harry said.

"Exactly. And you can reclaim it."

"But how?"

"You are a full-grown wizard now, Harry. Your magic is strong. You know the power of intent. Reach out with your magic and take it back. You can do that; it belongs to you. It is your right."

Harry made a face. "I don't want it back. After being in him...even if there's nothing evil in his blood, the thought is still disgusting." He shuddered.

"No, you don't want it back. Just as he destroyed what he gave you, you must destroy what you take back from him. If Minerva and I are both there, we have a plan to help you with that, a shield we can cast that will also destroy the blood as you draw it to you. If neither of us is there, you will need to improvise, I'm afraid."

"This doesn't sound like a sure thing," Harry said. "He could still win. He could kill me and live."

"He could, but I have faith that events will bring you to victory if you are resolute. You are doing this not just for yourself, but for the wizarding world. And you won't be alone. There is an army ready to defend the castle, and Minerva and I will be with you. When I plucked you from the ground..."

"You? How?"

"I am an Animagus...my registration is sealed, and it is somewhat, um, inaccurate. But I take the form of a phoenix. I don't have all of the properties of a phoenix, obviously, but I can fly and I can Apparate whilst in my Animagus form, which is rather convenient."

"Professor McGonagall told me she raised Anti-Apparition wards in the castle again, though."

"In the castle, yes, but I brought us to the top of the Astronomy Tower. After that, I'm afraid it was a matter of brute magic and muscle to get us here, and as I'm no longer Headmaster, I don't have access to as many short-cuts as I once did. I could probably have managed to Apparate here in my Animagus form anyway, but I didn't want to risk it with you in Side-Along." Albus looked at his wristwatch. "We have to hurry. I don't think that it will be much longer before he gets frustrated looking for you and comes back and attacks the castle."

Harry and Albus stood.

"Wait...you said you took another name. Who were you? Were you around all this time?"

Albus smiled. "I was renamed. You knew me as Robbie Crouch. Robert Crouch hasn't been at Hogwarts since last March. It is quite a story, Harry, and I'll tell you more about it when this is over . . . the entire truth will probably remain untold until after all of those involved are dead, though."

"Potter," Severus said.

Harry stopped in the doorway and looked back at him.

"Scrimgeour's dead. Who's the new Minister?"

"Tiberius Ogden, but only temporarily. They're saying it will be Kingsley Shacklebolt. Probably in just a day or two."

Severus tried to restrain his sigh as he leaned back against his pillows.

"Do you need something? Should I get Madam Pomfrey?"

Severus shook his head. "What don't I know, Potter? I haven't seen a *Daily Prophet*. I think they're keeping me from seeing a newspaper. Are people calling for my head? Is that it?"

"No. I think there was an article about you next to an interview with some of the students. But it just said that you had been spying on Riddle for years and that he tried to kill you but didn't succeed. Also that you teach Potions and all that. And that you aren't a popular teacher. But that was probably the worst thing anyone said about you. So that's not it," Harry said. "They probably just haven't even had time to read the papers themselves, Professor."

"What don't I want to hear?" If anyone would accidentally let the cat out of the bag, it was Potter. No ability to evade whatsoever.

Harry held onto the doorknob. "Well . . . Peter Pettigrew is in some kind of coma, but he's alive. He was being held prisoner with some other Death Eaters, and he just keeled over. The silver in his hand started creeping up his arm and into his body. It seemed to stop once Riddle was dead, but they don't think he'll ever regain consciousness."

"As long as he's not scurrying around somewhere spreading pestilence," Severus said. "What else? There must be some bad news that people think I shouldn't hear. You have never spared my feelings before, Potter. I don't expect you to start now out of some Gryffindor sentimentality."

Harry thought for a moment. "I'm not sure what qualifies as bad news to you. Bellatrix LeStrange is alive. Completely bonkers, but that's not much of a change. Of the dead . . . did you have any friends who were Death Eaters? What I mean is, somebody you, well..."

"I know what you mean, Potter. No. There were some younger ones who I wished hadn't joined him, but no. What about the Order? Lupin...is he alive?"

"Yes, he's fine and back home with Tonks now. You know about Professor Sinistra?" Harry asked. When Severus nodded, Harry said, "I can't think of anyone else who died that might upset you that you don't already know about then. Oh! Yes, I do. Binns!"

Severus snorted. "Binns was already dead, boy."

"Yes, but no one's seen him since some time in the middle of the battle. He was with Nick helping to spot holes in our defences, but no one's seen him since."

"Interesting fact, but hardly warranting any secrecy." Severus shook his head. "Too many years as a spy, Potter. I'm seeing conspiracies where there aren't any. I'll be turning as mad as Moody soon."

Harry shrugged. "There might still be something you'll find out later. I have to go now. I told Ron I'd speak at Molly and Percy's combined funeral. It's tomorrow, and I have no idea what to say." He sighed. "Be glad no one's asking you to do that, Snape. I'm supposed to speak at Scrimgeour's, too, and I was going to say no, but then Professor McGonagall convinced me I should."

Severus dozed, the golden afternoon sun filtering through some gauzy curtains. He had just finished his first set of exercises, and he was tired. It turned out that his "coach" was Hermione and part of his exercise programme consisted simply of taking a walk with her, so it wasn't the unpleasant ordeal he had anticipated. They had only walked up and down the corridor outside the infirmary, but it had been quiet and they'd been alone. Hermione said that this wasn't precisely the kind of walk she'd had in mind a few days before when she'd said she wanted to take a walk with him after Riddle was dead, but that in a day or two, they could go outside and walk in the gardens.

There was a light knock on the partially open door to his room.

"Yes?"

"Severus, it's Minerva. May I come in?" She peeked around the door. Her hair had been cut much shorter on one side, and was still closely shorn on the other.

Severus pushed himself up on his elbows. "Of course! You are up and around; that's good."

Minerva nodded. "I'll spend one more night here to humour everyone, but then I'll be moving back up to the Tower. Filius will still be taking on more responsibility while you and I recuperate, but I'll be meeting with him and making most of the decisions. You, though, I hope you will take your time to really get well. Those last injuries of yours were bad enough; you need to recover from the last few years. I hope you take a holiday."

As she sat in the chair beside him, she waved her wand, activating the charm to raise the head of his bed.

Severus snorted. "I don't take holidays, Minerva. There are simply periods when I am less occupied than others and am not in residence at the castle." Spending time at Spinner's End could hardly be called a holiday. He hated that house.

"Well, it's time you do take a holiday, then. Go somewhere new. Refresh yourself!"

"It is a thought," Severus said, not wanting to crush Minerva's enthusiasm. "Your hair...has Poppy found some potion for you yet?"

"Yes. I started on it this morning." Minerva touched her short hair self-consciously. "We trimmed the rest of it shorter so that it won't look quite so peculiar over the next couple weeks. We'll keep trimming the longer side until the rest catches up with it. I have another reason to find a new hat for the feast on Sunday."

"Feast?"

"A celebratory dinner in the Great Hall. There will be a memorial aspect to it, as well, of course. Melina said you should be well enough to attend and eat whatever you want, so that's something to look forward to."

Severus sighed. Something to look forward to. He hadn't thought that he would have to look forward to anything.

"It's a Hogwarts event, Severus. I won't make very many demands on you over the next few months, but I would like you to attend. You are still my Deputy, you know!" Minerva's voice was light and teasing, but it was clear she wanted him there.

"I don't like such things," Severus said moodily.

"You have never given yourself the chance to enjoy them. You don't need to be a social butterfly, Severus. Just enjoy the food, watching the people, imagining sarcastic commentary to all the long-winded speeches...it shouldn't be too painful for you. It will be primarily Hogwarts staff and some students, the Order members, and only a few people from the Ministry."

"Very well."

Minerva reached into her pocket. "Hermione told me you were looking for this." She held out his wand.

"My wand!" Severus took it from her. "I don't understand. She said she hadn't thought to pick it up. Did Crouch?"

Minerva hesitated. "Not exactly, Severus. You have had the feeling that something has been kept from you, and you're right. And I'm the person who began it. Almost a year and a half ago, in fact. Melina thought that I should wait another day or two to tell you, give you time to gather more strength, but I couldn't do that to you. It has been hard enough all these months, and I don't want you to discover it by accident."

Severus frowned. "What are you talking about? It's something about the battle they're keeping from me, I'm sure of that. Even Hermione. She changes the subject very adroitly whenever I ask certain questions. No one will bring me a newspaper. Did Crouch die? Is that it? Poppy said he was uninjured, but I haven't seen him and..."

"No, Severus. And there's something that I want you to understand. Until Monday morning, Hermione knew nothing of this. The only secret she was keeping from you was that she received the training and special potions meant to try to save you. Almost no one knew about this other secret." Minerva sighed and rubbed her eyes.

"I understand. There are certain secrets of the Order that were best kept only to those who needed to know. I clearly didn't need to know whatever this was, since the Dark L Riddle is dead, Harry is alive, and, beyond all my expectations, I am alive, too."

Minerva took a deep breath. "I hope you remain so understanding, Severus, though it won't be a surprise if you don't, and I won't blame you, either. And it wasn't a secret of the Order. It was not a part of the Order's plans. It was my plan. I had help carrying it out, but it was my plan."

Albus set down his wine glass. The colours of the *Celebrare* had faded to a warm glow. He had just heard Minerva's plan, only asking a few questions as she explained it. As he listened quietly, and apparently with an open mind, Minerva became encouraged and went into greater detail than she had originally planned.

He looked away thoughtfully. "Because of this," he said, flexing his right hand, "obviously my previous plan is no longer possible. Alternatively, I could try to convince Severus to carry out his Vow, using some of the same techniques you have just described to me in order to have him believe that my hand continues to carry the curse."

Albus looked at his hand and concentrated. He knew well what his hand had felt and looked like after the Gaunt ring had released its curse. He grimaced as he performed an internal Transfiguration on it, not changing it into a dog's paw or a raven's claw as one might during Animagus training, but moulding it into the same form his hand had possessed before the magic of the *Celebrare* had cured it.

"Layered Glamours would allow me to give the impression that I have cast a Glamour to hide my deteriorating health." He picked up his wand and cast a Glamour that made him appear ill, then another one over it to return his healthy glow. "Until Severus killed me, he and everyone else would see a wizard who was in very slowly declining health. There would be no need for the potions that would make me genuinely ill...or I could take only a few mild ones."

Minerva began to feel alarmed. "I don't know if you can persuade Severus," she began.

"I do not believe we will ever find out," Albus said. "I think your plan, with a few adjustments, will work, and I am willing to risk that I may still die if you are willing to risk accidentally killing me. But once we commit to this, we have to carry it out. There will be no turning back, Minerva, no opportunity to change your mind and decide that you cannot carry through with that last step."

Minerva nodded. "I know that. I am not happy about the prospect of failure, the consequences of it. Melina did say that she could, in theory, perform the spell, but she said that given the length of time we will want to have it last, I will have a better chance at success in holding it and resuscitating you, provided she begins training me immediately and I master the spells. If worse comes to worst and I suddenly lose my nerve at the end, she can try it, but if she does, either you will have a higher chance of dying or she will be able to keep that from happening but the effects will be insufficient to achieve everything we want to. Even if I do it, we may have to resuscitate you before certain things happen...Hogwarts may be more sensitive than we believe...and that's one reason why I want Alroy to become Head of Gryffindor. If he were aware of the ruse, he wouldn't wonder about certain things."

"Such as why my name didn't change from blue to grey in the Gryffindor book, for instance," Albus said.

"Exactly," Minerva hesitated. "If this works as thoroughly as we hope, you will lose all of the connections to the castle that you have had for decades. Hogwarts won't recognise you; it will simply believe that you are someone very like Albus Dumbledore, the Headmaster, but that you are not the same Albus Dumbledore. It will be the equivalent of undergoing the Severing Ceremony, but even deeper. That might be hard for you."

"If I were to die, I would lose those connections, anyway," Albus said with a smile. "And I think that if the procedure doesn't succeed as well as we hope, we should do a Severing Ceremony as soon as possible afterward, anyway. In the meantime, I will hand you the care of the wards, and you may keep it. I will soon be too ill to manipulate them, anyway, even though my magic shouldn't be directly affected...it won't be, will it?"

"No, the potions will only affect your physical health; any decline in your magical abilities will be highly temporary and a result of your physical weakening," Minerva said. "We did toy with the notion of using spells and potions that would only affect your appearance, make you *seem* ill without making you genuinely ill, but we all agreed that too many sharp-eyed, sharp-witted witches and wizards will be seeing you, even at the end. If we kept Filius and Poppy away entirely, for example, that in itself would be suspicious, and isolating you from everyone completely would be even more suspicious. Your death has to be unsurprising to those around you, yet sneak up on Riddle, and there must be no questions about the cause of your death. The timing will need to be perfect."

"I am sorry I didn't let Melina examine me thoroughly while I was still afflicted by the curse," Albus said. "I didn't realise why she needed to."

"Would you have allowed me to explain?" Minerva asked.

Albus opened his mouth then closed it. He smiled sheepishly. "No, I suppose I would have stopped you part way in and become even more stubborn," he admitted. "Sorry about that."

"You were doing what you thought was best," Minerva said. "Tomorrow you can spend the day looking at all of our research, see if you can find any flaws or think of any improvements. Gluffy brought me a letter from Gertrude this morning, and she's agreed to work with Gareth on the Arithmancy. I'll be visiting them tomorrow evening and explaining everything to them. They can help us work out the details, especially with the timing. Calum and Murdoch have already begun working on new delivery systems for Polyjuice Potion and ways to make it act longer. Calum seems to think that, using a combination of magical and mundane methods, it should be simple."

"I always do say that Muggles have some of the most clever ideas," Albus said, pouring them each more wine.

"I don't know if there's any easy way of telling you this," Minerva said. "Different people have found out in different ways, most of them very suddenly and with no preparation at all."

Severus looked at Minerva, his perplexity showing on his face. "Just tell me. You are not a witch to beat around the bush."

"You may have noticed that Melina wasn't here this morning. She was in London. At the Ministry."

Severus's confusion grew. "Melina? What does she have to do with anything?"

"You are not the only wizard who survived unexpectedly, Severus. There was another. Melina was involved in saving his life, too, but in rather a different way than she saved yours. Fortunately, after a preliminary hearing, the Wizengamot found that there were no valid charges to be examined, and Shackbolt is in the process of formally sanctioning her actions as serving the war effort, and providing her and those working with her ex post facto approval for anything that might have contravened any law. He also included any experimental Potions work that was done on behalf of either of you that might have skirted some laws. But whatever else may later come to light, Shackbolt's decrees should protect anyone involved."

"Experimental Potions . . ."

"The antivenom potion that you were given was one of them. Arthur Weasley provided some blood for its creation. Without that, the potion would not have been as effective."

"His blood." Severus looked down at his wrists emerging from the loose infirmary gown, as if to examine his veins for evidence.

"Yes. Of course, it wasn't used directly in the potion. They did something to it, or analysed it, or extracted something from it. I'm not clear on that. But it wasn't his blood that went directly into the potion, if you have some superstition or queasiness about that."

"No. No, especially not if it was altered in some way before it was used." Arthur had helped to save his life, and yet his own wife was dead.

"Anyway, Melina has worried about possible legal consequences. She still has to meet with a few people at St. Mungo's, but she's not as concerned about that now."

Severus knit his brow. "She committed some crime?"

"The only specific thing of which they were certain was that it appeared she had falsified a death certificate."

Severus stared at her, still uncomprehending.

"Severus, I am so sorry," Minerva said, her voice breaking. "I wish we could have spared you. I don't know how to tell you . . . Robbie . . . Robbie was not who you thought he was, Severus."

Several expressions seemed to cross Severus's face in rapid succession. "Not who I . . . no. I don't . . . he . . . no."

"There's someone who wants to see you. He helped Hermione in the Shrieking Shack, then he sent the two of you to the Hog's Head. After you returned here, he was only able to come in and see you when you were still unconscious, and when you visited Gareth, he had to hide himself."

Minerva waited for a reaction, but Severus just stared at her. She was sure that he had put the pieces together; he was just either unable or unwilling to see their meaning.

"I think I'll let him know you are ready for him," Minerva said softly. "I will see you later, Severus."

Minerva pushed herself out of the chair and looked down at Severus's stricken face. She didn't believe there was any way to make this easier for him, so she just sighed and left to let in his visitor.

"Not another cat," Minerva said in an anguished voice.

"You're ready this time," Melina replied. "And if you think this is difficult, remember why you are doing it."

Minerva nodded. She stroked the little grey mackerel tabby's head then scratched her jaw. The cat closed her eyes and began to purr.

"You've had more practice. You're better at this now. I am sure you can do it," Melina said. She didn't mention that this cat was perfectly healthy while the first one had been very ill.

Minerva didn't say anything in response, merely continuing to pet the cat and become familiar with her. After a few minutes, she took her wand from her pocket and cast a spell to put the tabby into a deep sleep. She closed her eyes, and with her left hand on the animal's chest, she touched the tip of her wand to a point near her beating heart and whispered, "*Arrestocordis!*"

The cat's heart immediately ceased beating. Minerva didn't move. Melina held her watch in front of her, and after one minute, she said, "Now."

Minerva did not hesitate. "*Animarecordis et vivere!*"

The cat's chest heaved, her limbs twitched, and Minerva could feel her heart beating again. The cat twitched again, then leapt up, hissed at them both, and ran and squeezed herself beneath a bookcase. Minerva laughed and Melina hugged her.

"Next time, we'll do it for two minutes," Melina said, "but that's the outside limit I want you to practise."

"It will probably take longer than that when the time comes to actually do it, though," Minerva replied. "You said at least three minutes, possibly longer."

"Three and a half minutes . . . that's the longest I've ever dared do it, and for the purposes of the treatments I was performing, that was sufficient, but what you wish to achieve may require longer," Melina confirmed.

"How long?"

Melina shook her head. "I don't know. I can legitimately declare him dead as soon as his heart ceases beating and he stops breathing for more than a few seconds. That would be sufficient if we only wanted to give him a magical death certificate that could withstand scrutiny. But if you want to have Hogwarts register his death . . ." Melina shrugged. "I doubt anyone was ever watching any of the significant markers just at the precise moment of a Headmaster's death before. There's no way to tell, is there? I think you should do something to change the flag without waiting for the castle to note his passing, though, since that will be the most obvious symbol to everyone, and it certainly wouldn't do for someone to notice that the Headmaster's flag is still flying when he is supposed to be dead. You don't have to know much about Hogwarts magic to know there's something odd about that, now. You can do that, can't you?"

Minerva nodded. "That won't be difficult. It simply involves tweaking one of the wards so that it raises the Gryffindor flag instead. If the Headmaster wished the castle to fly a pair of longjohns from the mast when he was in residence, the castle would do that. It's not reliant on the same kind of deeply rooted foundational magic as the others."

"And if you install Aloy in a private ceremony and lock the Gryffindor book away, that will take care of the problem of his name in there. What were the other potential problems?"

"The Hogwarts book. Only the Headmaster or Headmistress and the Deputy have access to it, but if Severus is Deputy, I cannot keep him from it." Minerva frowned. "Still, it is unlikely that Severus would flip back that many years to find Albus's name in the book. He would have no reason to unless he suspected that Albus was alive. In all my years as Deputy, I've only gone back more than a couple of decades a few times. Nonetheless, if he suspected, or if Riddle or someone at the Ministry did, I don't know

how we would disguise the fact that Albus is still alive if Hogwarts doesn't register his death in that book and someone were to look up his name. Any other effects can be achieved simply by performing a Severing ceremony to cut his magical ties. It would be as though he had never been Headmaster or Head of House, and he will have none of the lingering privileges and abilities that a former Head would normally have. But that would still not affect either the Gryffindor book or the Hogwarts book."

"I really wouldn't want you to go beyond five minutes at the outside," Melina said. "Not unless his death is more important than his resuscitation. But that is something only you and he can decide. I would be very unhappy if you were to decide to have his heart stopped for any longer than that, even if I were to perform spells ahead of time that would cushion any effects on his brain, keep the oxygen level from dropping as fast as it normally would. As I say, though, it is up to you."

"There is that other spell," Minerva began.

"I disapprove of that even more strongly, Auntie Min," Melina interrupted. "It has Dark origins and is tied too closely to the Dark Arts. It has never been used in any procedure like this one, either. It might have an effect that you can't anticipate."

"I have researched it quite carefully," Minerva said. "I believe that the spell, in and of itself, is neutral, certainly no worse than this one that you've spent so long developing to use in conjunction with other Healing spells."

