

Conversations Through an Empty Frame

by RedOrchid

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The Forest of Aberdeen

Chapter 1 of 14

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A/N: A big thank you to Lariope, for insightful comments and general support.

Chapter 1 The Forest of Aberdeen

A lone gust of wind swept through the dark branches of a shivering tree, and a few remaining leaves shuddered and fell to the ground. The forest was covered in darkness, a pale moon providing the only light in a ghostly shimmer. A little further in, invisible to the eyes of any improbable passers-by, stood a small, rickety tent, seemingly abandoned. The wind swept past the small opening, and a square of thread-bare material flapped desolately to accommodate its transit. All in all, the impression was a rather sad one.

The inside of the tent was largely different. A small flat extended into magical space, providing comfortable accommodations for up to half a dozen people. To one side, the door to a fully functional kitchen stood slightly ajar, dissipating the last wafts of freshly baked bread. On a closer look, however, first impressions proved again to be deceiving; despite the comfortable surroundings, there was an air of hopelessness and sadness about the place, which mimicked the outside in an almost eerily appropriate way.

In one of the bedrooms, tucked in beneath soft covers, lay a young girl, unable to sleep. She twisted on the sheets, trying to lure her body to rest by providing a more comfortable position. Like in her earlier attempts, her body settled down into heavy relaxation, but her mind refused to shut down. The forest was quiet tonight...much too quiet for a girl who'd spent half her nights in the middle of a city and the other half in a dorm room filled with noisy co-habitants; her thoughts were much too loud. The isolation from the outer world was slowly creeping beneath her skin, pulling strength from her heart and leaving only desolation. They had been gone for many weeks now. It had been summer when they'd set out on their quest, and now autumn was coming to a quick conclusion. Soon, there would be snow.

Loneliness was setting in as well; they had lost Ron in a stupid fight...though were she to be completely honest with herself, Hermione thought he'd been largely right...and the famed Trio had been decimated to a lonely pair. Loyalty and compassion made her stay with Harry, though his plans seemed to get more and more lost in a web of confusion and obsession with every day. Ideas weren't frequent or cunning now, but rather desperate and far between. Hope, like time, was running out, and she could do nothing but stare passively into space.

"Miss Granger!"

Her eyes jerked open at the sound, and she quickly grabbed a small drawstring bag from her bedside table, fiddling with the cords. The sound was coming from inside, muffled by the cloth but still audible. Tearing the bag open, she felt inside and withdrew from it a portrait, set within a gilded frame. On the black canvas, a small man appeared, looking rather flushed but quite proud of himself.

"Ah, there you are," he exclaimed. "I've been calling for quite some time. It is truly impolite to ignore your elders, of course, but with you lot, I can't say I ever had much hope to be treated with courtesy. Why, when I was Headmaster..."

"It's the middle of the night," Hermione interrupted, eliciting a small *hrumph!* from the minute wizard. "What was so important to tell me that it couldn't wait till morning?"

Phineas Nigellus Black looked deadly affronted, and for a minute Hermione thought that he would just turn around and leave the painting...as people in magical portraits so often did. Instead, he stood up to his full height and pinned her with a very firm stare. She sat up a little straighter.

"The Headmaster would like a word, Miss Granger, and I have been *respectfully* asked," he stressed the word, and Hermione felt a small pang of guilt when reminded of their somewhat less than courteous treatment of the former head of the Black family lately, "to open up a link between my portraits so that he may speak with you."

Dumbledore! Her heart was suddenly beating very fast, and her mind started spinning. Was this possible? Portraits moved from frame to frame at Hogwarts with ease, of course, but she'd never heard of them visiting other locations through paintings that weren't their own. She mentally kicked herself for not having researched the matter more thoroughly. With Dumbledore's advice, they could have worked faster, more efficiently...might even have been spared this cursed, prolonged camping trip! Feeling the resentment of months on the run...with boys who somehow assumed that she would do all the housework...well up inside her, she gave herself an additional kick for good measure and looked intently at the canvas for a first glimpse of the beloved Headmaster. Phineas Nigellus had left, and the painting stared back at her, black and empty. She opened her mouth to call him back, to ask if she needed to do something else, some kind of special charm, for the connection to work. Before she could get the first word out, however, a voice sounded through the canvas...a deep, rich voice with a deadly silken quality she knew she would recognise anywhere.

"Good evening, Miss Granger."

She froze, her mouth suddenly dry with fear. Not Dumbledore, but the man who'd killed him, was on the other side of the canvas *He's far away*, she tried to reason with herself, but it worked poorly on her nerves. Even though she couldn't see him, she felt his presence as acutely as though he'd been right in the room with her. *Harry*. The painting fell from her hands as she scrambled to her feet.