Melina shook her head vehemently. "It is quite different. *Arrestocordis* only acts on the heart. It affects only the body. It's an ordinary charm hardly any different from an *Accio* or an *Arrestomomentum*. The one you propose to use...I don't even *understand* what it's supposed to be acting on, but it's nothing physical, and I cannot approve it. To . . . to tether his life force to you, or whatever that spell supposedly does, that's well beyond the bounds of any medical magic. You might succeed in casting both spells and in resuscitating Albus, but then find that you can't reverse this other one, or that it has some peculiar side-effects that we are not equipped to deal with. And given how very dangerous all of this is anyway, and how difficult the general situation is with the school and the war, I don't think you should risk such a thing."

Minerva nodded soberly. "I understand your concerns. I will think about it longer and discuss it with Albus. I suppose that I fear . . . I fear not only that I might not be able to resuscitate him, and I believe that this might offer a measure of protection against that, but I also fear that when we cut his magical ties to Hogwarts, if we are successful in doing that, that I will lose the ties between us. That is selfish of me. I will reconsider. But," she added with a smile, "I was successful with the cat today!"

"You and Melina are still arguing about the *Adsumo*?" Albus asked a few weeks later.

Minerva sat down beside him on the sofa and took his hand, then leaned against his shoulder. He always seemed so much better before he had taken his morning potions. "Yes. She is still opposed. I told her I would talk to you about it again. Do you want me not to use it?"

Albus was quiet a moment. "It is entirely your decision, Minerva."

"It is your life, though, Albus," Minerva said. "If she's right and there are some side-effects of this spell, it is you who would suffer them."

"As would you," Albus replied. "No, it is entirely your decision. You are the one who is performing the procedure. I want you to do whatever you believe you should."

"Then tell me what you would do if our positions were reversed, or if you were speaking with someone else about it just theoretically. Is it a Dark spell? Do you believe that it is likely to have some adverse effect on you or on us both?"

"I really don't want to influence you in either way..."

"But I value your advice, your analysis," Minerva persisted.

"All right. Then I will say this. You have to do whatever it is that you believe will give the procedure the greatest chance of true success. You need to be able to know that you did all that you could. If anything goes wrong and you didn't perform the *Adsumo*, you would always wonder if you should have. On the other hand, if you resuscitate me but the *Adsumo* has some unanticipated effects . . . that could be worse than failing to resuscitate me at all, and you would have to live with that, as well."

"You do believe that it is a Dark spell, then."

Albus shook his head. "No. Not necessarily. But it has never been used in this context and has only been used in very Dark rituals. You should be able to release it, but if you can't . . . the consequences might be quite dreadful. My body could be a living, breathing shell with my true life force tied to your own, or if my body was unable to be resuscitated and you could not release the *Adsumo* . . . I do not know what I would experience, if anything, nor do I know what you would, but to have my spirit tied to yours . . . it could be very disturbing. And I know that you think that it might increase the chance that the *Animare vivere* will work, that I will survive prolonged *Arrestocordis*, but it is possible that even if you are able to release the *Adsumo*, it will actually sever my life force from my body and will have the opposite effect than what you believe it will."

"No," Minerva replied with a shake of her head. "Of this I am certain. If I am able to perform the *Adsumo* and reverse it, it will never sever the life force from your body, not unless we cannot resuscitate you. It will simply tether it to mine."

"You must use it, then. You will not be comfortable if you do not. You have my permission, and to whatever extent I am able to give it, you will have my cooperation, too," Albus said. "You have always held my heart and my life. I trust you with them, whatever happens."

The door closed behind Murdoch, and Robert cast an Imperturbable.

"It's time, Albus," Minerva said softly.

Albus nodded and smiled slightly. "You've done so well, my love. Thank you."

"I will clear your lungs first," Melina said, "then I will put you into a deep sleep so that it won't be uncomfortable for you. As we discussed, after Minerva resuscitates you, Robert will do his part, then we will need to dose you with Draught of the Living Death before we open the door again."

Albus nodded again. He knew it was not only for his comfort that he was being put to sleep first, it was also for Minerva's. To stop his heart and see him react to that and die would be very disturbing.

Melina cast a spell clearing his lungs and another to decrease the oxygen depletion to his brain, then gave him a potion to help him breathe more easily so there would be no congestion or constriction to affect the resuscitation. "Ready?" she asked as she placed the death certificate beside him on the bed.

"Yes." Albus's eyes met Minerva's and he smiled. "One more adventure for us to take together."

"Just as you promised me all those years ago," Minerva replied, trying to return his smile. She kissed his lips lightly.

Melina cast *Suain*, and Albus's eyes closed and he began to breathe slowly and evenly.

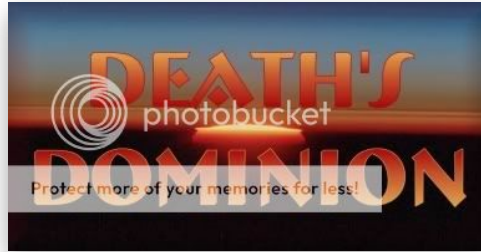
Robert held Melina's watch, waiting for Minerva to cast the spell. Melina sat, holding the Gryffindor book open in front of her. Albus's name was in blue. She hoped to see it turn to grey before Robert gave the four-minute signal.

Minerva nodded at Robert, then she cast. *'Adsumo spiritus tuus! Arrestocordis!'*

Chapter Thirty-One: Life regnant

Chapter 32 of 34

Severus has more than one unexpected visitor. Hermione delivers his newspapers, and he doesn't like something he sees.



Chapter Thirty-One: *Life regnant*

28 31 May 1998; 26 May 1998; 5 January 1997

Severus began to tremble even before Minerva had closed the door behind her. Robbie not who he appeared to be . . . falsified death certificate . . . someone who had lived unexpectedly . . . Severus refused to think any further. The conclusion was impossible. But he remembered his vision of Death, blue-eyed and smiling, so very like someone else . . .

There was a light knock, but Severus simply fell back against his pillows and closed his eyes. A few seconds passed, then the door opened slowly. Severus lay still and heard the door click closed again. Tentative footsteps came closer.

"Severus." His name was a whisper accompanied by a gentle touch to his forehead. "Severus, my dear boy."

Tears leaked from his eyes as he opened them. "Albus?" But Severus did not need to ask; he was there beside his bed. "How?" He took Albus's right wrist. "And your hand?"

"It is a very long story, Severus, and it begins with a very stubborn wizard and an even more stubborn witch."

Severus sat up and touched Albus's face as if to feel his reality. "I don't understand. At all. The tomb. Your body. You died. We mourned you. Gods, we mourned you!"

"I know, and I cannot tell you how painful it was to see you all mourn, especially you, my boy," Albus said softly, his hand resting on Severus's left shoulder. "It was difficult but necessary. Difficult in many, many ways, not least of which was causing you grief."

"But you did," Severus said, his anger bubbling up above his other many emotions. "You did."

"I know," Albus repeated. "I really had decided to allow the curse to take me, to stop all potions and hope to die soon enough that Draco's task would become moot and your Vow with it. Neither Minerva nor I wanted you to die because you wouldn't fulfill the Vow and kill me. There were few options. I saw only one that would allow you to survive. Minerva saw another. I was difficult to persuade and wouldn't listen to her when she tried to get me to think about a different solution, and when I wouldn't, she took matters into her own hands, first consulting with Melina and Murdoch, then working out many of the details without me. I was unreasonable and intransigent. When it came time to involve me, I refused to cooperate, so she took action." Albus held out his hand and stretched his fingers. "It has been long since it has been afflicted by the curse, and almost as long since I had to replicate its most obvious effect, but I can show you how I did that."

Severus watched as Albus's hand gradually turned charcoal black and withered. "Not a Glamour?"

"No. Someone would notice a Glamour. Filius certainly would, Poppy would eventually, and you might detect it, too, no matter how strong the charm."

Albus grimaced but said nothing as Severus took hold of his hand and turned it over, examining it.

Severus looked up. "It hurts?"

"Not as much as when it was actually cursed, but yes, it does," Albus replied.

Severus released the shrivelled hand.

"It is an internal Transfiguration," Albus explained, pausing a moment to concentrate and return his hand to its ordinary state. "That type of Transfiguration you showed some interest in whilst you were ill. Minerva removed the journal from your room." Albus twitched a smile. "She was unhappy with me for having left it there; claimed I'd done so on purpose. I hadn't, at least not consciously, but she was afraid that if you read the article and had time to think about it after you felt better, you might realise there was a way I could have simulated the curse, and that might lead you to have other suspicions. I didn't think that likely, but she made the decisions about such things."

"I don't know . . . Hermione explained more to me about internal Transfiguration, but I had no reason to suspect," Severus said slowly. Or had he? So many little things, inconsequential on their own, now seemed to take on new meaning. Even Minerva's "affair" with Robbie. Everyone had found it surprising, whether they had known of her relationship with Albus or not. He felt some relief to realise that Minerva hadn't been inconstant and so quick to move on as she had appeared to be, nor had she taken up with a married man. "Who knew?" he asked. "Did anyone find out?" Was he the only one so dim not to notice that the Headmistress's lover and the Hogwarts Defence teacher was actually Albus Dumbledore?

"Here at Hogwarts, only Minerva and Alroy knew that Robbie Crouch and Albus Dumbledore were one and the same. Alroy knew we had faked my death, of course, but beyond that, he knew relatively little about the overall plan or how we did it. He's Robert's cousin; he would have known within days, if not sooner, that I wasn't really

Robert. In fact, it was one reason we hired him to teach Transfiguration this year. One more person to add to the verisimilitude of my new identity. Others had met me, er, Robert, over the years, but there was no one else at Hogwarts who had known him well. In order to lessen the confusion among those who were aware of the deception, I became known as 'Robbie' rather than 'Robert.' Only his mother ever calls Robert by that nickname. As to whether anyone found out . . ." Albus hesitated. "There was one here at Hogwarts who deduced it, and then only two others we know of who might have figured it out. Egeria seems to have, although she's said nothing. She was completely unsurprised when Melina told her, however.

"We hadn't told my brother Aberforth. I wished to, but Minerva vetoed the idea. Because of his position and his relationship to me, there was always the possibility that he might be kidnapped or otherwise compromised. Aberforth is fairly adept at throwing off the *Imperio*, but not unfaillingly, and his Occlumency skills are rudimentary. So Minerva convinced me that we should not tell Aberforth the entire truth."

"What did you tell him, then? And did he figure it out?"

"I changed my will to bequeath everything to Minerva but a few minor charitable gifts. Since I had never cut my brother out of my will in the past, that required some explanation," Albus said. "I went and spoke with him in late January and explained that because of certain circumstances to do with the war, I was changing my will. I told him how I was changing it, then gave him a small sum of money and arranged to have certain family items transferred from my home to his. He was curious, but as he has never been grasping and I have never been ungenerous, he was happy enough to receive the family heirlooms before my demise rather than after. If after my death, he thought of any other items he might like, he only had to tell Minerva. I also told him that whatever Minerva might choose to do after my death, he was to assume that it was all with my approval. He promised me that if she ever asked him for his help, he'd give it to her. Anyway, Aberforth claims he became suspicious about my death. When I visited him about a month ago and revealed myself to him, he was only slightly surprised, and he said that he'd guessed I might be masquerading as Robbie."

"He's your brother, though, and you had warned him that appearances might be deceiving," Severus said. "He knows you well."

"Yes, well, he was also not particularly happy to have been included among those who were deceived. He nonetheless agreed to help you and to provide a safe place for you until Hogwarts was secure."

"That's why he closed the Hog's Head a few weeks ago," Severus said.

"He thought it a prudent measure in any case," Albus replied, "but yes, that is why he closed the Hog's Head when he did."

"Who else knew? Melina and her father," Severus said, "but what of the Order?"

"We didn't involve the Order directly, though there were some who performed tasks without realising they were a part of a greater plan. Obviously Robert Crouch had to know. At first, he was simply enlisted by Minerva to help with the Potions work, but we needed someone for me to 'become,' someone who would be both known and unknown. Murdoch offered himself," Albus said with a chuckle, "but Minerva quashed that idea quickly. Not only is he known to a number of the staff here and impersonating him believably for months would be difficult, but as he is Minerva's brother, she found the idea of my looking like him quite nauseating, no matter that she would know that it was really me. It would also have affected our public interactions. We briefly considered Alroy, but again, too many people knew him and many of the staff had taught him. At one point, we even thought of Aberforth, and I believe he would have been willing, but the role that we would need the wizard...me...to take at Hogwarts would not be credible for him, though I believed I could impersonate him effectively. We quickly settled on Robert. He wasn't a complete stranger, but very few people at Hogwarts...or in Britain...had more than a superficial acquaintance with him. I've known him since he was born and thought I could convincingly impersonate him, at least among people who didn't know him well. I prepared by viewing many of Robert's memories in the Pensieve, learning more about him, how he moved and spoke, and, while he was at Hogwarts in February and March, reviewing each day's memories so that he wouldn't have a conversation with someone that I would later not remember."

"You planned this for months," Severus said flatly.

"Yes. Almost since you first told Minerva about the curse and the Vow. It gave us time to prepare and time for me to weaken and die."

"You did not die," Severus pointed out.

"No, not precisely. But I did sicken. We . . . for lack of a better description, I shall say that I poisoned myself over the course of almost three months, very, very cautiously. By the time the appointed hour arrived, I really did feel rather wretched. Melina carefully monitored me, but she still worried constantly that I would be too physically weakened to be able to be revived..."

"Revived? You did die?" He was confused.

"Oh, yes, my boy, I died. Not all of the way, obviously, or I would not be here now...or I would be some dreadful creature with only a semblance of life. But surely you are aware that in Muggle hospitals every day, people are resuscitated after having apparently died. This was no different." Albus quirked a smile. "There's dead-but-revivable and completely dead, I suppose. I was sufficiently dead so that if no measures had been taken to resuscitate me and more time had passed, I would have become completely dead. I wasn't so dead that I couldn't be resuscitated...Melina insists on the word 'resuscitated,' by the way, if you speak to her about it. She says that the words 'revived' and 'revivified' have too many connotations of magical revivification using Dark Arts, and this is not anything like that." Albus blushed. "I'm afraid that I once was one of those who denied there was a meaningful difference, though fortunately, I never said it very loudly. She had her research denied and banned by the Ministry several years ago"

"She's the one who wanted to use Muggle methods to do something in Healing," Severus said with sudden realisation. "I hadn't noticed the name. O'Donald didn't hold much meaning for me until recently. She wanted to use Muggle methods for some reason...something to do with treating curses."

"She wanted to adapt the Muggle methods to stop and restart a patient's heart. She had already had great success in slowing a patient's metabolism, lowering his body temperature and whatnot, but using reliable magic rather than anything Muggle. But the Ministry decided that this new method of hers was too akin to the Dark Arts, no matter what use she made of it. I don't think they ever really read her research or her proposals. They just saw that she proposed killing a person then bringing them back to life a couple minutes later, and that sent them into a thought fog and they were incapable of understanding her proposal."

"Why did you oppose it?"

"Vague concerns. Some superstition, possibly, although I hope that wasn't all it was. Fear for how people might use it." Albus shrugged. "It's actually difficult for me to remember why I wasn't in favour of it, it seems so logical and benign to me now. I had no actual say in the Ministry's decision, though I could have exercised influence if I had wished. Fortunately, Melina simply travelled abroad to continue her research and refine her techniques, so by the time that Minerva approached her about it, she'd been successful with more than one hundred patients from around the world."

"Did she have any failures?" Severus asked, his curiosity overriding his other concerns.

"Several. Not all of them were because the patients died from the procedure. She was using the technique to allow her to treat curses using spells that can't be cast on a living person. Sometimes, merely having the person 'die' for a short time drives the curse from the body. There were occasions when she was unable to treat the curse and the person was no worse off than they had been. There were two cases, though, in which she was unable to resuscitate the patient afterward. In those cases, the curse would have killed them eventually. Not that Melina felt any better about it, but as she says, sometimes when a Muggle surgeon operates on a deadly disease, the operation kills the patient, but the Muggles don't stop operating and saving the thousands of lives they would otherwise lose."

"So you *could* have died." Oddly, Severus found that a comforting thought. He didn't know why.

"Oh, certainly! Minerva did the procedure, and she knew that she might really be killing me, but we believed it worth the risk and better than some of the alternative ends I could meet."

"*Adsumo spiritus tuus! Arrestocordis!*"

Melina touched the tip of her wand to the death certificate and waited a few seconds for the seal to glow, then she began to watch the Gryffindor book closely, waiting for *Albus Percival Wulfric Brian Dumbledore* to begin to fade from blue to grey. As the current Head of Gryffindor, Minerva's name was in scarlet. Between the two, Wilhelmina Grubbly-Plank's name was the same bright blue as Albus's. All the other names were grey.

Melina blinked. She wasn't sure, but she thought the ink seemed less vibrant; she felt as though she had been staring at it for an eternity, though, and might be imagining it. She blinked again. Perhaps it wasn't quite as blue as Grubbly-Plank's name, but it wasn't grey. She took a second to glance up at Minerva, who was still kneeling beside Albus, her left hand flat against his chest, his yew wand trapped beneath it, and her own wand in her right hand, its tip still lightly resting just over his heart. Her face was a mask of concentration, and when Robert said, "Three minutes," she did not move.

Albus's name was still blue, but Melina was certain now that it was a duller blue than it had been. She stared and blinked and stared, willing the letters to turn grey.

"Four minutes."

Melina swallowed. She had never gone that long with a patient before. There was still little danger, and when she had cast the spells to clear Albus's lungs, she had cast one to keep the oxygenation of his brain from falling as fast as it normally would when his blood stopped circulating. Under ideal conditions, Melina believed she could probably resuscitate someone after fifteen or twenty minutes; but that was in theory, nothing she would ever want to test, and these were far from ideal conditions.

Robert's voice was steady. "Four and a half."

Minerva did not move. Melina continued to stare at the book. The letters had faded a little more, but were still clearly blue and not grey.

"Four forty-five."

The seconds ticked by, and Melina could feel the sweat trickling down the back of her neck. Still blue. She hated blue.

"Five," Robert said.

Melina looked up, but Minerva did not move, though it seemed her right hand trembled.

"Five, Minerva!" Melina said.

"His name?" Minerva asked softly.

"Not grey."

"Five and twenty seconds," Robert said, his voice growing slightly agitated. "Five and twenty-five. . . Thirty. . . Thirty-five. . ."

Melina held her breath. Just as Robert announced, "Forty," Melina cried out, "It's grey! Now, Minerva!"

Minerva didn't even wait for Melina to finish speaking. "*Tua anima spiro! Animarecordis et vivere!*"

Immediately, there was a loud, gasping breath, then another as Albus's body jerked upward in the flash of the final spell. Melina leapt to her feet, letting the Gryffindor book fall to the floor as Minerva moved off the bed to give her room.

Robert's wand was out already, and as Albus opened his eyes, the younger wizard said, "*Te adopto et nomino* Robert Crouch." A soft yellow light drifted over Albus.

Melina didn't pay any attention to the truncated magical adoption. She cast one diagnostic, then rapidly followed with a few supportive spells. Albus was blinking and he turned his head to the left, looking for Minerva.

"Albus, how do you feel?" Melina asked.

"Impatient to see Minerva," he whispered. He raised one hand to weakly urge Melina aside.

"In a moment." She cast further diagnostic spells to check the condition of his heart muscle and to analyse his blood, and multicoloured symbols began to float above him.

Minerva moved to the other side of the bed as Melina switched her focus to examining his magical energy.

Albus's eyes found Minerva's. "You cast the *Adsumo*," he said, his voice slightly roughened.

Minerva nodded. "And released it successfully, as I assume you can tell."

"I think I could feel that," Albus said. "I don't remember much . . . I heard Melina cast the spell to put me to sleep, and then . . . there was comfort, like a nest of light and warmth. I remember seeming to see . . . something very bright, but I looked away . . . the nest was comfortable . . . an embrace I didn't want to leave."

Melina paused. "Some of my patients report seeing a bright light, sometimes with figures behind it, and they feel a pull toward it. The longer I keep their hearts still, the more likely they are to say they see it, and the longer they are in cardiac arrest, the greater the pull toward the light is. I think it is an artifact of the procedure, something manufactured by the brain after the heart stops sending it fresh, oxygenated blood, but you were in cardiac arrest longer than any of my patients, and yet you are the first to say he did not feel any pull toward the light."

Albus smiled slightly as he looked up at Minerva. "Not yet," he whispered.

Minerva began to cry, her tears seeming to come from nowhere, and she rested her head on his chest as Albus caressed her hair. Melina reached over and patted Minerva's shoulder.

"You did very well, Auntie Min, very well," Melina said softly. "She was perfect, Albus."

"I've always thought so," he said.

"It's time for you to play dead now, though, Albus," Melina said as she took Draught of Living Death from the pocket of her robe. "It's past quarter to six. We have to hurry. We have to let the others catch a glimpse of you now, and then we can bring you around, do a few more tests, get you to the other rooms, and then roll out your corpse and put the finishing touches on it." She looked over at Robert. "You'll have to bring him. I don't think he can stand on his own, let alone use the Floo."

"Minerva did it, not Melina?" Severus asked in surprise.

Albus nodded. "She wanted any responsibility to rest with her if I did die, for one, but Melina also believed that because of Minerva's familiarity with my body and my magic, she would have a better chance of successfully resuscitating me even after the longer period of, um, death that would be required to create the effects we needed. We didn't simply want a few people to think that I was dead and have the rumour spread and be believed. We needed the fact of my death to be indisputable. By doing this

procedure, there were certain magical effects that essentially declared me dead to the wizarding world. In fact, there is some doubt about my legal status, but I am sure that will be cleared up easily. Robert has already given me my name back."

"Given you your name . . ."

"You know about Potter's map, and I assume that you have seen the Headmaster's, er, Headmistress's parchments. I couldn't very well turn up on those or any other similar Charmed lists as *A. Dumbledore*. Robert and Minerva worked with her niece Branwen, who is an expert on archaic spells, to create a shortened form of the ancient magical adoption ritual, the type that used to be used to adopt adults into a family or clan. Since all we wanted to do was give me a new name and Robert already felt a tie of kinship toward me, it wasn't very difficult for them."

"So Branwen knows, too." Severus vaguely remembered black-haired Branwen; her twin sister Morgana had been a couple years ahead of him in Slytherin. He hadn't known either of them well. Branwen had been a Ravenclaw, and Morgana had had little to do with most of the other Slytherins, particularly those who were future Death Eaters, and he'd had nothing to do with most other students, unless they *were* future Death Eaters, with only a few exceptions. Only one exception, actually. He pushed those thoughts aside. "How many people knew?"

"Branwen didn't know what the research was for. She may have suspected something peculiar was going on at Hogwarts, but she never had any opportunity to see either of us after the funeral...which wasn't unusual. She has her own career and family to occupy her mind and her time," Albus said. "There really were very few people who knew. A bare handful, Severus. And if we could have told you without endangering your life...or your status...we would have trusted you. We simply couldn't. My own brother didn't know. We didn't tell Minerva's mother until a few weeks ago. We couldn't tell them or anyone until it was important for them to know."

Severus was frowning, but he nodded. "You said someone else here deduced your identity. Who?" How much of a fool had he been?

"Filius," Albus said. "I was afraid . . . there was a moment when there was an expression in his eyes, one of startled recognition, I suppose you might call it. I had been demonstrating a charm, and there must have been something in what I did or how it felt . . . he looked surprised. But then he moved on to another topic, and I forgot about it. He didn't. Over the next few months, he watched me, and he watched Minerva with me, and he says that by Christmas, he was convinced that Robbie was me and not Robert Crouch. He never told a soul, though. I think he was afraid of a strong, mind-damaging *Obliviate* from someone in the Order, since he assumed the Order was behind it, and he also didn't want to let the cat out of the bag, as he put it. He thought that anything requiring such a huge deception must be very important."

"He cried, though. When he came back from photographing your corpse and fixing the tomb. He was crying."

"It was a very good facsimile, as you probably remember," Albus said softly, "and Filius is a very sensitive soul. Minerva even had a hard time looking at the . . . the remains that morning, and she *knew* it wasn't my corpse. She had helped create it."

Severus snorted. "Creating a convincing corpse would be beyond her abilities, she told me. I wanted to have Kreacher go into hiding and have his corpse found, and she said it was too difficult." He shook his head. "I have been a fool. I have been continually played the fool. And I never questioned any of it. I was angry that she had taken up with Robbie...I hated him for a while. But I never questioned his identity...or to the extent that I did, I thought he might be a disguised Death Eater or some other person with nefarious motivations. I even asked Poppy about it...did she know? Was she laughing at me when I asked her if Robbie could be an imposter?"

"You have not been a fool, Severus. And no, Poppy didn't know until Sunday. We told her then because we knew that the battle was coming and more people would need to know, particularly if anything went wrong with our plans. But we also knew that the tomb would be opened the next morning, and if someone other than one of us examined the corpse too closely, it could become obvious that it was a fake. So Poppy examined it when the Aurors arrived and gave them her findings...nothing out of the ordinary, just a slowly decomposing corpse, and the corpse hadn't been disturbed, only moved."

"You're the phoenix," Severus suddenly said. "Trelawney's phoenix. That nonsense about burning, dying, and living."

"We believe it was meant to refer to me, yes," Albus said. "And you were one of the snakes. It was that prophecy combined with your description of Tom's recently favoured method of execution that made us decide to have the antivenin potion created and to train Hermione in the Prospirator. We thought it likely that she was the lioness. Or that she could become the lioness if we managed things properly. Minerva and Vector, as Gryffindors, were also trained, and there were five of us here at Hogwarts who spent about three weeks carrying a specially designed Potions kit twenty-four hours a day. Poppy is a Hufflepuff, but we thought it was sensible that she have one, and although I'm not female, I am a Gryffindor and I planned to be with Hermione, so Poppy and I each got one, as well. Egeria...who, incidentally, is also a Gryffindor...was waiting for you and Hermione when you arrived at the Hog's Head. Hermione did almost all of the Prospirator work for you, but she had to take an occasional break, and Egeria breathed for you at those times."

"Trelawney said 'a snake dies.' I don't remember the entire prophecy, but I do remember that clearly. How did you know it wouldn't be me?"

"Because, my dearest boy, we weren't going to let it be you," Albus replied, tears entering his eyes. "Saving your life occupied almost as much of Minerva's attention...and mine...as the defence of Hogwarts and the defeat of Riddle. She always repeated that it was better that any of us die individually than for Riddle to have victory, but I knew that she ached for you to live. And there in the Shack, watching you..." Unable to continue, Albus stopped, closing his eyes and turning his head away.

He took a shuddering breath and swallowed. "It was good that Hermione was there with me. She doesn't know it, but she was holding me back as much I was holding her. If she had not been present, I would have cast aside all caution and simply attacked and tried to stop them, tried to take you away. It would have been disastrous, I am certain. Even if I had managed to get you out, the surprise of my survival and of your betrayal would have been gone and Riddle would have been wary, perhaps to the point of abandoning his plan to attack Hogwarts. But in any moment of Gryffindor recklessness, of which even I am occasionally guilty, I would never have risked Hermione's life as well as my own. And so we waited until Riddle Disappeared. I took care of the Death Eaters as Hermione dispatched Nagini, then she immediately went to you. And we were not too late to save you." He let out a long sigh. "It would have been a blow to have lost you after all we had accomplished. I continually reminded Minerva that all our plans could be for naught and you could still die, and yet it was too painful to believe that we wouldn't. My hope that you would survive was as great as hers, but my fear that we would fail was greater."

Severus looked down, his own tears beginning to gather again. "I understand why you did what you did and why you never told me, but did it have to be so difficult? Did you have to meet with me as you did? And giving those gifts at the end . . . why the drama, Albus? More 'verisimilitude'?" he asked scornfully, trying to hide his pain. It hurt. It all hurt. "Or just for the fun of it? For your amusement?"

"No," Albus whispered. "I really did feel as though I might die, and I certainly felt as though I was taking leave of you all. Perhaps it was selfish of me, but I did what I would have wanted to do under those circumstances if I really were dying. And if I had died, either last spring or in the battle or at any time in between, I wanted to know that I had taken my leave of you, and of you especially, Severus. Nothing I said to you was a lie. I love you, I was and am proud of you, and I did not want to leave you without telling you that." Albus took a handkerchief from his pocket and wiped his face. "I also knew that you would have many difficult months ahead of you. I hoped that remembering that I am proud of you and have faith in you would help you to get through them. I'm sorry if that seems hurtful and selfish to you now."

"And Minerva," Severus said, his anger not abating despite Albus's words, though tears welled in his own eyes. "For months, she acted as though she blamed me for your death, as though she could scarcely bear having me in the castle with her..."

"Surely it wasn't that bad..."

"Oh, she was pleasant enough at times, perfectly collegial, but any friendship I had ever felt from her seemed to be gone...she punished me, Albus, and you did, too, and she *knew* you lived, she *knew* it was all a charade. I took her punishment and added to it. I thought I deserved it. I thought I deserved worse." Severus made no effort to modulate his voice.

Albus nodded. "I know. And we can never know if she should have done otherwise," he said softly, "but it was hard on her. You know how you felt, and perhaps it isn't possible for you to understand how she felt, but she has always cared for you. Her anger with you about the Vow burned out very quickly. By the time we began to

implement her plan, she had all but forgotten it. One of her primary goals, after all, was to save you...to save you from having to kill me, to save you from the isolation that fulfilling the Vow would have brought you, and to save your life in the end, if possible. She had to force herself to behave coolly toward you. It may seem to you as though she did it easily, but she didn't. She was often in tears because of the stress she was under, and much of that stress came from having to behave toward you as she did. She already had to lie to almost everyone she knew, but she had to make a lie of your entire friendship. She hated causing you pain and guilt. It hurt her terribly. Finally one night when she was feeling particularly alone and burdened, I recommended that it was time for her to begin to treat you more warmly. It was a month or so earlier than in our original plan, but I couldn't see how it would benefit either of you...or our plan...to continue with the rift, particularly when it caused her so much distress."

Severus's mind flew back to the encounter he had witnessed in the library in early January. How very much he had misunderstood that scene, and yet he could have understood it better if he had given it some thought; it was clear that it was on that night that Minerva began to treat him more as she used to. She had even given him a kiss before he left her office, far different from her previous distantly polite dismissals. He could easily believe that Minerva had suffered, pretending as she had; weeks before, she had admitted to him that her treatment of him had been a calculated act on her part. It was certainly better than being believed to be Dumbledore's murderer. He'd understood it before he had known that Albus was alive; it should be no different now. And Minerva had become a friend to him again...more than that, she had helped him to survive over the last few months. She had strengthened him. And her tears in the library . . . she had mentioned him specifically as she wept in Robbie's arms.

That memory raised a question in his mind. "You and Minerva, that is, Robbie and Minerva, seemed very close. From about September or so, and the way you would look at her . . . but you and she . . ." Severus thought a moment. "You were so often together, seemingly inseparable, but I don't remember thinking that you, hmm, occupied the same rooms until sometime after the winter holidays. It's none of my business, but there was a change, she became more demonstrative . . . was it strategy? Trying to make Minerva's affair with you seem more natural and less sudden?"

Albus hesitated slightly. "Actually, we had no strategy in that regard. Aside from the fact that Minerva did not want me to walk about in her brother's likeness for months, it was something that we had very foolishly overlooked, as incredible as that may sound. The reality of our domestic situation struck us once I began to recover and was Polyjuicing myself daily. In those first days, I was too still weak to use the Polyjuice and appear in public more than a few hours at a time. I would retire to those warded rooms that you and Minerva used during the *Adfectus*, then allow the Polyjuice to wear off and spend most of my time sleeping, reading, and eating. Fortunately, my death occurred early on a Friday, Robert remained in the castle until Saturday, and I attended my first meal as him on Sunday. Then the funeral was on Monday, classes were cancelled on Tuesday, and Minerva explained my absence on Wednesday by saying that I had personal business to attend to.

"After I began teaching, I couldn't remain absent so long or so frequently, though. Once I was well enough to use the Polyjuice continually, it was important that I do so. I had a long-acting formula and a patch containing a potion that prolonged the Polyjuice further; that meant that I could go nine or ten hours between doses. We had to do all we could to minimise the risk that someone would see or hear something peculiar. Minerva, Melina, and Alroy...any of those who knew...never addressed me or referred to me as anything other than Robbie. It had to become habit, something automatic. There could be no slips of the tongue. I was Robbie. I had to learn to refer to Albus Dumbledore entirely in the third person, as someone completely separate from me. That was more difficult than you might imagine.

"What was hardest, though . . . you know that Minerva and I were together for many years. In the spring, we did occasionally find time to be alone in those warded rooms without the Polyjuice. At first we didn't have an antidote to the Polyjuice, so I would simply wait for it to wear off, which meant very careful timing. Minerva would join me later, which allowed her to maintain the mental separation between me as Albus and me as Robbie. Over the summer, we spent quite a bit of time like that in those rooms...often just reading together, playing chess, or discussing the school and the war. But doing that created other pressures and strains, particularly once the new school year began and I was Robbie continually. The first few times we had any, um, private time when I was Polyjuiced, it was strangely awkward. We made the room dark." Albus blushed. "She'd found that she was comforted when I was nearby, though. She could still sense that I am who I am. My magic hadn't changed, and she has always been sensitive to it. Fortunately, we did become accustomed to the charade and my new appearance, though not as quickly as we might have if we had done things differently from the beginning. I became used to it and to my new identity more quickly than she did; in fact, I found it rather freeing not to be Albus Dumbledore any longer, even if becoming Robbie took some effort."

"Robbie was with Minerva more than you ever used to be. Robbie always seemed to follow her about," Severus said. It had seemed strange and sinister to him, and it still seemed odd.

Albus chuckled. "Yes, you would call me 'her shadow.' It was important to me that she knew that I was following her, and not simply so she could feel my presence, but more metaphorically. Minerva is a very strong witch, but she had been paired with a much older, more powerful wizard for most of her life. When I was alive, I mean, before I was Robbie..." Albus looked confused for a moment. "Sometimes, people would notice Albus Dumbledore in a room even when it was Minerva who should have had their attention. She deserved her opportunity to finally have her recognition, but more than that, to exercise all of her abilities. She needed to not only have the title of Headmistress and to know that she was in charge of the school and our plan, but to feel that she truly was the one in the lead. I didn't want to overshadow her, even only in her own psyche. I wanted her to feel that I was truly in the background. It was not always the easiest thing for me to do, either, but I'm very proud of Minerva. Being with Robbie could allow her opportunities that being with Albus never could."

Severus looked at him for a moment. "You are as barmy as you ever were."

Albus laughed. "Barmier! Surely barmier!"

"If that is possible. And just as infuriating."

Albus smiled at him, a slight twinkle in his eye. "So are you going to kill me in good conscience now? You told me that you would if you discovered that I had misled you. Do you remember?"

Severus shook his head, his expression tight and drawn, unable to smile at the memory or appreciate its irony. "Do not mistake me, Albus. I do not wish you were dead. I understand that I couldn't have known you were alive all that time, and I understand why that knowledge was kept from me. But I still wish that my grief had actually been for a dead man or that I'd never survived to learn any differently. I wish I could be happier to see you." Tears came to his eyes again, but he blinked them back. "I know I would have been happy if you had been saved from death at the last minute. I don't know what I feel now."

"If you are angry, that would be understandable, Severus. If you are angry or upset with me, I don't love you any less."

"Stop using that word! Just stop it, Albus! Don't! Don't!" Severus turned away. His head was pounding and his throat was tight. "How can I feel anything of my own if you keep using that word!" he said hoarsely. "It makes me feel guilty for it, that word, guilty for anything I feel. Guilty and ungrateful."

"I won't say it again, then," Albus said softly. "But *I am* sorry, and I'll say that again someday when it may be less painful to hear." He reached down and pushed some of Severus's hair from his face, then touched his forehead and cheek. "You feel warm. I will get Madam Pomfrey for you."

Severus looked back up at him. "You're leaving?" It slipped out, and to his own ears, he sounded the pathetic child who had watched from his bedroom window as his father had left the house for the last time.

Albus squeezed his shoulder lightly. "No, not leaving. Just stepping out. And if you want to see me, or if you need to speak to me, just tell someone, and they'll find me for you."

Suddenly Severus reached up and grabbed Albus's arm and grasped it hard. "I don't know. I don't know what to feel or what to do."

"And that's all right for now." Albus looked down at the desperation and pain in Severus's eyes. "Just because I won't say it again," he whispered, "doesn't mean it's gone, you know. And I *am* just stepping out."

Severus held onto Albus and let go of himself, burying his face in the old wizard's bright blue robes. He had expected to die, but had lost his life even as he had survived his death. What should have been cause for joy now only gave him anguish, and he did not know who he was or why he felt as he did.

When Severus had calmed down, Albus touched his cheek again as he eased him back onto his pillows. Severus felt a cooling charm pass over his face, then there was a straw and fresh water at his lips.

"You still feel feverish," Albus said softly. "Drink some water and rest a bit. I'm going to get Poppy to look at you."

Severus opened his eyes.

"And you look fine," Albus added, "although Poppy wouldn't mind however you looked, you know."

Severus nodded. He felt little energy to spend on such concerns, but he knew that Poppy would understand. She'd seen him worse.

"Tell Minerva . . . tell her what I said in the Shrieking Shack. And I will be at her feast," he said in a low voice. "Because I am still her Deputy."

Albus smiled slightly. "Of course." He took a step back, then stopped and felt in his pocket. "Before I burned the Shrieking Shack, I found this. I thought you might like to have it back." He pulled out a small object and placed it on the bedside stand. "I'll send in Poppy."

Severus turned his head wearily. His knife. The flick knife that McGonagall had given him a lifetime ago.

Poppy cast one more spell before taking Severus's hand in one of hers and feeling for his pulse with the other. "Spells are all well and good," she said softly, "but feeling a patient's pulse and his magic, there's no substitute for that."

Severus didn't respond.

"I don't think your fever is anything for you to be concerned about," Poppy continued, "but I'd rather not treat it until a Healer has seen you. I want to be sure that I'm not masking anything more serious."

Severus closed his eyes.

"Some of it might simply be attributable to being upset. You're still recovering from Nagini's bite. Learning that Dumbledore didn't die was certainly a shock," she said.

"I am fine," Severus replied, opening his eyes. "It was unexpected. That's all."

"Then you are sturdier ill than I was well. When I saw him, I fainted. I had never fainted before in my life. Of course, Minerva didn't bother to tell me anything first. Just brought me into a shadowy room and presented me with him."

"You were surprised."

"The understatement of the year. No, of the century. I had seen Albus weaken. I had been near him only a few hours before he supposedly died. I have been a Healing professional for fifty years. Melina had sealed his death certificate. I was beyond shocked. I was also angry and hurt, as unreasonable as that might sound...and it does sound unreasonable even to me. But as I told Minerva on Sunday, I would wait to be angry with her until after everything was over," Poppy said. She sighed. "Now that it is, now that Riddle's dead and the wizarding world knows that Albus's death was a carefully planned and executed deception, I find myself merely . . . a little hurt, I suppose. I stood at these windows and watched as students, friends, and colleagues fought and were injured or even killed. Somehow after that, I don't have any room left in me to be angry with her. Especially after seeing Minerva in Albus's arms. When Blampa Apparated them to the infirmary, I thought she was dead, Severus." Poppy squeezed his hand, then released it. "Minerva did what she thought was right. She saved Albus's life and yours by doing what she did, and it wasn't easy for her."

"It was easy for him, though," Severus said, not caring how he sounded.

"He really was truly ill, you know," Poppy replied quietly. "He had to give up almost everything that he had been for so many years...he couldn't associate with his friends, he had to take another name and identity, and he had to relinquish the power he had exercised for so long. And I have known Albus for many years, Severus, and I can assure you, he never could have found it easy to watch people grieve him. Although from what Minerva has said, I do think he was surprised by it, too, by the depth of feeling so many people had for him."

"Still . . . he . . ." Severus turned his head away.

"It is hard sometimes to realise how much we have come to care for someone," Poppy said, "and how much we have come to depend on them being in our lives. Sometimes we don't realise it until it's too late, then they are gone and our grief is doubled. To discover that Albus was alive and here all that time, it could not be easy for you."

"I know why he and Minerva did as they did. It is fine. I am fine."

"I'm sure you will be. But I wouldn't be surprised if you were confused about how you feel...or at least that you have a lot of contradictory feelings at the same time. It would certainly be natural." Poppy paused and looked at him, thinking. "You know, Severus, you and I . . . I'd like to think we're friends of a sort and that I know you a little better than most. I know that you grieved Albus. You were as Stoic as always after his death, but I saw that you grieved. That wasn't a bad thing, however confusing it may be now. You loved him and he'd been important in your life. That was very good to see...not your pain of course. Now you have a new life and a fresh opportunity to . . . to make those kinds of connections with other people, and perhaps to appreciate them while you have them."

Severus swallowed past the lump in his throat. "But my grief was all a lie."

"No. No, Severus, it wasn't a lie. It spoke your truest feelings. That Albus was dead was a lie, and perhaps Minerva's grief was a lie...although I have no doubt that the entire process was painful for her...but your own grief was no lie."

Severus made no response to that, too tired to think about it any further.

"I will fetch Egeria to look at you. Melina won't be back from London until late, but we'll have her come see you when she is."

"I don't want to see O'Donald," Severus said, a sudden violent antipathy rolling over him. He did not want to see the cheery, vibrant Healer who had made the entire deception possible and who seemed to have made his life a lie. "I won't. And I want to return to my rooms."

"Very well," Poppy replied, unfazed by his vehemence. "But I do want Egeria to see you before I treat your fever, and I can't let you leave the infirmary just yet. I will at the first possible moment, though, Severus, as long as you agree to abide by certain guidelines."

Severus narrowed his eyes. He didn't want any conditions or rules. He wanted to leave. He wanted to never see any of these people again, to never clap his eyes on Hogwarts, to never again be told what to do and when to do it. Poppy folded over the top of his sheet, lowered the head of his bed slightly, and ran a cool damp cloth over his face. But he would humour the matron for a little longer.

There was a knock and his door opened despite his lack of response.

"Severus?"

Severus relaxed. "Hermione. I thought it was someone else come to cast more spells or impart more unwanted information."

"No. Madam Pomfrey said that I could have my dinner here with you if you felt up to company."

He nodded, then he reached for his wand and raised the head of his bed.

Hermione frowned. "I thought you weren't supposed to be using any magic yet."

"Activating a charm takes less energy than it takes for someone to scold me for it," Severus said irritably.

"Sorry." She sat down in the Transfigured wingback chair.

Severus shook his head. "Not you. I didn't mean you." He had, but he wished he hadn't said it.

"I remember how close to death you were, that's all. I just don't want to see you have a relapse."

"Just don't fuss too much," he replied. "I don't mind you being here, though."

"So . . . Madam Pomfrey said that you saw Professor Dumbledore this afternoon."

He nodded curtly. "Is dinner coming, or do we have to call for it? Twiskett!"

Twiskett popped in. Once he'd been certain his Professor Snape was on his way back to his usual self, he'd moved out from under the bed.

"Where's our dinner?" Severus asked.

Twiskett's brow furrowed, he nodded, then he popped out again.

"Is he mute?" Hermione asked.

"No. Just agreeably quiet. No constant yammering," Severus said crossly.

"He's not in charge of the infirmary meals, you know," Hermione said, trying to ignore Severus's irritability.

"He is a house-elf. And if the infirmary house-elves are not competent to feed the patients, then I will call him. Unless you prefer to sit here and starve to death?"

"Severus, that is an exaggeration," Hermione began.

"It is only an exaggeration because I have taken measures to see that we are fed," Severus replied just as two trays of food appeared. "And I should also remind you that until the end of July, I am still Deputy Headmaster here...and your Potions teacher."

Hermione was silent. She picked up her fork and poked at her shepherd's pie.

Severus felt disagreeable, but now he felt worse than he had before he had vented his irritation. He watched out of the corner of his eye as Hermione ate some mashed potato.

"I dislike being a patient in the infirmary, myself," Hermione said softly.

"That's all I meant. I do have some authority left . . . I can still at least call a house-elf for a meal." Not what he'd originally meant, but she nodded and let him save face.

"The shepherd's pie is good," she ventured. "I like it when they put mushrooms in the gravy."

"Hmmp. First real meal they have let me have," Severus said grumpily. "Probably a mistake. They probably wanted me to have pablum and weak milky tea for my supper."

Hermione giggled. Severus raised an eyebrow.

"It's just funny sometimes. Pablum and weak tea, the way you said it," Hermione explained.

They ate in silence for a few minutes.

"What did you think when they told you?" he asked suddenly.

"I was shocked, I suppose, although . . . somehow it seemed to make sense of things, things that I hadn't really been aware hadn't made sense before," Hermione replied, knowing immediately what he was talking about. "But I never knew the Professor as well as you did, and . . . well, they told me a little about the Vow you took, though I got the feeling that there's a lot that they didn't tell me. I think it was a very good thing for you that they did what they did, but . . . if I were you, I probably would've felt in some way responsible for Dumbledore's death even if I hadn't killed him, because he did it to avoid the Vow. So I think now I'd feel upset because there was something that I'd felt guilty for that was actually all just an act, and because I'd been playing a role and didn't know it. I suppose that even if I was happy and relieved, I'd still be upset about that, especially since I'd believed it was one true thing in a life filled with lies." Hermione shrugged. "But of course, I can't know exactly how you feel. I'm not you and our lives have been very different. Still, I wouldn't be surprised if you felt something besides happiness that he's alive. Even if part of you is happy, of course."

Severus pushed aside his plate. It was too much, but Poppy would bring him nutritional potion later; he could take that.

"I don't know how I feel," Severus admitted. "But you are correct: it is not unmitigated happiness."

Hermione finished her meal, then pulled her vanilla custard toward her. "They've cancelled classes until September," she said conversationally. "That's not a surprise, I suppose, but they're considering holding NEWTs and OWLs. Professor Flitwick is meeting with the Board of Governors in the morning, but I don't think they'll make any decisions about anything until the Headmistress can take part. And you, too."

"They can do as they wish." Severus swirled his spoon through his custard then shook his head and set the small bowl on top of his plate of shepherd's pie.

"You are the Deputy Headmaster," Hermione pointed out.

"The Headmistress is quite capable of handling things without me. She has Dumbledore and the others. Flitwick is competent."

"Professor Dumbledore isn't involved in any of the decisions, at least not formally. People were coming to him with questions and asking him what they should do, and he sent them to Professor Flitwick. He's just another teacher, he says."

Severus nodded. "So the Governors aren't going to make him Headmaster again?"

"I think that if they tried, he wouldn't accept it. Besides, Professor McGonagall is the Headmistress now; they'd have to sack her first. Professor Dumbledore has made it very clear that during the entire time that he was masquerading as Professor Crouch, she was the one who made all of the decisions concerning the school. I guess there was some speculation that she'd just been . . . a puppet, I suppose, and that he'd been acting through her. But the speculation didn't go very far; he nipped it in the bud. I think it was pretty obvious to anyone who was here this year that the Headmistress was in charge, and she clearly was in command of the Hogwarts defence."

"She is a formidable and capable witch," Severus agreed.

"You said that you're Deputy until the end of July. What did you mean?"

"I have a renewable contract. I can renew it or resign. Obviously, I never believed that I would live to renew it."

"You're going to resign?"

"I . . . I don't know." He was getting a headache.

"You have time to think about that later," Hermione said. She waved her wand and cleared away their dinner dishes. "I wanted to let you know that I won't be at the castle most of the next couple days. There are some funerals. But I'll be here first thing in the morning for your exercises, and I'll come by in the evening, too. And on Saturday, we can do your exercises after lunch before I leave again."

"I see." He didn't know why he cared whether she was in the castle or not, except that he didn't want to have some nitwit from St. Mungo's there supervising his exercises.

"On Sunday, I'll be gone for part of the morning, but then I'll be back. I'll be here for the feast, too."

"I hope to be in my own quarters by Sunday. Earlier, perhaps."

"We could meet in your office," Hermione suggested.

Severus thought a moment. He had no desire to see his office. "Call Twiskett. I will tell him to expect you. He will bring you to me," he said with a decisive nod. "It is not necessary to continue with the exercises, however, if you are occupied."

"Yes, it is. If you'd rather not do them with me..."

"I'd rather do them with no one else," Severus replied. "And we have not had a walk in the gardens yet."

Hermione smiled. "I think we might be able to do that on Saturday, if you like."

He nodded.

"I have those newspapers for you," she said, reaching into her bag. "The first one is the Wednesday early edition of the *Prophet*. There were a couple extra editions, and I included them, but many of the articles are just reprints. There's also a copy of the Dublin edition of today's *Prophet* because there's an interview with Kevin Harper on what it means to be a Snape's Slytherin. There's also a copy of yesterday's *Voyant-Clair*, the Toronto *Wizarding Gazette*, and this morning's *Täglicher Wahrsager*, in case you'd like a more international perspective."

Severus accepted the newspapers from her. The headline announcing Scrimgeour's death was below those announcing that You-Know-Who was dead and Dumbledore lived. Potter's continued existence was below all three, but in larger letters. Dumbledore's name was probably on the front page of every issue. He unfolded the first one. One large picture of Potter and Dumbledore returning from the Forbidden Forest, sober expressions on their faces, dominated the page, and below that was one taken from a distance that looked to be a photograph of Potter, Dumbledore, and Minerva facing the Dark Lord in the midst of a battlefield of combatants, but there was another one in the bottom right corner, and Severus blinked at it, then felt the blood drain from his face.

"What's this?" He pointed. But he knew what it was.

"Colin Creevey took photographs of the battle from the Hospital Wing windows using some special lens, then after the battle, he went out and took more. Almost all of the Hogwarts photographs in the papers are ones he took. He happened to be outside taking photographs of the grounds when we returned." Hermione blushed. "We didn't know he'd taken any of us until we saw this one in the paper."

Severus stared. The photograph showed a small group walking up the drive from the gates towards the castle, two witches, two wizards, and a supine figure floating on a Charmed stretcher.

"There are others he took, some just of you, but he only sold that one. He says the others are just for, um, he calls it the historical record."

"I will . . . I will have him scrubbing cauldrons until he is ninety," Severus hissed.

"I think you look noble and heroic, Severus. And you shouldn't judge it yet." Hermione said softly. "People were very moved by it."

"Is that Moody?"

Hermione nodded. "He came down to tell us we could return to Hogwarts, and then he led us back from Hogsmeade on foot. We didn't want to Apparate with you if it wasn't necessary."

Severus closed his eyes.

"Should I put them away until later?" Hermione asked.

"No." He looked down at the pile of newspapers. "I'll read them. Perhaps not all tonight."

"Good night, then. I'll see you in the morning."

"Good night, Hermione. Thank you for the papers. And for . . . your assistance." He wanted to apologise for his earlier temper, but it embarrassed him, and he couldn't bring the words to his lips.

Severus stood in the middle of his sitting room. He had been standing in the same spot for five minutes. Twiskett had brought him his clothes that morning, and once Egeria had cast her eye and a few diagnostic spells over him, he had dressed normally. After lunch, he and Hermione had taken a brief walk on the grounds, though he had tired before they reached the gardens. They had sat together on a bench she conjured, but had spoken little. Severus found it difficult to avert his gaze from the spot where the white tomb had been for so many months, gone now as though it had never been.

Hermione had walked him back into the castle, but he had insisted on walking down to the dungeons on his own. She had another funeral to attend that afternoon, anyway. So now he was standing in the middle of his sitting room, which, when he'd left it on Monday evening, he'd thought he would never see again. And he had no idea what to do.

A knock on the door gave him a moment's purpose, and he walked over and opened it.

"McGonagall? I thought you were in hospital," Severus said.

Gareth smiled. "They unchained me this afternoon. Thought I'd see how you are."

"I was similarly released this noon."

"I see, but I didn't know that and went to the infirmary first. I hate to be presumptuous, but do you suppose I could come in?"

Severus noted then that Gareth was leaning with one hand against the doorframe and his face was pale and sweaty.

Severus stepped aside. "Should you be walking about the castle?" he asked as he closed the door behind them.

"No." Gareth lowered himself carefully onto the couch. "Just don't tell Poppy. I told her I was going straight to my room."

"You're staying here?"

"For a little while. We're returning to the house in Hogsmeade, but I'll be here for a few days whilst I recuperate. Mum is staying at the estate until I have the place done over for her. Shouldn't take long, though."

"You don't look as though you should be out of bed."

Gareth shrugged. "I'm supposed to get some exercise. I Flooed to Hogsmeade and Hagrid was waiting for me with a carriage. He dropped me right at the door, so I only went up to the infirmary and then came down here."

"You didn't see your aunt first?"

"I'll see her later. Uncle Albus has visited me a few times, and it sounds as though she's recovering quickly. As soon as things are tidied up here, though, he wants to take her on holiday. After the year she's had, she needs one."

Severus nodded.

"What about you, Snape? Plans for the summer? Taking a holiday?"

He shrugged. "I do not take holidays as such. I will leave Hogwarts as soon as both Healer Egidius and the Headmistress will allow."

"Yes, I understand that Grandmother Egeria is your primary Healer now," Gareth said, looking at Severus speculatively. "You do know that she's a Healer-Midwife, don't you?"

"She has proven competent thus far, other than her obsession with fruit."

Gareth laughed. "Well, I suppose you are undergoing a rebirth of sorts. The Slytherin shedding his skin."

"Hmmpf. My recovery is proceeding apace."

"I see that. We can have that drink soon."

"I have a bottle of firewhisky. We can have it now." Get it over with, Severus thought.

"No alcohol for me yet...for you, either, unless you want my grandmother to send you back to the Hospital Wing. If we're lucky, they'll let us have a glass of wine with our meal at the feast tomorrow."

Severus was silent.

"Out with it, Snape. Come on. No need to be polite on my account," Gareth said.

"I have promised the Headmistress that I would attend, but I do not want to."

"You are . . . angry? Upset? Confused?" Gareth ventured.

"Why do you care?"

"No clue, Snape. Must be your winning personality."

"You knew, didn't you? You must have. They had the real Crouch on that island and you were there, too."

"Of course. I helped with the planning. When my brother moved to the island, he and Thea stayed in my aunt and uncle's cottage and I stayed with my mother. I'd been staying in the other one with Thea, but it's a bit small for three adults for more than a short time. Mum got used to having someone else around after a while." Gareth was quiet for a moment. "It was the first time that I'd spent more than a few weeks at once with her since I was about fourteen. It was actually pretty nice."

"Bully for you," Severus said sarcastically.

"Yes, well, it was," Gareth replied calmly. "Look, I'll see you at the feast tomorrow, but I'm staying in the Ravenclaw guest rooms if you feel like stopping by before then." He stood up, then paused. "Melina is glad to know you're doing better, and she understands that your full recovery will not be easy for you."

"Close the door on your way out, McGonagall."

Albus walked into the Headmistress's Office and took a seat near the fireplace. "Very pretty hat, Minerva."

"Mmm, I'm still not sure, but I didn't want to waste any more of Madam Malkin's time," Minerva replied, looking in the mirror and trying a different tilt to the oblong brim and wondering whether the long, sweeping feather wasn't a bit too . . . Musketeer.

"Did you set the menu yet?" Albus asked, taking out his pipe, but just fiddling with it.

"I'm leaving it all to Filius and Pomona, other than the seating arrangements," she said, taking off the teal-coloured hat, putting it aside, and banishing the mirror from the desk. "And that has me preoccupied at the moment."

"I'd think it would be fairly straightforward. Unless you want to mix people, you can divide them according to..."

"I don't want to divide them by House," Minerva replied.

"I was going to suggest by whether they were student, Ministry, Order, and so forth."

"That's actually not the trouble I'm having. It's the staff table."

Albus raised an eyebrow.

"Obviously, Severus will sit on my right as usual, and the others will sort out easily, but I don't know what to do with you."

"I can sit where Robbie always sat."

"You could . . . but you do know that probably half the school and most of the Order believed we were having an illicit affair when you were Robbie. The staff certainly did."

"Ah. Yes. I suppose that we can tell everyone that it was part of our cover story, that it was an excuse for me to spend more time with you, planning our strategies and so on."

Minerva didn't respond.

"What were you considering?" Albus asked.

"I was thinking of moving you up to sit at my left," Minerva said.

"I see," Albus replied, though he didn't entirely.

"After all, most of the staff already know that we're together, and a few know we're married. A few in the Order already know we're a couple, as well."

"What are you suggesting?"

"Last year was anomalous. In practice, I don't believe it is a good thing for people, especially students, to speculate about the Headmistress's love life, particularly about any illicit affairs. It is much better to be discreet about such things. Your following me about like a lovesick puppy dog, while I did enjoy your company, was hardly discreet."

"We had a discreet relationship for many years," Albus reminded her. "And I think that 'lovesick puppy dog' is a bit of an exaggeration. We behaved appropriately in front of the students and hardly any differently in front of the staff."

"I think we can still behave appropriately, but I believe that in this case, discretion means more openness. I don't want it to appear that we are having some . . . some sordid little affair."

"As I said, we can tell everyone that my behaviour last year was an act so that we could meet more frequently," Albus said.

"And I said that I would like you to sit at my left at the feast tomorrow."

Albus looked at her. "Ah. I see. And you do not mean it simply as a place of honour for the former Headmaster."

"Correct. I know we haven't discussed this in years, but now that things are different . . . we don't have to be as discreet as we were, do we?" Minerva asked.

"Things *are* different now, Headmistress McGonagall," Albus agreed with a smile.

"Not just that: no more Riddle. You did your bit...we did our bit...and now perhaps we can finally have our freedom."

"You would like to have our relationship made public."

"I'm not suggesting taking out a full-page advert in the *Prophet*," Minerva said as she stood and crossed the room to him. "Just not being secretive about it any longer. Discreet but not secretive."

Albus tilted his head, looking up at her with a fond smile. "You know, I don't think it would do at all for the wizarding world to believe that the Hogwarts Headmistress was having an affair with a member of her staff."

"You aren't suggesting you quit, are you? Or that we both do?"

"No, simply saying that it may take me a while to become used to being openly married after all these years, but I think I would be quite happy to become accustomed to it."

Minerva smiled broadly. "I may miss our clandestine meetings, though."

"Whoever said we had to stop those?" Albus replied with a grin as he pulled her down into his lap.

Severus took his seat beside Minerva. The staff had met in the antechamber and all entered together, though when he'd arrived in the Great Hall, other guests had already begun taking their places at the small round tables set up in lieu of the usual House tables. He glanced over at one of the nearest tables, where several of the student leaders were seated together. Blaise Zabini had just said something that Potter and the Abbot girl found funny. Hermione sat between Potter and Weasley, with Luna Lovegood on Weasley's left, and Longbottom next to her, then Daphne Greengrass. The next table over also hosted a mix of Dumbledore's Army and Snape's Slytherins. Pansy Parkinson looked uncomfortable seated between Anthony Goldstein and Dean Thomas, and Severus wondered again at her motivations for joining Snape's Slytherins at the last minute. Perhaps a sudden realisation of which was the winning side, although if that had been her only consideration, she could have retreated to the Hospital Wing with the younger Slytherins, yet she had fought until shortly after the Dark Lord's...Riddle's...defeat, when she had been struck by a *Petrificus*.

Gareth McGonagall was sitting at a table with a few members of the Order, including Lupin and Tonks, but there were still five chairs open at the table, and Severus wondered who among the Order hadn't arrived yet. Arthur and Kingsley were seated at a table with others from the Ministry, including one elderly witch whom he didn't recognise, but to whom Kingsley was clearly deferential. Too old to be Scrimgeour's widow, and he believed that the slightly plump witch on the other side of Gawain Robards was the late Minister's wife. It seemed that the Headmistress had chosen to invite a few from the battle at the Ministry, as well. Ah . . . Scrimgeour's guest, the one above reproach. Severus remembered reading that she was a Yaxley and had insisted on joining Scrimgeour in the defence of the Ministry. She certainly looked sprightly enough, considering that she was over one-hundred fifty.

Poppy leaned over and whispered to him. "If you feel fatigued at any point, let me know, Severus, and I can walk you out."

"I am perfectly capable of leaving on my own, if I wish," Severus replied stiffly. Apparently, Minerva had placed the matron on his right to keep an eye on him.

"I know. I'm simply offering. But I hope that you will stay through the entire meal, as long as you feel up to it."

Severus didn't respond. More guests were filing in. Two students, one a Slytherin and one Gryffindor, had been enlisted to greet them at the door, and two others, a Ravenclaw and a Hufflepuff, helped them to find their tables. Severus felt Poppy sit up straighter, as though she wanted to pop out of her seat. He looked over at her. Her bright gaze was fixed on two newcomers: a tall, broad-shouldered, handsome wizard in a dark, well-tailored Muggle suit, and a younger, petite witch with fiery golden hair. The straight-backed wizard certainly was remarkable-looking, his dark hair streaked with white, and carrying himself with the ease and grace of an athlete, but Severus had never believed the Hogwarts matron to be overly interested in mere good looks. She certainly hadn't simpered around Lockhart, after all. But then the new wizard caught Minerva's eye, and he grinned at her. As Minerva rose and left the table to greet the wizard personally, Severus could feel Poppy twitch, as though she wished to join the Headmistress.

Severus's curiosity overcame his reticence, and he finally asked, "Who's the wizard in the suit?"

"Quin," Poppy said with a happy smile. "Alroy's father. Melina found a cure for him. I haven't been able to visit him, though, with everything else going on."

So that was Quin. He could see why Poppy had described him as she had, months ago. The wizard practically crackled with charisma, and it hadn't required the

Headmistress's approach and personal greeting to cause all heads to turn toward the new guest. When Quin leaned toward Minerva to accept her kiss, then kissed her cheek and gathered her into a bear hug, literally lifting her up off the floor in his exuberance, Severus looked over at Albus, half-expecting some expression of displeasure or surprise on the older wizard's face, but Albus was grinning, genuine happiness on his face.

Minerva took Quin's hand and led him up to the staff table, leaving Aine to sit beside Gareth. Albus rose and embraced the younger wizard.

"Minerva hadn't told me you were coming! It is so good to see you, such a wonderful surprise!" Albus said enthusiastically, drawing back to look at Quin.

"You have another surprise waitin' for you in the Headmistress's Office," Quin said with a wink. "A hamper filled with all your favourite sweets. Well, the ones o' me own manufacture, anyway. Still haven't any sherbet lemons."

Albus laughed.

"Allow me to introduce you to Severus Snape, the Deputy Headmaster," Minerva said. "Severus, this is an old friend, Quin MacAirt."

Severus pushed himself to his feet. He would not embarrass himself or the Headmistress with petulant behaviour, regardless of his desire to be far from there.

Quin extended his hand. "'Tis a pleasure to be meetin' you at last," he said. He nodded slightly as his bright blue eyes met Severus's dark ones and he shook his hand. "We all owe you a debt of gratitude, some of us more than others."

Severus did not know how to respond to that. To explain that it had been he repaying a debt seemed impossible, to contradict the other man seemed rude, and to accept his words as though he deserved them seemed hypocritical.

"You're Alroy MacAirt's father," Severus said instead.

The wizard's smile grew. "That I am." Quin looked beyond Severus to Poppy. "And to see you again brings joy to me eyes."

Poppy stood and came around to take Quin's hand. "It's good to see you well...and with your wand!"

"Usin' it, too," Quin said, light in his eyes. "I better find me seat, though. No holdin' up dinner! I'll see you later, I'm sure." He bent quickly and gave Poppy a peck on the cheek.

As the tall Irishman turned and left, speaking a few more words to Minerva and Albus on his way past, Severus took his seat again and looked over at Poppy. He had expected to see her watching Quin, but her eyes were on the doors again, and Severus followed her gaze. Immediately, he thought that his heart stopped as surely as if he had been hit with an *Arrestocordis*. His stomach seemed to drop and the blood drain from his face.

Gareth was now out of his seat and walking rapidly toward the three who had just come through the doors. The older witch seemed to scold him mildly for exerting himself, but he took her arm and led her to his table. Robert and Thea Crouch followed.

"It must seem strange to you...and to many others...to see Robert Crouch here," Poppy said softly.

Severus merely grunted a reply. It would have been startling and strange to see the wizard whose form Albus had inhabited for more than a year, were it not for the fact that a one-armed witch was with him.

He couldn't remain. If he did remain, he would be unable to eat. Of all the dreadful things he had done before he had turned to Dumbledore all those years ago, this particular one had haunted him since he'd met Robert Crouch that day in the Headmaster's Office. Severus knew that the witch had fought in the Battle of Hogwarts, she hadn't been invited there merely to taunt him or to remind him of his ignoble past in the face of whatever accolades he might now be receiving, and yet Severus felt that it was so, that she was there to remind him that he was not cream, but pond scum. He may have risen above his Death Eater past, but the fact remained, that was where he had begun and it still dominated who he was now.

Severus could scarcely hear Minerva as she stood and welcomed everyone, thanking them for their presence that evening and for their loyalty during the crisis and the attack on Hogwarts. He was only vaguely aware that she was mentioning the losses, those who should be there among them but who had died in the defence of the wizarding world. She requested a minute of silent memorial for the dead. Seconds ticked by, and Severus discreetly looked around the room. Many had their eyes closed or their heads bowed in reflection or prayer, but as Severus's gaze fell on Gareth's table, Gertrude Gamp opened her eyes and they met his. Severus froze, then Gamp seemed to nod slightly, and he wrenched his eyes away. Minerva began to speak again, this time speaking of other losses, of those who had chosen the Dark, and saying that the wizarding world should mourn their loss, as well, and attempt to keep future generations from falling into such ways.

Despite Minerva's mention of boring speeches, hers was the only one, and food arrived as soon as she sat down. Severus looked at his prawn cocktail and suppressed a shudder.

"Don't like prawns, Severus? Or are they just too rich for you yet?" Poppy asked.

"I am not hungry."

"Try to eat a little."

Severus felt Poppy's hand lightly on his elbow. "Just a little," she said. "You might feel better if you eat something."

Severus picked up his fork. If he could dance attendance on the Dark Lord while his victims lay writhing on the floor, he could certainly eat a meal in the Great Hall. He would simply shut everything off. Nothing was wrong. All was well.

When the next course arrived, Minerva leaned toward him. "I'm glad you felt well enough to attend, Severus."

He nodded shortly. "I am recovering quickly," he acknowledged.

"I thought there have been enough speeches and eulogies this week, and there will be more to come, so I thought this evening could simply be a quiet celebration and a time for reflection in the company of others."

"Probably a wise decision," Severus said.

"Mother said she would like to see you after the feast," Minerva continued. "And she would like Melina to take another look at you, too."

Severus nodded. It was pointless and childish to avoid Healer O'Donald. She had saved his life, after all, indirectly, at least. And she had saved Dumbledore. Severus glanced over at Albus, who was smiling at something that Sprout had said.

"I do not intend to remain long," Severus said. "You or Madam Pomfrey can escort them to my quarters if I have left before they are ready to." Melina, Murdoch, and Healer Egidius were sitting at the table just behind the one where Gareth and the Crouches sat with Professor Gamp. He had no desire to walk down and speak to either Healer.

An hour later, Severus sat in his well-worn armchair, his feet up on the equally worn ottoman, his eyes closed, hovering somewhere between waking and sleeping, when there was a knock on his door. Severus let out a sigh as he opened his eyes and removed his feet from the ottoman. The Healers were faster than he'd thought they'd be. When he'd left, people had begun to mingle, moving seats as they ate dessert and drank coffee. He'd been sure he'd have at least an hour of peace before they would

appear and begin waving their wands at him.

Still under orders to conserve his magical energy, and privately agreeing with the advice, though he chafed at it, Severus stood and crossed to the door. He opened it to find not Melina and her grandmother, but Gareth.

"McGonagall. You are in the dungeons. If you are lost, the Ravenclaw guestrooms are on the seventh floor." Severus paused and frowned. "And you still don't look as though you should be wandering about and going up and down stairs."

Gareth smiled. "Just accompanying someone who wanted word. We looked for you in the Great Hall, but you were already gone."

Severus looked beyond Gareth just as a witch stepped forward. Severus stared.

"Professor Snape," the witch said with a nod. Gareth hovered close beside her.

Severus swallowed and nodded.

"I wished to see the wizard who served Slytherin House," Gertrude said in a steady voice, "to see who had inspired such fine young wizards and witches to fight for Hogwarts and the honour of Slytherin."

Severus was speechless. Surely she knew . . . she remembered . . . he had no doubt of it.

"I fought beside Snape's Slytherins, Professor, and they brought pride to our House. You did well with them." Professor Gamp stepped back. Severus thought she was trembling slightly, but she simply took another step back and glanced quickly over at her son on her right.

"I'll see you later, Snape. We have to be on our way now. But I'll be around this week, if you feel like a natter," Gareth said, reaching one hand to his mother's waist. "Good night!"

Severus managed a slight grunt and a nod as he watched the two turn and leave.

He was still standing at the door a few minutes later, leaning against it and trying to understand that visit, when there was another knock, a sharp, quick rapping. He opened the door and was relieved to see Melina's smiling face and Egeria's bright eyes. He stepped back and let them in. They could wave their wands all they liked.

Severus set aside his quill and automatically straightened the pile of parchments in front of him. It felt peculiar to do the grading he had begun more than a week ago, but the Headmistress wanted to have grades for the students. He almost reached for his pocket watch, then stopped himself and glanced at the clock across the room. Another forty minutes before the meeting. He toyed with the idea of beginning to tally final grades, but a knock on his office door interrupted that thought. With a flick of his wand, he opened the door.

"Good morning, Severus!"

"Minerva. If you are here to remind me of the meeting, I have not forgotten."

"No, no, I hadn't thought you had," she replied, taking a seat. "I simply wanted to see you. Finishing your grading?"

Severus nodded briefly. "I'll have the final grades for you before I leave the castle."

"I'm not worried about that. And do take your time with your decision. I promise not to bother you with school business over the summer. You can relax and recover."

Severus nodded. Spinner's End was hardly conducive to relaxation, but he felt incapable of making any decisions just then, and he would wait.

"I do have one other thing I would like you to do, however. It isn't precisely Hogwarts business, but it affects Hogwarts and her students." She pulled a stiff envelope from her pocket. "I asked to deliver this personally. Please attend, whether you want to for yourself or not. Blaise Zabini and your Slytherins would appreciate your presence, as would I."

Severus looked down at the envelope. Only his name on the front. He flicked a finger and broke the Ministry seal on the back, then removed the heavy embossed invitation. The Order of Merlin awards dinner.

"There will be many awards presented, but they are working it out so that the process shouldn't be too lengthy. I know your Slytherins will be receiving awards."

Severus assumed that he would receive one, as well, and his feelings about that were mixed. A part of him wanted recognition for his years of denial, danger, and pain, but another part of him felt that any positive recognition would be undeserved. He had joined Dumbledore because of his own agenda all those years ago: avenge Lily's death and pay for his unwitting betrayal of her. His reasons had changed over the years, particularly in the last few, but they were still based on the original choice he had made to take the Dark Mark. Hardly noble. And although the newspapers had said little of his past as a Death Eater, that would no doubt change once the elation of Riddle's defeat was over.

"Do not inform her, but Miss Granger will be receiving a Merlin, much of it based on her heroic actions in the Shrieking Shack," Minerva added.

Severus nodded. "I will consider attending."

"Good."

There was another knock on his door, and Minerva rose as Severus opened it. "I'll see you at the meeting, then." She turned. "Good morning, Miss Granger. Leaving today?"

"Yes. I'll be staying at Grimmauld Place for a while before I sort things out with my family."

"Take care of yourself, Hermione, and if you need any help, please do let me know," Minerva said with a smile.

"I will, Professor. Gareth's contacted his cousin about helping me out, but I'll let you know if there's anything else."

Minerva took her leave, and Hermione sat in the chair she'd vacated. "I wanted to say good-bye. I see you received an invitation to the awards dinner."

Severus nodded. He felt peculiarly hollow with the prospect of Hermione's departure, although he would be leaving soon himself.

"The MLE will check our house for curses and traps, but it isn't high on their list of priorities at the moment, and I'm not certain I want to bring my parents back there, anyway . . . if I can find them."

"If you can find them?"

"They aren't where I left them. I've placed a few telephone calls, but haven't found them yet."

"Where did you leave them?" Severus asked, sensing her underlying anxiety.

"A flat in Melbourne. They apparently moved out a few months ago." Hermione rubbed her forehead. "One of Gareth's cousins lives in Sydney and has a lot of connections. She's going to help me to find them and lift their memory charms."

"So you won't be attending the Merlins?"

"Yes, I will be. I have a Portkey for the next morning."

"Oh. Is there anything I can do?"

Hermione shook her head. "Morgana has hired both a witch private investigator and a Muggle agency to look for them. We'll have the Muggle report tomorrow. They're doing credit traces. We'll find them."

"If there is anything . . ."

"I'll let you know. When we return, I'll owl you. We still need to take a proper walk, after all."

Severus nodded.

"I'll see you at the dinner on Saturday, then?"

Severus looked at the invitation on his desk, then at Hermione. "I'll be there."

Note: There is a new "Who's Who in Death's Dominion" on my WordPress site and my LJ. There are links on my TPP author's page.

Chapter Thirty-Two: Guerdon unsought

Chapter 33 of 34

Severus finds himself surprised once again when he receives unexpected recognition.



Chapter Thirty-Two: Guerdon unsought

6 June 1998

Severus glanced over at Hermione. She looked lovely, dressed in a simple gown of deep black with bias insets of pearly grey. It seemed they would have little opportunity to speak. She was sitting between Potter and Weasley at a round table in front of the head table. He was sitting with other Hogwarts staff at a table adjacent to the one where Minerva and Albus were sitting on the dais with the Minister and other notables.

Severus thought he should feel more disturbed that Dumbledore was with Minerva at the head table, although he, her Deputy, was sitting at another table with the Hogwarts matron on one side of him and Pomona Sprout on the other. He had nothing against the Hufflepuff Head of House, and when they discussed Herbology, Sprout was more than tolerable, but he never would have sought her company for any other reason. Severus presumed that Poppy had been seated beside him in the event that he had a sudden fit of swooning, but despite that, he didn't mind her company. Filius was on the other side of Pomona and MacAirt was next to Poppy. Decidedly better company than Potter and his friends, Severus told himself, though he would have liked to have been nearer Hermione.

At each place was a booklet, and as the awards were announced, the names of the recipients and the reasons for their awards would appear in it. Severus was somewhat alarmed by the number of blank pages. Fortunately, when the new chief of the Wizengamot, Tiberius Ogden, stood and asked their patience waiting for the dinner to begin, he also explained that the second- and third-class awards would be announced and delivered in groups, rather than being individually presented, and he hoped that everyone understood that this was a testament to the great bravery and honour displayed by so many, and no slight to any individual.

There had been another awards dinner the previous evening for those who received Merlins for their general service during the final days leading up to Riddle's defeat or recognising their participation in the Battle of the Ministry. Severus had received an invitation to that dinner, as well, but delivered by conventional owl rather than by the Headmistress, and he had declined to attend. Two such evenings in a row would be unbearable, and he could only imagine the strutting and preening of some of the recipients. When he felt a slight twinge at the unwanted thought that he should be more respectful of those who had contributed to the Dark Lord's...Riddle's...downfall, he reminded himself that he was still under Healer's care and that he really wasn't well enough yet to go out two nights in a row.

Severus turned to Poppy, who was chatting with Alroy about his father's greatly improved health.

"He's here tonight," Alroy said, gesturing toward a large round table on the other side of the room.

Poppy laughed. "That looks like a McGonagall family reunion."

Alroy grinned. "I would have preferred to sit with them...no offense to your company, Poppy...but the 'powers that be' seemed to want to keep the Hogwarts staff together."

"No, I understand," Poppy replied.

Severus looked across the room at the "McGonagall family reunion," as Poppy had called it. He didn't know why Quin would be seated with them, but Severus could see his profile and the bright golden red hair of the woman whom Severus took to be his daughter, Aine. The grey-haired witch on his other side was probably Professor Gamp, though he couldn't see her face. Gamp's other son, Robert Crouch, his wife, daughter, and her family were seated at another round table nearby, and the sight of Crouch gave Severus a peculiar sense of dislocation. He turned his attention back to the McGonagall table.

He recognised Gareth, Melina, and Healer Egidius. Murdoch was there, as well, with a tall, heavy-boned witch...one might call her stately, though she seemed more athletic and robust than elegant...whom Severus assumed was Murdoch's wife, Estelle. Beside her, an elderly witch seemed even more petite for being seated next to the taller woman. There was a young boy sitting between the elderly, sharp-looking witch and a somewhat younger, tall wizard with silvering blond hair. A fringe of black hair fell over the boy's eyes, and his pale face wore a solemn expression until the long-haired wizard beside him leaned over and, with a poorly suppressed grin, whispered something into his ear. The skinny boy's face immediately lit up and a broad smile softened his angular features. The old witch raised an eyebrow at the tall wizard, but the boy turned to her, pulled her closer, and, cupping his hand by her ear, whispered something that brought a slight smile to her face.

The other witch and wizard at the table had their backs fully to him, but Severus believed they were closer to his age and likely Melina's children. He wondered who the young boy was. There was something familiar about him, but he wasn't old enough to be a Hogwarts student. Severus shrugged to himself. All children begin to blend together after a while. He probably just resembled a hundred other runty boys whom Severus had seen pass through Hogwarts.

He remembered what he had been going to ask Poppy. "Were you invited last night, as well?"

Poppy nodded. "I didn't attend, however. I had another obligation. Filius and Pomona went as Hogwarts representatives. I think Albus was here, too. He'd planned to attend, though I know he had some argument with them about the seating."

"Seating?" Severus asked.

"They wanted to put him at the head table, and he didn't think that was appropriate since he has no official role in the Ministry or at Hogwarts, other than as a teacher." Poppy replied. "It's different tonight, of course, since he's here accompanying Minerva, who is seated at the head table on her own account."

"Did they have him doing anything official?" Alroy asked.

"He presented the posthumous awards," Pomona said, overhearing the conversation from her place on the other side of Severus. "It was quite affecting. They presented Scrimgeour's Merlin last night, even though he died at Hogwarts, because he participated in the Ministry battle, and when he was at Hogwarts, he was acting in his capacity as Minister. His wife accepted for him. She's here again tonight, too." Pomona nodded, gesturing with her chin toward where Madam Scrimgeour sat.

"She doesn't look well," Poppy remarked.

"Many of us don't look as well as we might," Filius chimed in. "How are you feeling, Severus?"

Severus frowned. "I am fine." He recalled the little wizard's visit the week before, and the books he had brought with him as a get-well gift. Severus tried to relax. "I am recuperating well, thank you."

"Rolanda looks better," Alroy observed, "but I am still surprised to see her here."

Severus looked at the other rectangular table at which other Hogwarts staff sat facing them. Madam Hooch didn't look well. An obvious Glamour hid the right side of her face, her right arm was clearly immobile, and the normally lively witch seemed to be using all of her energy to remain upright in her chair. He suddenly regretted never visiting her or any others at St. Mungo's. Not that he had been up to that level of activity until recently, but he knew that Hooch had only left hospital the previous afternoon. She had sent him a card, dictated to an Autoquill, but still . . . she had been more injured than he and had managed that.

No one expected anything from him, he reminded himself, and certainly they wouldn't expect any gestures of insincere sympathy or condolence. He swallowed. It wouldn't have to have been insincere. But he didn't know what to expect of himself now, let alone what he should do.

Trying to avoid thinking about the impossibility of his new life, Severus looked back over at Poppy. She had chosen to wear a pale bluish grey robe with an under-robe of a slightly darker shade. His own attire was more typical of the other attendees, though his choice had been dictated by his wardrobe rather than any etiquette of mourning.

"If I had known they were going to be so late to start, I would have gone over and talked to Rosemary and my dad," Alroy said with a sigh.

Severus knew that Alroy's sister's name was Aine. "Who is Rosemary?" he asked Poppy in a low voice.

"She's there next to Aine, the one with the fancy hairdo," Poppy said, pointing out the one feature of the witch that Severus could see. "She was a Ravenclaw just a couple years behind you, but you probably wouldn't recognise her after all these years."

"And the others?" Severus asked, thinking that he wouldn't have recognised her regardless of the amount of time that had passed.

"Her brother Calum is next to her. You know Gertrude, Gareth, and Melina. Brennan is the old gentleman between Melina and Calum..."

"But he's a Muggle," Severus interrupted, puzzled.

"He had a charm placed on him, a binding of some sort, years ago, so that he can interact with the wizarding world freely, rather like a Squib. He hasn't dared go to McTavish Street in the last few years, though, with the attitudes of certain people towards Muggles and parents of Muggle-borns and half-bloods," Poppy explained. "He's a chemist, had his own shop till he sold it to Boots and retired, so he used to enjoy visiting Murdoch at the apothecary."

"I see," Severus replied, though he didn't entirely. He knew that the parents of Muggle-borns would accompany their children to Diagon Alley, but he hadn't heard of Muggles moving freely in the wizarding world other than that. Of course, there were always those Muggles who had to be treated at St. Mungo's for some reason. His gaze fell on Egeria, now seated between Estelle and the older witch. "Who is the witch next to Healer Egidius?"

Poppy gave a crooked smile. "Siofre Tyree, Egeria's mother-in-law. She's a firecracker. She's also the reason Pettigrew's not dead. When it became obvious that his silver hand was infecting his body, in an attempt to stop it, Siofre poured a near-overdose of Dreamless Sleep down his throat, then cast a *Petrificus* on him. Not exactly a recommended treatment, but it slowed the progress of the silver until Riddle was dead and it stopped on its own. The silver nevertheless did a lot of damage, and the Healers are still doubtful they'll be able to cure him."

Severus was puzzled. "Why was she with Pettigrew?"

"Albus had to drop his captured Death Eaters somewhere, and he couldn't very well bring them to the Ministry or any other public place, since he was still believed to be dead. So he showed up on their doorstep, startling the entire household with his appearance, but Siofre took it in stride. She had the Tyree house-elves empty out the wine cellar, and she kept the Death Eaters there." Poppy took a sip of water. "I understand that Hyatt Crabbe tried to cause some trouble when he regained consciousness, but he's still in the secure ward at St. Mungo's, recovering from Siofre's . . . discipline."

"That witch?" Severus asked in disbelief. Crabbe, even without a wand, was a dangerous man.

"She's tough," Poppy said, "always has been. And she wasn't alone, of course."

"Who are the others?"

"The boy is her great-great-nephew, Eoghan Tyree. Or great-great-great." Poppy frowned. "*Think* he was her brother Murdoch Tyree's great-grandson, but it might be one more generation removed. Siofre and her husband were close to his parents; when they were killed, Eoghan moved in with them and Lydia, Siofre's sister-in-law. When Lydia died a few months later, Siofre and her husband adopted him. He'll be starting at Hogwarts in another year." She looked up at Severus for a moment, as if deciding what she should say next. "It's a funny thing, you know, Severus, but..."

Severus never learned what was funny, nor the identity of the other older wizard at the table, since at that moment, Minister Shacklebolt entered the room and everyone went quiet as he stepped up to open the awards ceremony.

Severus attempted to pay respectful attention as the third-class Merlins were awarded. Shacklebolt and Minerva took it in turns to read the names of those receiving the awards, and their names appeared in the booklet, with a description of some of their activities in support of the Hogwarts defence or their role in the Order of the Phoenix. Poppy stood as her name was announced. After a few more recipients' names were read, her Order of Merlin, third-class, appeared in front of her. Severus thought that food would be more welcome at that moment, but then he was distracted as he heard his name read by Shacklebolt. Pomona nudged him in the ribs, and he stood.

He tried not to think as he stood and waited for the medal to appear in front of him, but a part of him felt ashamed that he should be receiving one at all. A greater part of him, though, felt as though he'd been kicked in the stomach. Order of Merlin, *third-class*. If he was going to be awarded one, shouldn't it have been a first-class Merlin? Did they value him so little? But it was probably because he hadn't been in the battle itself. It seemed that none of those who received the third-class awards had been directly involved in the battle. Colin Creevey had received one for taking photographs. *Photographs*. Severus tried to betray no emotion as he sat down and looked at the medal in its open box.

There was a break between the third-class awards and the second, and small baskets of crusty bread appeared on the table with little crocks of tapenade and plates of butter. Next to him, Poppy began to spread tapenade on a piece of bread. He closed the box with a snap and put it beside his plate, then he picked up the booklet. His name seemed to jump out at him. Beneath it, he read, "Invaluable service providing information that saved many lives and provided cures for others." It was one of the briefest descriptions in the booklet. Severus closed it and swallowed. Hermione was still there, and Blaise and his Slytherins, too, and they would still receive their awards, otherwise he would beg off, plead fatigue, go home.

"Here, eat some of this," Poppy said, placing a couple small pieces of bread on his plate. She had spread tapenade on one and butter on the other.

Severus looked at it and didn't respond. Poppy didn't say anything more to him, just chatting with Alroy as she ate her own appetiser. He watched the other guests, trying not to stare at the table where Hermione sat with several other students. He saw him looking in her direction once, and flashed him a broad smile. He nodded at her, then looked away, focussing on a group of Aurors and Hogsmeade residents. Aberforth was there, sitting between a reedy-looking pale witch in Auror's robes and a stout old witch with blue hair and a hat to match. Severus thought he may have found one other wizard in the room who might be as uncomfortable as he was.

It seemed no time at all passed, and the second-class Merlins were presented. Severus clapped politely at all the right points. Melina and Murdoch, he noticed, each received a second-class award, as did a few others at that table, though he did not look at the booklet to see why.

Before the first-class Merlins were awarded, the attendees were fed soup. Severus did eat some of his soup after being prodded by the witches on either side of him. Pomona was irritating him with her clucking, mothering noises, and he ate just to shut her up.

"I wish they'd fed us first and then given the awards," Alroy said, grumbling slightly.

"If they do it the way they did last night, they'll serve the entree next and then announce the first-class Merlins afterward," Pomona said. "They present those in groups, though they hand them out individually, and last night, there were a few speeches, too."

Severus didn't allow his expression to change at that news. He had hoped that the first-class awards would be announced quickly, then he could leave without having to sit through the rest of the meal.

He thought he had masked his feelings, but apparently not well enough, because Poppy leaned toward him and said softly, "I'm sure it won't be too bad, Severus."

Severus simply glanced over at her out of the corner of his eye, then turned his attention back to his soup. The entrees arrived, and Pomona tried to engage him in conversation. He, in turn, attempted to be polite, but found it wearying to speak. He wished that someone like Vector was sitting next to him instead. She always seemed to know when he didn't want to talk during a meal...which was almost always...though when he did, she was given to sensible conversation and not inane pitter-patter. But Vector was sitting next to Slughorn at the other staff table. Severus didn't know why Slughorn was seated with the rest of the Hogwarts staff, since until the previous year, he hadn't taught at Hogwarts in well over a decade. He had stayed at the castle after the battle, though, leaving only earlier that week, when most of the students were gone and Severus was more ambulatory. The odious man had stopped and seen Severus before he left, proudly displaying a ring he wore on his right-hand ring finger. Two intertwined snakes, one winding to the right and one to the left, one gold, one silver, each with one tiny emerald eye.

"Snape's Slytherin, you see!" Slughorn had said with some enthusiasm. "Zabini got them made for all of us. He even gave them to the young ones who stayed behind in the Hospital Wing. Theirs are silver, though, don't you know. To distinguish the combatants. They'll be heirlooms, Severus, passed down generation to generation, and any Snape's Slytherin can always count on another to recognise him...or her! Many fine witches, too. Yes, indeed! A proud House we have, Severus." He suddenly looked awkward. "I was ashamed for years . . . my own role . . . Well, that's the past, eh, my boy?" he exclaimed more heartily. "Riddle's gone. We have a new generation of Slytherins. Young Blaise will lead us into a nobler future, mark my words, Severus. He will go far!"

Slughorn had clapped him on the shoulder and left him with a bottle of a Pinot Noir that he described as "particularly fine." Severus had put it in his cupboard next to his unopened bottle of firewhisky.

The entrees were cleared away and coffee and tea served. Tiberius Ogden stood and announced that the Orders of Merlin, first-class, were being bestowed upon those who had given most, risked most, and achieved most. He went on to describe the dangers that had been faced by many, but especially those who had engaged in the Battle of Hogwarts, and that most of the first-class awards that evening would acknowledge those brave souls who had participated on the battlefield in Hogwarts defence.

He began by slowly naming those who had been killed in defence of Hogwarts, and one by one, next of kin or other representatives rose to accept the awards on behalf of those whose lives had been sacrificed by the attacking Death Eaters. Beside him, Minerva, as Headmistress, presented the closed box to each person, and Severus could see from the tight line of her jaw that she was doing all she could to maintain her composure.

Pomona rose to accept an award on behalf of one of her students whose family had been killed in a Death Eater raid only the week before the attack on Hogwarts. His chest tight and his throat burning, Severus could barely attend to the ceremony as the names of other students were read. He had done all he could to warn of the attacks in wizarding Britain. He had lowered the wards on the school in order to trap Riddle and his army, not in order to bring children to slaughter. There would have been far more death and destruction if he had not. Severus felt nonetheless acutely uncomfortable, and his discomfort was not eased when Arthur and Bill rose and accepted the medals for Molly and Percy. Perhaps he did not deserve a Merlin, first-class, after all.

Thankfully, the posthumous awards came to a relatively quick conclusion, and Minerva took a moment to sip some water as Ogden began to describe the Battle of Hogwarts, using only broad brushstrokes but still managing to convey the fury and violence of the confrontation. He paused a moment as if considering his words.

"The attacking Death Eaters would have killed and injured far more if it were not for the leadership of one person, a witch whose foresight and strategic planning brought the defenders rapid success. Though it no doubt felt much longer to those who were fighting and who were falling, the attackers were overwhelmed in number and in tactics, and from the spell cast by Arthur Weasley shortly after sunrise to the moment the final Death Eater ceased resisting, the primary battle lasted less than an hour. Her leadership and her bravery were instrumental not only in the success of the battle, but also in Tom Riddle's ultimate defeat. For the great debt of gratitude that the wizarding world has, I am proud to present this Order of Merlin, first-class, to Headmistress Minerva McGonagall."

Severus needed no prodding to stand when everyone in the hall who was able stood and clapped. Ogden placed the Order of Merlin around Minerva's neck, the heavy

medal resting on her chest, then he leaned toward her, kissed her cheek, and whispered something in her ear. That was all it took for her self-control to waver, and her tears spilled over. Albus, standing now beside her, handed her a surprisingly staid white handkerchief, and she wiped her eyes.

The rest of the awards went fairly predictably, beginning with Aurors, then the Hogsmeade residents who had defended the gates and a few others, such as the old Tyree witch who had guarded the Death Eaters and so severely incapacitated Crabbe when he attempted to escape. Severus noticed that some names added themselves to the blank pages without having been read off, then he saw that each had the note beside them, "*Presented 5 June 1998.*" Kingsley's name appeared in that way, as did those of most of the Aurors. Severus was thankful for that. He could leave as soon as the last name was read. Go home...return to Hogwarts...and put his third-class medal in the drawer with his watch. Dumbledore's watch.

Minerva presented the medals to the faculty and staff who had been selected to receive one of the first-class Merlins. From their table, Flitwick and MacAirt stood and walked up to accept their Merlins. Severus wondered vaguely why Sprout hadn't been named at the same time, but didn't consider it long.

There was a pause after Shacklebolt read Argus Filch's name, and Hagrid wheeled the old caretaker up to the front of the hall to receive his award. Severus was surprised to see that the old man was crying as Minerva placed his medal around his neck. Filch had, foolishly or bravely, tried to stop Goyle from escaping the dungeons after the Slytherin had killed Sinistra, then he had lain on the cold, hard stone for more than six hours before anyone noticed that he wasn't where he was supposed to be and went to look for him. Severus looked down at the booklet, which simply said that Filch had "exhibited heroism and fortitude beyond the call of duty in trying to protect the students of Hogwarts." A small note beneath that indicated that Filch was the first Squib ever to be awarded an Order of Merlin.

The surprises didn't end with Filch's award. Shacklebolt, who had taken over from Ogden after the Headmistress had received her award, announced that although the centaurs who had participated in Hogwarts defence had declined their awards, their names and collective contribution would be noted and never forgotten. With that, the centaurs' names appeared in the booklet, with a description of their role in the battle.

Neville Longbottom was singled out to receive the first award to a student. Shacklebolt gave a brief description of Dumbledore's Army and Longbottom's role in reforming it to train the students in "self-defence." Neville said something softly to the Headmistress as she handed him his award. She smiled and nodded, then made a gesture to Kingsley. Neville stepped up to the podium and pointed his wand at his throat to amplify his voice, which wavered just a bit for his first few words, but then gathered strength.

"I thank Minister Shacklebolt and the Headmistress . . . and everyone for this honour. There are a lot of other people I could thank tonight, people who have helped and supported Dumbledore's Army, but I want to thank one wizard in particular." Neville stopped and cleared his throat. "I know that this wizard wanted to remain anonymous at the time he helped me, but things have changed a lot. Without this wizard, there wouldn't have been a Dumbledore's Army."

Severus sighed. He had wondered how long it would take before people began to sing the praises of the great Albus Dumbledore. He deserved it, Severus had no doubt about that, but he hated thinking about the Headmaster because then he began to feel all those confused emotions that he so wished would simply go away. He took a sip of water and tried to maintain an air of slight boredom.

"I learned a lot from this wizard," Neville continued, "even when I didn't know I was learning it. The most important lesson he taught me, though, was maybe the simplest: *Don't be a victim, Longbottom.*"

Severus swallowed the wrong way and would have choked on his water if Poppy hadn't cast a quick *Anapnea* and saved him from embarrassment.

"He also told me essentially that if I ever told anyone about it, he'd deny it. I hope he doesn't." Neville smiled shyly as he looked over at Severus. "I would like to thank Professor Severus Snape for the lesson and advice he gave me that day, leading me to revive Dumbledore's Army. He saved many lives by doing it, and I know that he didn't do it for any obvious gain to himself and certainly not out of any affection for me." His grin grew a bit bigger. "I'm sure he celebrated the last day that I'd ever be able to melt a cauldron in his Potions class. Anyway, thanks, Professor Snape."

Neville glanced back at Minerva, who was smiling warmly and began to clap. Severus could feel the heat rise in his face as the others in the hall followed suit. This time, Poppy nudged him, and he stood briefly and gave what he knew was an awkward bow. He really should kill Longbottom. Or his toad.

But then the applause subsided and Kingsley began to read out more names. Longbottom placed the medals around the necks of the students who filed past him as Shacklebolt read them off in groups of four. Severus clapped politely as group after group of students filed up to accept their awards. His lower right eyelid began to develop a tick when group after group of students consisted of Hufflepuffs, Ravenclaws, and Gryffindors. Dumbledore's Army. But there were still others left who were not Slytherins...Potter and his sidekicks. It made sense that Longbottom would give them out to members of the DA. Minerva had said that Zabini and Hermione were receiving Merlins, and they surely deserved them. He might not receive a Merlin, first-class, Severus thought, but they would not neglect the Slytherins who fought in the battle.

The parade of Hufflepuffs, Ravenclaws, and Gryffindors came to a conclusion, and Neville stepped down and returned to his seat between Luna and Daphne. Minerva now stood at the podium and Kingsley stood to one side.

"The next Order of Merlin, first-class," Minerva announced, "we are very pleased to present to a young man whose leadership and courage were vital not only in defeating Riddle in battle, but in defeating narrow-mindedness and prejudice. Slytherin House has produced many admirable witches and wizards over the centuries, ones who have made positive contributions to wizarding society. But both within Slytherin and outside of it, the notion of what makes a good Slytherin, a 'real' Slytherin, has grown increasingly narrow, particularly in the last few decades. There have been those outside of Slytherin who believed that 'Slytherin' was synonymous with 'evil,' or at least, with greed and a self-centred disregard for anyone else. Blaise Zabini, a seventh-year Slytherin prefect, displayed that ambition, achievement, and cunning are not antithetical to bravery, loyalty, and independent thinking.

"He and Daphne Greengrass, another seventh-year Slytherin, quietly gathered around them other like-minded Slytherins, ones who did not believe that being a Slytherin meant unswerving allegiance to a Dark Wizard, the Dark Arts, or dubious and distorted medieval notions of wizarding purity. He led students from his House in the battle against Riddle, and he and his fellow Slytherins stood with Harry Potter when he defeated the self-styled lord; the Slytherin contingent prevented any Death Eaters from reaching and assisting their master. Many of them were wounded or cursed severely, but they did not retreat and none betrayed us. The wizarding world owes its gratitude to Blaise Zabini and the Slytherins who followed him. I ask now that Mr Zabini come forward and receive his Order of Merlin, first-class."

As Blaise stood and walked up to accept his medal, the applause grew. He bowed his head as Kingsley Shacklebolt placed the Order around his neck. Minerva paused in her own clapping to shake his hand, then she stepped back to let him have the podium.

Blaise stood quietly for a moment, waiting for the applause to die away, showing the natural grace and poise that had become increasingly evident over the last weeks.

"Thank you, Headmistress McGonagall, Minister Shacklebolt," he said, speaking distinctly but softly, with no amplification, causing the room to come to complete silence in order to hear him. He smiled and said, slightly more loudly, "I would also like to express my appreciation for the wizard who, in difficult times, led our House well, Professor Severus Snape." Blaise paused, as if considering his audience, though it was doubtful that he hadn't planned every word and gesture, though he seemed at ease and his speech unrehearsed. "Professor Snape was an exemplary Slytherin in every way. Not only was he a spy who fooled even Tom Riddle, whose magical power and mastery of the Dark Arts were unquestionably great, Professor Snape was able to impart to us some of the most essential tenets of Slytherin House, ones that did not promote the Dark Arts or include following a mad blood-purist whose ideas would be disastrous for the wizarding world if implemented. And he did this without ever exposing his true allegiance or endangering his position among the Death Eaters.

"I did not at first recognise what he was saying, what he was trying to encourage in us, but every year, from my first year through my seventh, he recited certain of Salazar Slytherin's maxims, always the same ones. These were not lessons about blood, or about the supposed inferiority of Muggles, or about the hypothetical dangers posed by Muggle-born witches and wizards. They spoke of ambition, of the strength to be found in flexibility, of independent thought, and of questioning authority, even that which is most venerated or ancient. All of these Slytherin precepts could be distorted by Death Eaters espousing blood purity, and those who were so inclined heard what they wished to hear. But I, and others, with each year's repetition of these Slytherin values, heard more. To follow a leader without question is not Slytherin. To adopt a practice without evaluating it is not Slytherin. To act in accordance with tradition merely for the sake of that tradition is not Slytherin. Being incapable of bending can snap you, and to

refuse to grow is most assuredly death. A Slytherin thinks independently and deliberately. We choose our loyalties; we do not have them thrust upon us.

"Professor Snape," Blaise continued, turning his head and looking directly at Severus, "some of us heard you. We listened and we heeded you. Our thanks go to you, Professor. We are Snape's Slytherins."

Severus sat motionless. He had no idea how to react. With what he thought were inadequate measures, he had tried to steer the students away from the Dark Lord, but they were so young and so influenced first by their families and then by their peers, he had doubted that he had had any effect at all on them, particularly given that he couldn't openly speak out against pureblood ideology or the folly of the Dark Lord's...Riddle's...plans. He certainly hadn't dared hope that any of them would actually listen to the speech he made each September. But now he was being nudged from either side, and he rose briefly, nodded at Blaise, and sat before the applause subsided. Hermione was looking at him, smiling and applauding vigorously, and Severus had to work at not betraying the warmth he felt at her approval.

As he sat down, it struck Severus that this was, perhaps, better recognition than a Merlin. The speeches were being transcribed. There would be a record of what was said of him. The memory of his contribution to Riddle's defeat wouldn't consist solely of the one line of text beneath his name in the awards booklet.

Blaise stepped back and let Minerva return to the podium.

"The next Order of Merlin, first-class, is awarded to one of Snape's Slytherins. He joined them as we prepared to defend Hogwarts, and there are many here tonight who are alive because of his participation." Minerva smiled. "Please, Twiskett, come forward and accept your Order of Merlin, first-class."

Little Twiskett, wearing a Slytherin-green tea towel and his face blushed lilac, trotted up from the back of the room. Blaise bent and put the medal around the house-elf's neck. The medal was on a shorter, narrower ribbon than the others, so it didn't drag on the floor or look too much like a sash.

"We spoke with Twiskett before the awards, asking that he accept our gratitude and the Order of Merlin, the first ever awarded a house-elf. He agreed, but he said he didn't want the money associated with the award, therefore it will be put into a Gringotts account established to support the Society for the Promotion of Elvish Welfare."

Severus glanced over at Hermione and saw that she was grinning broadly. Now that she was older and understood the wizarding world...and house-elves...better, she might be able to do something that actually served the interests of the house-elves.

"The next of Snape's Slytherins is not a member of Slytherin House," Minerva said, "but he joined Snape's Slytherins and is proud to be counted among their number. Mr Ronald Weasley."

Ron, in new black dress robes, bent his neck as Blaise placed the medal around it, and the two shook hands. As Weasley returned to his place, Minerva began to read off the names of the actual Slytherins who had fought with the group. He noted that Professor Slughorn was in that group, but not Professor Gamp. Hardly surprising.

Finally, Kingsley returned to the podium to announce the last of the Orders of Merlin, first-class, and Severus almost breathed a sigh of relief. He could leave and forget this night had ever happened. Except, perhaps, for Blaise's speech. That had been rather gratifying. And Hermione's smiles.

"In the end," Kingsley said, "no matter the number of Death Eaters killed, captured, or incapacitated, if Tom Riddle and his familiar, the snake Nagini, were undefeated, the wizarding world would remain in peril. The next Order of Merlin, first-class, is awarded to Hermione Granger, the daughter of the dentists Anne and Jerome Granger, for her great heroism in killing the snake Nagini and rescuing Professor Snape from death, as well as her work supporting Harry Potter and finding a method for him to defeat Riddle."

Hermione caught Severus's eye as she approached Minerva to accept her award. For a moment, her smile seemed to reach out and touch him physically, but then she turned and Minerva placed the Order of Merlin around her neck.

Kingsley waited until Hermione returned to her seat before continuing.

"In the final confrontation with Riddle, Harry Potter relied on the assistance of others. We begin by presenting the Order of Merlin, first-class, to the first in that encounter who struck a wounding blow to the Dark Wizard, Professor Pomona Sprout, Head of Hufflepuff House."

Pomona rose and accepted her award. As she returned to her seat to the sound of applause, Kingsley waited for silence before continuing. Touching her medal, Pomona leaned toward Severus and whispered, "It barely did anything to him, really. It was just a lucky hit."

"The next award goes to Madam Gertrude Gamp of Slytherin House, my former Arithmancy teacher," Kingsley said with a smile. "In addition to facing Riddle, she contributed her Arithmantic expertise to the defence of Hogwarts."

After Gertrude returned to her table, Kingsley continued. "Minerva McGonagall, as we noted before, also stood beside Potter, and with her was Albus Dumbledore, who, in addition to his many other contributions...and deceptions!...joined Professor McGonagall to create a powerful shield that helped Mr Potter defeat Riddle."

Albus stood and accepted the medal, and this time, rather than the handshake she had been offering all the others, Minerva reached up and kissed his cheek. Albus smiled and blushed, then sat back down. He was forced to stand again and take a bow, the audience's applause was so loud and their enthusiasm so high. He refused, however, to make a speech, for which Severus was doubly thankful. The evening was dragging long, particularly now that Hermione and Blaise had both received their awards.

When finally everyone had taken their seats again and stopped clapping, Kingsley cleared his throat and said, "The next wizard provided the opportunity for Harry Potter to defeat Riddle. He threw a charmed knife...er, skeen dew," he corrected himself after Minerva leaned forward and whispered to him, "and he wounded Riddle, striking him in the side and drawing blood. Gareth McGonagall, Ravenclaw."

Gareth, dressed in kilt and plaid, walked somewhat stiffly up to the dais. He kissed his aunt's cheek as she put the medal around his neck, then he whispered something to her that made her smile. Severus looked down at the booklet. The page he saw was entirely devoted to Albus Percival Wulfric Brian Dumbledore and a recitation of some of the contributions he had made to Riddle's defeat the second time around. Severus flipped the page and tried to avoid looking at the information about Gertrude Gamp and just read what was written below Gareth's name. He blinked. He had forgotten that Poppy had told him that Gareth had saved Malfoy's life. He wondered whether McGonagall knew that Malfoy had been with him when they had attacked his mother, that he had been the one who had cast the curse on her face. It had healed well, though, with only slight scarring that Severus could see, unlike the curse he himself had cast. Severus swallowed hard.

Kingsley was wrapping up his speech extolling all the virtues of Harry Potter, a wizard who had had far too much responsibility thrust upon him far too young and who had risen not only to face his destiny with Gryffindor courage, but who had destroyed the Dark Wizard, Tom Riddle.

Severus listened as Harry gave an acceptance speech, suitably humble for the Boy-Who-Lived-Twice. Potter began to drone on about everyone else he had to thank, and when he mentioned Sirius Black's name, Severus tuned out completely. He wanted to leave. He could go to bed, perhaps take some of the sleeping potion Melina had left with him a few days before when he had admitted to not sleeping very well now that he was more recovered. It wasn't Dreamless Sleep, but his dreams didn't seem as vivid, and it had helped him sleep several hours straight the one time he took it.

Severus felt Poppy's elbow in his side, and he scowled at her.

"Pay attention," she whispered softly.

He just grimaced at her, but turned his attention back to the dais. If she could tell he wasn't paying attention, he'd either have to do a better job pretending or actually listen to Potter. He didn't hate Potter as much as he once had, but his existence still rankled. There were very few Gryffindors who weren't intolerable. Minerva. Hermione. Possibly Dumbledore, though Severus still tried to avoid thinking about him or looking at him. Poppy elbowed him again. Hufflepuffs were hardly more tolerable.

". . . and although Tom Riddle might have been happy about his death, we were all happy that he was alive . . ." Harry was saying.

Oh, gods, more about Dumbledore. Severus bit back a sigh as Poppy prodded him again. Annoying witch.

". . . taught me a lot and even saved my life. I didn't always appreciate him, but without this wizard, I don't believe that Tom Riddle would have been beaten, or it would have taken much, much longer and cost everyone much more." Harry cleared his throat.

None of the panache of Blaise. It was the rare Gryffindor who could match a Slytherin in that, Severus thought.

"I think it would be easy for this wizard's contributions to be forgotten and lost, since he did a lot of it in secret and we probably won't ever learn the full extent of it." Harry folded the parchment that he'd been reading from. "Even though I'm not on the Merlins committee, I asked to speak with them about the awards. When I think about everyone who got an award tonight, it's sometimes hard for me to see why there are different classes to them, because we all did what we could, and I'm sure that there's no one here who would have refused to do more if it was . . . if it was required of them. Um, when I went out to face Riddle that first time, I might have seemed alone, but I knew my friends, people I loved, were there and depending on me. I was pretty sure that I would survive, too, though there was a chance that I wouldn't, and then during the battle, as Minister Shacklebolt points out, I wasn't alone."

Severus kept himself from sighing. He wished Potter would shut up. Just say that Dumbledore was the greatest living wizard and be done with it so they could all go home.

Harry swallowed and cleared his throat. "There was a wizard who also faced death, but he did it alone and with the certain belief that he could not survive. He struck the first blow in the Battle of Hogwarts and he was the first of us to confront Riddle."

Severus suddenly went cold. Poppy's hand rested on his elbow. He twitched.

"Unlike me, he didn't have any hope that he would survive when he faced Riddle, but he still went willingly. We will never know all that Professor Snape had to endure as the spy for the Order of the Phoenix, but I know that he came near death many times. I am glad that he didn't die in his final confrontation. Professor Severus Snape, alone and out-numbered, confronted Tom Riddle, defied him, and wounded the snake Nagini before he was almost fatally wounded himself. If it hadn't been for the actions of Hermione Granger and Albus Dumbledore, he surely would have died."

Clapping began softly, then grew louder. Hermione and Blaise stood, Snape's Slytherins following suit and others joining them. Severus, by now a little more accustomed to these words of praise from former students, merely nodded, though he felt uncomfortable. He told himself that most of the clapping was for Hermione and Dumbledore. Harry waited, cleared his throat, and then finally asked to be able to continue.

"As I said, some of the distinctions between the deeds of the people who received the different Orders of Merlin seemed a matter of chance, and we all did whatever we could. Professor Snape did all he could, and he willingly offered his life, with no hope of ever seeing any reward, or even living to see another day. The Order of Merlin committee was going to award Professor Snape an Order of Merlin, first-class, but that didn't seem right to me, and I told them that."

Severus stiffened. That brat thanks him for what he did then has the nerve to say he didn't deserve a first-class Merlin! It was a mere matter of chance! He wished he could Disapparate, but Poppy's hand was now clutching his elbow almost painfully, so he couldn't even get up and leave the room. He couldn't leave without creating a scene at this point, anyway.

Harry nodded at Minerva and stepped back. As she stepped up to the podium, Albus came to stand beside her, holding something in front of him. Poppy released Severus's elbow.

"Professor Severus Snape, my dear friend," Minerva began, smiling and looking directly at him, "I am very happy and honoured to ask that you step forward and accept the first-ever award of the Order of Merlin Without Peer."

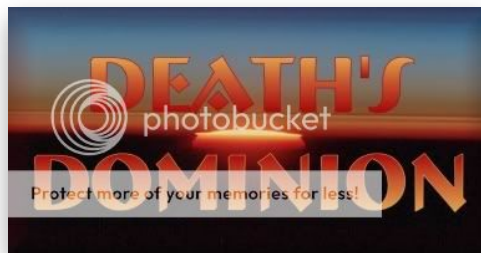


Note: As I noted in my recent LJ entry, the epilogue is still to come, so it's not over yet! For a little peek at what's to come, take a look at the LJ version of the table of contents.

Epilogue: In transitu

Chapter 34 of 34

Severus sets out on a journey and enters his new life.



Epilogue: *In transitu*

28 July 1998; 6 June 1998

Walking the length of the platform at Paddington, Severus felt in his pocket for his ticket, reassuring himself for the hundredth time. There was still time to change his mind. She would never know. But he boarded the train and found a seat. A few minutes later, there was a slight lurch, then another, and the train pulled out of the station. Severus lost himself in the view out the window, scarcely noticing when they passed out of the city and into the countryside, travelling westward. He roused when the conductor asked for his ticket, carefully replacing it in his inner pocket when it was returned to him.

The miles passed neither quickly nor slowly, and when he arrived in Truro, he again considered breaking off the trip, turning around, or simply finding a dark, deserted corner and Apparating back to Spinner's End. Yet he found the information counter and asked where one could find the Western Greyhound buses.

As Severus mounted the steps of the bus, it occurred to him once more that he could change his mind, but as embarking on the trip seemed hardly to have been a decision, simply an autonomic reflex, he continued onto the bus and made his way to the back. He thought absently that he had to change in Wadebridge, and he knew that he would, just as he had Apparated to London that morning, gone to Paddington Station, and boarded the train to Cornwall. Despite his sense that he was now simply proceeding under some inertial force, he had actually planned the trip carefully, finding the times and connections, even purchasing his tickets in advance.

He had not told Hermione he was coming. Three days before, he had looked at her last letter to him, remembered her earlier invitation to visit, and found the letter in which she had told him where she and her parents were staying for the summer. Then he'd left his house and proceeded to plan his route and purchase his tickets. He could have departed from Manchester, but for some indefinable reason, he preferred Apparating to Diagon Alley and leaving from London. He also could have held out his wand and boarded the Knight Bus and taken it at least as far as Port Isaac. Instead, he was taking Muggle transport, slow but reliable, and watching the changing scenery pass by. Sharp grey needles of rain began to streak the dusty bus window.

He had last seen Hermione at the Order of Merlin awards dinner. They had spoken briefly in the foyer after the awards had been distributed, and she had confirmed that she was leaving the next morning for Australia. The Muggle detective had found her parents, then the witch investigator had confirmed that Hermione's memory charms were still in place and they appeared unharmed. They had simply moved from Melbourne to Sidney of their own accord.

Severus had accepted Hermione's congratulations for his two Orders of Merlin and congratulated her in turn, then asked whether she had known what had been planned for him. She had shaken her head, then explained that she had known that they had something special in mind for him, but she hadn't known what it was.

"I'm glad you were here tonight," Hermione said. "It wouldn't have been the same if it had been awarded without you actually here to accept." She reached out and touched his arm.

"Was it really Potter's idea?" Severus asked sceptically.

"I don't think the precise award was, but he did ask that they do something to distinguish you from the others. He was worried that everyone would remember him, because he's 'the boy who lived,' and Dumbledore because, well, he's Dumbledore, not to mention his surprising reappearance, and Headmistress McGonagall because she led the defence of Hogwarts, but that you might be forgotten, and you were as essential to Riddle's defeat as he was, even if you didn't have a prophecy about you."

Severus coloured. The damned prophecy. If he had never heard it . . . he never could have betrayed Lily. But he likely would be long dead or languishing in Azkaban now. And deservedly so. He did not believe that he would have ever found the final motivation to betray the Dark Lord if it hadn't been for the danger to Lily and her family, ironically, a danger he himself had created. Lily's death had, in a way, saved him just as it had saved her son. His debts were greater than anyone could comprehend, and Severus once again had the sense that it had been wrong for him to have received any award at all. The thought flitted through his mind that the awards had negated any repayment he had made for his crimes. Whatever Minerva said about his having paid more than enough, he doubted he would ever feel that way himself. There were no scales of justice weighing his evil deeds against his positive ones. And so much he had had to do in order to repay his debt and attain his vengeance had required him to commit more evil. There was no wiping the slate clean; there was no slate. There was only his soul, and he could feel the evil inscribed there indelibly.

Suddenly overwhelmed by disgust with himself, he wished to shake off Hermione's friendly hand lest his evil infect her. He stepped back slightly, and her hand dropped to her side.

"It might be better to be forgotten," Severus said.

Hermione shook her head. "No, Severus. And not just for you, but for everyone. We all need to remember what you did. Without you, Harry is right, it would have taken much longer to defeat the Death Eaters. It might not even have been possible."

"Without people like me," Severus said softly, "Riddle never would have had any power."

"If all the Death Eaters had done as you did, he would have been defeated long ago," Hermione replied equally softly. "We aren't perfect, Severus, none of us are."

Severus snorted. He could not engage her in argument now, but he knew that it wasn't merely a question of human frailty. She was too good and innocent to recognise it, though.

"Your example can give encouragement to others who . . . who have made mistakes and who want to live in a different way than they had," Hermione said. "And you did do a lot of good. They wouldn't have given you the special Merlin if they didn't believe that, if you didn't deserve it. They could have simply given you a first-class Merlin and presented it at the same time they did Harry's and Dumbledore's."

Severus didn't understand himself. He had wanted recognition, he had felt injured when he had received, as he believed, only the Order, third-class, and yet he felt so utterly unworthy at the same time. He should have died. He should have his deeds celebrated posthumously. He should have been allowed to pay, to make the ultimate sacrifice. But Minerva had taken that out of his hands. Minerva, Albus, Hermione . . . he wanted to hate them for it, to denounce their efforts as selfish, but he knew that they cared for him, cared for him despite the evil he had done.

A look of sympathy crossed Hermione's face. "You look tired. You haven't completely recovered yet. You'll get more used to it after you have time to adjust to everything, I'm sure."

His knee-jerk reaction was to chafe at her concern and scoff at her words, but instead, he quirked a self-deprecating smile. "And you are still the optimistic Gryffindor, Pangloss?"

Hermione laughed. "No, not Pangloss! But I am still optimistic. And I am sure you will feel better. You just have to decide to give yourself the chance. And you have friends, you know, and not just me."

Severus agreed in order to please her, then wished her well in retrieving her parents from Australia, reminding her to contact him if she needed anything. She smiled warmly and asked if she could contact him even if she didn't need anything, and he returned her smile and nodded.

She had written him regularly once she had returned to England, and he had found himself looking forward to her owls. Minerva also wrote him, and McGonagall, the irritating wizard, had owled him a few times, too, insisting on a drink. In Severus's opinion, there was something wrong with any wizard over the age of six who went around with his knees exposed all of the time. McGonagall hadn't even bothered with long robes at the awards dinner. Not that that had stopped all of the foolish witches in the room from eying him. Still, at least he didn't flaunt his looks like some wizards he'd known.

Minerva had found him and congratulated him again before he had taken the Portkey back to Hogwarts with Poppy. Albus had hovered in the background, trying to seem as though he wasn't hovering. Severus hadn't been able to speak to Albus since their conversation in the infirmary. He knew that would have to change, at least if he were to stay at Hogwarts, since Albus would be teaching Defence again. When Albus had put the Merlin around his neck, settling the broad purple ribbon over his shoulders, he had looked directly into Severus's eyes, and Severus could see the affection . . . the *love* looking back at him.

"I am glad we both lived to see this day, son," Albus had said softly. "I am so proud of you."

Severus felt tears choking him, and he looked away. He could not allow himself weakness in front of the entire wizarding world. Albus sensed that and dropped his hands from where they had rested on Severus's upper arms in half-embrace. Swallowing, Severus pushed his emotions aside, cleared his mind, and felt nothing. Tried to feel nothing. Then Minerva had embraced him, and he had to work harder at Occluding. But Potter was there, clapping and grinning as though he were the one receiving the award, and he reached out to shake Severus's hand. One look into Lily's eyes . . . Potter's eyes, and the warmth and gratitude dissolved into guilt. But Potter's eyes were not reproving, they were accepting.

Severus shook himself internally as the bus took a sharp turn, shifting all the passengers in their seats. He did not need Potter's approval or forgiveness. He didn't know

what he needed, but that wasn't it. At the moment, he almost felt beyond the guilt and self-disgust he had so often felt, but beyond that . . . was nothing. Just nothing. Nothing and no one.

A blank gaze stared back at him from the bus window, and Severus blinked before realising that he was looking into his own empty eyes. Was that what others saw when they looked at him? He closed his eyes and dozed, thinking of the end of his journey, of his ultimate goal, of Hermione.

The air brakes of the bus made a high-pitched squeal as the bus slowed and jerked to a stop. Wadebridge. Shaken from his reverie, Severus stood and stepped past the middle-aged Muggle who had been blessedly silent all the way from Truro, busy with her knitting.

"Eh, your sack!" The woman held out his paper bag to him.

Severus took the handles and nodded his thanks. He had thought he shouldn't arrive empty-handed. Bad enough he was showing up unannounced. As he stepped off the bus into the sunshine—he hadn't even noticed that the rain had ended—it occurred to him that turning up on the Grangers' doorstep unannounced might be a bad idea, but he looked around and found where the bus to Port Isaac would be leaving from. Although he had time to find a bun to eat or to visit the shops, he simply stood and waited. He was underway. Once he had taken his first step that morning, he couldn't veer from his path.

He was one of only a dozen on the bus to Port Isaac, and five of them were an American family of tourists. Much to his surprise, they scolded their youngest boy when he started to run up and down the aisle, and then they quietly admonished the older girl, who was staring at him openly. The American tourists he usually saw were loud and treated everything as though it was just there for their amusement, like the scenery or props at Disney World. But, he considered, you probably would only notice the loud ones and not the polite ones.

Severus dozed a little as the bus made its winding way to Port Isaac. Feeling a prickling, he opened his eyes. The girl was staring at him again. She glanced over at her mother beside her, then she opened her backpack and made a great show of looking for something. Severus raised an eyebrow. The girl had a wand in her bag. She was fifteen, perhaps sixteen. He hoped she knew that the laws of Britain were different from those in the States, where wand use was permitted for anyone over fifteen, though the type of permissible spells was regulated. She pulled out a pamphlet.

"Mom, do you think that man would mind me asking him about the megalithic structures in Cornwall?" She held up the pamphlet, which had a picture of standing stones on the front.

Her mother laughed slightly. "You can ask him, but even if he doesn't mind, don't forget that just because he's from here doesn't mean that he can answer all your questions." Severus thought he detected some apprehension on the woman's face as her daughter got up and moved to the vacant seat beside him, bringing her bag and pamphlet with her.

"I am not from Cornwall," Severus said, attempting to be polite but discourage any conversation.

"That's okay. You still know more than me." The girl shot a look at her mother.

"I doubt very much that I could enlighten you." Severus turned his head and looked out the window.

"Oh." That information didn't seem to deter her, and Severus was beginning to reevaluate his opinion of the American family. "This is my first time in England. Dad went to school here, though. Well, not exactly. He was a Fulbright scholar."

Severus had the vague idea that that information was supposed to be impressive. He made a noncommittal noise and continued to look out the window.

"I've seen a lot of owls since coming to England," the girl said in a conversational tone.

"Have you," he replied drily.

"Yeah, owls, and I went to an owl emporium in London yesterday. It was hard to convince the 'rents to let me off the leash, but I told 'em I'd be fine. They let me when I said I'd bring Rick with me. He starts at my school next year, and I thought he could get some books, you know? Special ones."

Severus nodded. The girl apparently had deduced he was a wizard. Given that his Muggle attire, which, unlike some, was perfectly unremarkable—an ordinary black suit, white shirt with French cuffs, a tie with diagonal green and silver stripes, and black ankle boots—he didn't know what had given him away.

"I teach at a . . . private school," he said.

Her face broke into a smile. "I knew it!" she said in hushed excitement. "You're *him*! Nobody's gonna *believe* it at home! Wow! And on *abus*!"

"I am no one," Severus replied, looking out the window again.

"I've read all about you! You're famous. The hero Snape! D'you know Harry Potter? Duh! That's a dumb question, of course you do! He's so cute! Are you—I'm sorry." The girl stopped, frozen by the glare that Severus gave her. "I didn't mean to bother you. It's just—except for an hour in Diagon Alley, when I had to drag my brother along, I've just been with my family, if you know what I mean." She glanced back over at her mother.

"You appear to have competent parents and acceptable siblings. Whether they attended your school or not should not matter." Then he remembered that he was talking to a teenager. If she weren't embarrassed because they were Muggles, except for her one brother, she would no doubt find them embarrassing for some other reason.

"But we hardly see *anything*," she said with an exaggerated sigh.

"I doubt that is an accurate statement," Severus said. "And when you are older, you can return and plan your own itinerary. Do not dismiss the destinations that your parents choose. Appreciate it instead of thinking about what you would rather be doing. That is pointless and stupid. You do not appear stupid." Annoying and immature, but not stupid. He looked away, the conversation at an end.

After a few minutes of silence, the girl got up and moved back to sit next to her mother. She whispered something to her mother, and the woman looked over at him, slight surprise on her face, then she looked quickly away.

Wonderful. Still frightening Muggles.

Port Isaac came into view, and the various passengers began to gather their parcels together. When they arrived in the village, Severus waited until the last of them had exited the bus before he stood himself. He walked without knowing where he was going, but he had gone scarcely twenty yards before he saw a four-by-four that appeared to be a cab. The driver was slouching against the car, smoking a cigarette and talking with another man.

"You take fares?" Severus asked.

The man stepped on his cigarette, putting it out, then carefully picked it up and flicked it into a nearby bin. "I do, dependin'. Where you need to be?"

Severus reached into his pocket and pulled out the slip of paper with Hermione's address on it.

"Aw, sure. The old Tremadden place. No. Sorry. Can't take you there. Unless you're going up later. In three, four hours."

The man's hard Rs reminded Severus uncomfortably of Gertrude Gamp's milder Cornish accent. Everything seemed to remind him of the past lately, the long past. He

frowned.

"Why can't you take me now?" He couldn't hang about this village doing nothing. He was on his way to see Hermione. The man was just standing there smoking, after all.

"I have a pick-up in less than an hour. It's in th'opposite direction. I'd never make it in time. Sorry."

"Are there other drivers?" Severus asked, looking around.

"Sometimes. It's not regular. Not like yer in bloody London."

"You going to the old Tremadden place?" a woman's voice asked.

Severus turned. Looking up at him was a short Muggle with muddy boots, sharp grey eyes, striped braces, and a peculiar shapeless hat.

"Apparently. Or apparently not," Severus replied.

"Where those dentists are staying, the Granges?" she asked.

"The Grangers, yes," Severus replied, feeling something like relief.

"I can take you. I'm driving past there, anyway. Or near enough. Come on," the woman said, beckoning him and turning, expecting him to follow her.

"Go on there, man, unless you want to wait an' pay me a few hours from now," the cab driver said.

Severus followed the woman down to a dirty Land Rover.

"Well, get in," the woman said as she climbed in behind the wheel.

Severus walked around to the passenger's side and opened the door.

"Do you always give lifts to strangers? Isn't that unwise?"

She shrugged. "I'm pretty good at sizing people up," she replied, tossing her hat into the back seat, revealing short curly grey hair, quite mussed. "Safety belt, please! I'm Sadie Pengaree. Local eccentric. You are?"

Severus fiddled with the seatbelt and hesitated, though he didn't know why. "Snape."

"Snape? Just Snape?"

"Severus Snape." He felt he didn't know who Severus Snape was.

"Okay, now we're not strangers." She down-shifted as she took a corner and started up a steep hill, and the engine roared.

"You know the Grangers?" Severus asked as he tried to keep from holding onto the door handle.

"Met them. Don't know them. Talked with the daughter a bit. Interesting knowledge of herbs she has, better than most young girls nowadays. And interested in my bit of work—genuinely interested, not just humouring a ditsy old bat. I can tell when they're just pretending to be interested but are really thinking I'm a complete barmpot," she said cheerfully, pressing harder on the accelerator as she approached the peak of the hill.

"What is your work?" Severus asked, hoping he would survive this ride.

"Oh, it isn't real work, though you could say it's my occupation, or my vocation," Sadie replied, obviously repeating something she had said many times before. "Simples, tonics, tinctures, all from nature, concocted from local ingredients that I gather myself, as far as possible. I sometimes have to use ingredients that I can't find around here." She shifted into fifth gear and they picked up speed as they hit a flat, straight stretch of road. "Have to be careful though. Careful of my suppliers and careful who I give my remedies to. They think 'natural' means 'innocuous,' and they think that more is better." She shook her head at the idiocy of people. "Dunderheads, sometimes."

Severus smirked.

"And you?" She looked over at him. "On holiday? No—recuperating from something, I'd say. Car accident?"

"Something like that," Severus replied.

She eyed him. "You look like you could use something to raise your iron. A little sunshine wouldn't hurt either. And you've been eating too much prepackaged stuff. The microwave might be handy, but you can cook fresh vegetables in it as easily as you can one of those prefab things that are half fat and half salt."

"Mm." Another woman who thought she should give him dietary advice. She was right, though, he'd only been eating prepackaged meals. He used his wand to heat them, not a microwave, but otherwise . . .

"Interesting ring," Sadie commented, sensing that her cooking advice was falling on stony ground.

Severus looked down at his ring and nodded. Two snakes, intertwined. Gold and silver, like those of Snape's Slytherins, but unlike theirs, the heads were not in profile, and each snake had two emerald eyes.

They drove another ten minutes in silence.

"That's the place," Sadie said. She slowed and indicated a lone whitewashed stone house below them.

"You can drop me here," Severus said. "I will walk the rest of the way."

"It's no trouble for me to drive you around to the house. The turn off is just a few hundred yards ahead." Sadie pointed. "It'll bring us down to that road on the other side, then, hey, presto! There's the driveway."

Severus shook his head, and Sadie brought the car to a stop and pulled on the handbrake.

He reached into his pocket. "Can I give you something for your trouble?"

"No, thanks. It was my pleasure."

Severus walked down off the road and started across the moor, waiting until the "local eccentric" was out of sight before he Disapparated. He didn't Apparate too close to the house, since he presumed that Hermione had raised Antiapparition wards.

Again questioning the wisdom of his unannounced visit, he walked around the side of the house and down a path toward the front door. It opened to him before he reached it. A middle-aged woman smiled out at him.

"Professor Snape?"

He nodded.

"Please, come in," she said, opening the door more widely and stepping back. "Hermione is out, but she will be back soon."

He stood stock-still.

"I'm Anne, Hermione's mother. Jerome will be pleased to meet you, too. Hermione has told us a lot about you."

Severus stepped up the one granite step and into the house.

"Jerome!" Anne called. "We have a visitor!" She turned back to Severus. "Please, come in and have a seat!" She gestured toward a room to her right.

Severus had to stoop slightly to go through the doorway. He didn't recognise any of the furniture from his one visit to the Grangers' other house when the Dark Lord—Riddle—had summoned him. He was actually glad of that.

A tall, slim man with greying ginger hair and glasses seemed to spring into the room. "Professor Snape! Pleased to meet you," he said, holding out his hand. "Hermione mentioned you might visit, but she didn't say it would be today."

Severus shook the man's hand. "I hadn't been certain when I could come," he replied somewhat disingenuously.

"We're glad you could," Jerome replied. "Have a seat—would you like a drink? Tea? Lemonade? Something stronger? We have Scotch, gin—Anne enjoys a gin and bitter lemon occasionally."

That reminded Severus of his bag. "Nothing at the moment, thank you, unless you were going to have something." He held out his brown paper bag. "I brought you something." He looked past Jerome at Anne. "For the family."

Jerome pulled the wine bottle from the bag and looked at the label. "This does look nice, doesn't it, honey?" He held out the bottle to his wife.

"A Pinot Noir. Excellent!" she agreed, examining the label more closely than her husband had.

Severus felt slightly guilty at passing on the gift he had received from Slughorn, but he knew that that wizard would have selected a good wine. He also hadn't thought of it until the night before.

"But there's something else in the bag," Jerome said. He reached in and pulled out a book.

Severus worried for a moment that his choice had been poor and that he might inadvertently offend his hosts, but he didn't say anything. This gift, too, was not new, but he had gone through his bookshelves looking for a book on British history, one that was Muggle and not wizarding, and he remembered this one had been interesting and instructive, though it tended to dwell rather heavily on British excesses.

Jerome grinned, though, when he saw the cover. "The Battle of Culloden! And I haven't seen this one before." He began to open the book.

"Ah ah ah!" Anne admonished, taking the book from him. "If you start looking at that, you'll forget we have a guest." She smiled at Severus. "The perfect choice for my husband—though I'll certainly read it when he's finished with it. We still haven't got our books from the other house, and we're always looking for new things to read, anyway. Now, why don't I get us a pitcher of lemonade while you two talk. Hermione should be along soon."

"I think that's her now," Jerome said as the sound of a motor approached the house. "Yes, there she is."

Just as the motor stopped, Severus turned his head to look out the window. Hermione was getting off a Vespa and removing her helmet. He felt as though there were doxies in his stomach.

"Now sit, Professor. I'll let Hermione know you are here," Anne said.

Severus sat at one end of the couch as Jerome sank into an armchair. He heard Hermione's mother greet her. He couldn't hear what Anne told her, but he did hear Hermione's voice saying, "Really?" and a second later, she was in the room.

"Severus!" Hermione's grin was infectious, and as Severus stood, he found the corners of his mouth turning up in response to her enthusiastic greeting.

"Hermione. I hope my timing is not inconvenient—" he began.

"No, not at all, but how did you get here? When did you arrive?"

"I just got here a few minutes ago," Severus replied.

"He brought us a very nice wine," Anne said, "and a book your father's champing to read. But come help me in the kitchen, Jerome." She hefted the two bags Hermione had apparently given her when she came in.

"How did you find us?" Hermione asked, sitting down on the couch next to Severus.

"You sent your address. You seemed . . . I thought you had suggested I visit," Severus said awkwardly.

"I did, and I was beginning to think you weren't interested in visiting, but how did you get here? Knight Bus?"

"I took the train to Truro, then the bus from there. A woman named Pengaree gave me a lift from town."

"You met Sadie? I like her. I sometimes almost forget she's a Muggle when we're talking about her herbal remedies. I'm so glad you decided to come!" She reached over and patted his knee. "But why didn't you owl? I could have at least picked you up in Truro, if not Diagon Alley, saved you the long trip."

Severus twitched one shoulder. "I simply decided to come. I thought . . . I thought that if I thought about it too much, I might not. Or something. And the trip was . . . interesting." He shifted awkwardly. "Your parents were quite hospitable. They politely hid any surprise they must have felt at my unexpected appearance on their doorstep."

"I did tell them that I invited you to come visit. And now that you know where the house is, you can visit much more easily," Hermione said brightly. "Just Apparate. There's a shed and a trellis I'll show you. There's a nook there where you can arrive without being seen from the roads."

Severus looked out at the Vespa. "You ride a motor scooter?"

"Yes, it's practical. Better than Apparating everywhere and having people wondering how I get about, and it's fun, too. But I would have brought you by Side-Along—though the Vespa does have room for a passenger, it's a bit far to ride as a passenger all the way from Truro! But we have a car, too. So . . . what made you decide to visit today?"

Severus shook his head. "I just thought I would. I wanted to see you. Things seem very odd now. I . . . after I decided to come, I seemed to have a purpose." He coloured mildly. "It was something to do for the day, I mean. But I wanted to see you."

"Would you like to go for a walk? Now that the sun's out, it's a beautiful day, perfect for a walk."

Severus nodded. Now that he was here, he certainly felt it had been foolish to come. He had nothing to say, no reason to be there. No reason to be anywhere.

"Okay, let me just run and change my shoes and let Mum and Dad know we're leaving the house." She looked at his clothes. "Are you comfortable in that, or did you want to change? Or Transfigure them?"

"I will Transfigure my shoes," he replied with a nod, looking down at his boots, which he had carefully polished the night before using a potion of his own devising.

Hermione was back very quickly. "Ready? Good." She smiled up at him. "We can finally have that proper walk we were going to have."

Severus let out a slow breath and he felt a knot of tension unwind in him.

The two walked for twenty minutes, Hermione pointing out the little nook between the trellis and the shed where he could Apparate to if he decided to visit again, and then heading west across the road to a footpath. Hermione spoke of her indefinite plans for the future, the various options she was considering, including travelling through the wizarding world for a year and seeing all of the different ways that wizards lived around the globe.

"I was amazed to see the way that the wizarding world functions in Australia," Hermione said. "I always assumed it was more-or-less the way things are here, just with a different accent." She laughed. "But they really do things very differently. The differences between Muggle Britain and Muggle Australia are practically nonexistent compared to the differences between wizarding Britain and wizarding Australia. I think we could learn a lot from the way wizards live and govern themselves in other countries. Even the way they do magical research."

"You are going away for a year?" Severus asked. He didn't like that thought. In her letters, she had mentioned some of the things she was considering, including Muggle university, an apprenticeship, a job at the Ministry, and devoting her time to S.P.E.W., but she hadn't said anything about leaving Britain.

"It's an option," Hermione replied. "But probably not. Not now, anyway. My parents are still having some difficulties adjusting to life, though I doubt there was anything you could notice in the short time you were with them. They are having some . . . some memory problems, a little confusion. But even without that, I think I'd like to be nearer them for a while. And there are so many other things that I could do. I don't have to decide anything right away, though. What about you?"

"I still haven't decided whether to return to teaching or not. Minerva has been good to her word and hasn't bothered me about it, though I do hear from her every few days." He sounded disgruntled about that, but he was actually grateful. Her regular friendly correspondence punctuated his otherwise dull and shapeless days with small spots of light.

"What do you want to do?" Hermione asked, taking his arm and guiding him to some flat rocks where they could sit in the sun.

Severus shook his head. "I don't know. When I think about going back, I don't want to, but then when I think about not returning, that seems worse. I feel I have nothing in my future but long, dull, blank days." And nights filled with dreams of unspeakable horror, murder, cruelty, and torture. Of willingly punishing a recalcitrant Death Eater, Petrifying him and draping the bodies of his dead wife and two-year old daughter across him, of laughing as tears spilled out of the Petrified man's eyes. Of smiling as he cut off a witch's arm. Of pouring poison down the throat of one of his students. And then waking to know that the nightmares were his own memories. Memories of his own horrific acts.

They sat in silence for a while, looking off over the sea below, a few distant boats bobbing like toys on the water.

"I think you should go back for another year," Hermione said finally. "Not that you asked my advice, but that's what I think. Then at the end of the year, you can decide whether to stay or to leave, and it will be on your own terms, and not just because you're not the Order's spy any longer. You can see for yourself what it's like to teach and be Head of Slytherin without having Riddle and the Death Eaters be a factor in your life. And not that you have to prove anything to anyone else, of course, but it might be a side benefit to show people that you belong at Hogwarts on your own merits as a Potions master and a talented wizard, that you weren't just tolerated by Dumbledore and later by the Headmistress because they needed you as a spy."

There had been some suggestions in the *Daily Prophet* that Severus had only been kept on at Hogwarts because they had "wanted to keep an eye" on him before Riddle returned, and after, because they wanted to have easy access to their spy. Minerva had finally given a statement a few days before, saying that Severus Snape was not only a valued member of the Order and a true hero, as attested by his two Merlins, but that he was a good friend and highly valued member of the Hogwarts staff, and that Hogwarts had been fortunate to have such an extremely talented Potions master on the faculty for so many years. Still, it seemed that if they were only questioning his place on the Hogwarts staff, Hermione thought, that was preferable to having them wonder about his past as a Death Eater. She hoped that Severus wasn't reading the *Prophet*. It might discourage him.

"Stay this year," Hermione repeated, "and then if you decide to leave at the end of it, you'll do it on your own terms for your own reasons, and because you have something else to look forward to, not just because it's the default choice."

Severus nodded. "I do owe Minerva a lot, as well."

"I'm sure that Professor McGonagall only wants what's best for you, though. I don't think she would want you to stay only out of a sense of obligation to her. She hasn't said that, has she?" Hermione asked suddenly.

"No, no, she hasn't. She . . . you are correct. She would not want me to remain out of a sense of obligation to her. But the obligation is there, nonetheless." Severus let out a small sigh. "My contract is up in a few days. I should let her know by the thirty-first. And normally, we all return on the second of August to renew the wards, but Minerva said that because of the extensive work they are doing on the grounds and castle, and on the wards, as well, that will take the place of the annual ward renewal and I don't need to be there on the second."

"Annual ward renewal?" Hermione asked, her interest piqued.

"Not strictly necessary, at least not on an annual basis, but the wards are . . . given a tune-up every year, and by tradition, it takes place the day after Lammas. It's not a secret, but it's not common knowledge, either. The Headmaster or Headmistress also usually makes any changes to the castle or grounds at that time, too—moves rooms about, and such. That doesn't stop Hogwarts from changing things on her own when the mood strikes, but that's when the big changes generally get made. Usually with the help of the house-elves, of course." Severus looked off into the distance. "I think your advice is good, though. I will consider it."

"What have you been doing this summer? You never say very much in your letters." Although he responded to almost every one of her letters, his were all very short.

"I have done very little to speak of. I eat. I read. McGonagall has annoyed me a few times, insisting on meeting for a drink. The first time, I couldn't very well say no, since he reminded me that I owed him a drink. After that . . . it simply seemed easier to agree than to be peppered with owls every other hour," he said in disgust.

Hermione laughed. "I'm sure you could ignore them if you really wanted to. Gareth's a good guy. He's really pretty brilliant, like you, but a lot more out-going. He also has a positive outlook. I think he's probably good for you."

"Hmmp." Despite himself, Severus had . . . *not enjoyed* young McGonagall's company, no, not that, but it had provided him diversion from his mundane routine.

"I'm glad you came today, Severus."

He nodded.

"How have you been? How was the trip?"

Severus shrugged. "Fine. It was . . . fine." How to express his sense of dislocation? His sense that when he caught his reflection in the train window, he did not recognise himself?

"We're looking at this summer as a family holiday," Hermione said, "but I don't know whether my parents will want to move back to the old house any time soon. Did I tell you that the MLE went through and cleaned the house of curses and traps?"

Severus nodded. "I think you would be wise to have someone independent go through it again, just in case. Bill Weasley might be able to do it, or he could recommend someone reliable."

"Moody was with them when they did it, even though he'd retired again by then, so I'm pretty sure that it's okay, but you're right. It's better safe than sorry. Gareth suggested the same thing, more or less, though he recommended Professor Dumbledore."

"You have seen McGonagall?" The other wizard hadn't mentioned that when he'd seen him.

"A couple times. I'm glad you came by today and not tomorrow, or you would have missed me. I'm meeting Harry, Ron, and a few other friends in London tomorrow afternoon and was planning to stay overnight at Grimmauld Place. But if you'll be here, I can owl them and change that."

"No. I do not plan to stay." So she was seeing Weasley again. He didn't know why that should bother him, except that Weasley was a bit of a fool and not at all suited to Hermione. "I should leave soon."

"Do you have to?" Hermione asked. "You only just got here, and it was a long trip. Won't you at least stay for dinner?"

"I should not impose."

"Severus, you certainly wouldn't be imposing. If you don't want to for some reason, I will be disappointed, but you wouldn't be imposing. Please stay."

He hesitated. "If your parents wouldn't mind."

"Of course not! I've told them all about you, and they've read the *Prophet* articles I saved. I think they'd be pleased to get to know you a bit."

"All right. Thank you." He quirked a slight smile. "I'd be pleased to get to know me a bit, too. I have no idea who I am any longer, Hermione. I feel . . . at sea."

Hermione smiled at him and wrapped her arm around his. "All the more reason to stay for dinner, then. We can talk and you can start rediscovering Severus Snape. Besides, my parents are experiencing something similar, trying to sort out who they are after having lived as different people for almost a year. So they'll understand better than you might think. We'll all be happy if you stay."

Severus felt something in him begin to unwind, Hermione's warmth seemed to spread through him, and he started to relax. Very slowly and tentatively, he moved his hand down to take hers.

"I thought . . . when I thanked you for your friendship, I thought that was the end of it, the last time I would sit with you. I said good-bye."

"And I still had hope you would live and we would be able to become better friends, out in the daylight and not shut up in the library."

Severus looked away from her warm gaze. "Sometimes I wish I . . . I hope you understand, but sometimes I wish I hadn't lived," he whispered. He remembered lying with his head in her lap, delirious, certain he was dying. "I am not ungrateful to you. I simply don't know how to live. And I remember too much. For other people, it all ended with Potter's victory. It won't ever end for me. I remember everything I've done. And some of it . . . I want to forget it. I don't want to be that person. But I don't know how to be anyone at all."

"You're my friend Severus," Hermione said quietly, giving his hand a squeeze. "Start there with that. Then owl the Headmistress and give her your decision. And just go from there."

She stood. "Let's walk back. Dinner will be ready in a little while. And after dinner, we can have a glass of wine together out in the garden." She tugged on his hand as he got to his feet. "It will be like I promised you."

Together, they walked back to the house. Hermione led him through the front door, and when she looked up at him, met his eyes, and smiled, Severus found himself smiling back down at her. He and Hermione were friends. That was a good place to begin his new life. He felt Hermione's hand in his. A very good place, indeed.

~ **The End** ~



Note: I hope you have enjoyed this story. For more information about *Death's Dominion* and my other fics, check out my blog (mmadfan.com) or my LiveJournal. There's a link on my profile page to my blog.

Thank you to everyone who has taken the time to review. I really have appreciated it!

Update: There's now an additional *Death's Dominion* one-shot called "[Enter, Peacetime](#)." It's set during chapters 29 and 30 of *Death's Dominion*, features Alastor Moody and Severus Snape, and is posted here on TPP.



There's also a Snape-centric sequel to *Death's Dominion*, called "[A Long Vernal Season](#)", and it's available here on TPP, as well. If you would like to see how Severus learns to live his unexpected new life, you might enjoy it.

See what the nice people over at the SSHG Quiz gave me:



* SSHG Quiz ~ Epics II ~ 17 June 2011 *