"Fetch Potter and I will disappear. You do not have time for this. While you dally, unproductively, in the woods, the Dark Lord is strengthening his position, securing the hideouts of what you're looking for." The crisp statement brought her to an abrupt halt, one hand inches from the door handle.

"We're not hiding in the woods." Her voice was quite steady as she turned back towards the bed.

"Such lies," he admonished softly, causing a trickle of...*something* to run down her spine. "You are presently in a forest thirteen and a half mile from the outskirts of Aberdeen. You arrived the day before yesterday from your previous hideout on the west bank of Loch Ness. Since you left Grimmauld Place, you have made twenty-six stops, all in wooded areas."

"How...?" Fear had her numb, knowing that their position had been betrayed to the man who was known as Lord Voldemort's most faithful servant. Yet, if he'd known for months where they were, how come they had been left alone?

"Dumbledore wanted to make sure that someone was in position to aid Potter when he passed on," Snape said quietly. "He left his map to me."

"What map?" Without realising it, her feet had made their way back to the bed, and she was drawn back on top of the covers.

"The map showing Harry Potter's every move, his current occupation, his state of health and his closest companions. I understand that Dumbledore made it after he left the child with his relatives. According to my observations, Potter spent the day brooding, went outside for a short while to fetch a rabbit for dinner, ignored you for most of the evening and went to bed without helping with the dishes. I suspect that I could get much more information out of this map, but I haven't had the time or motivation to figure out all its secrets. Potter is rather dull to observe, as you undoubtedly know."

She was too stunned to reply. Any doubt she'd had as to whether he was telling the truth had disappeared as he retold the day's events. This explained much about Dumbledore's seeming omniscience when it came to Harry. She could see the usefulness clearly, but the level of intrusion left her baffled all the same.

"What do you want?" she asked. There was a slight tremble in her voice, and she swallowed hard to keep it steady.

"I have a duty to fulfil, Miss Granger. What I want hardly comes into it."

"A duty to whom?" she asked suspiciously. "One would think that the betrayal of one master would fulfil your duty to the other."

"Indeed," he replied, and she could hear a definite tone of bitterness in his voice.

"Perhaps you should have thought of that before you killed the man who loved and trusted you!"

His hiss of anger cut through the room. Her professor of six years didn't tolerate impertinence. With only his voice present and the darkness surrounding her, however, she felt a certain recklessness surge through her and found that she no longer much cared about proper respect to the man who'd turned out to be a murderer.

"Harry is looking to kill you," she stated, defiance in her voice.

"And I'm looking to save him. How ironic."

She started to reply, but her mind suddenly stumbled on a boulder of dismissed logic that had been pointedly ignored ever since Dumbledore's murder. She had pushed it away for Harry, refusing to think on it and telling herself that surely, it was nothing. It was the metaphorical pink elephant, lounging in her inner sitting room and occasionally raising its trunk to let out a loud, trumpeting sound. Ever since the attack on Hogwarts, she'd had a nagging feeling in her gut...a distinct sense that something was off, that an important piece of the puzzle was missing and that she was on the wrong track. She'd tried to tell herself that it was disappointment, betrayal or even simple fear. Hearing her former professor's voice brought it all back with brutal force, making her mind stagger. *There is just so much that doesn't fit...*

The Death Eaters had infiltrated the castle, and Snape had gone straight to the tower, as though he knew, somehow, that this would be where it all went down... Flitwick had been simply Stunned, and she and Luna been sent to him directly, making it possible for him to rejoin the fight within minutes... Dumbledore had died, and Snape had fled with Draco, Harry hot on his tail. According to Harry, the other Death Eaters had attacked, and Snape had stopped it because Voldemort wanted to kill him in person. But why would they not have even tried to capture him? Why would Snape let such a golden opportunity pass him by? To deliver Harry to Voldemort, together with the news of the death of his greatest foe? Grimmauld Place. Intact. Not filled with Death Eaters ready for ambush... Her thoughts kept spinning, details adding, memories clicking together, showing new angles, new possibilities. Learning through the portrait that Ginny and Neville had been given detention with Hagrid...a loyal member of the Order...for trying to bring Harry a famous weapon... The piece of fact most difficult for her mind to dismiss was that he'd known their position for months, and yet, no one had approached them. As hard as she tried, she couldn't think of a single reason to how this could possibly benefit Voldemort. They were alone, vulnerable in unknown terrain. The map apparently showed where they were, what they did, when they slept, when they left the protection of the charmed tent to search for food. An ambush would have been almost insultingly easy.

Perhaps the simplicity was the problem? Voldemort had shown a weakness for dramatics in the past, after all. Though why he wouldn't consider the flair of catching Harry Potter with the help of the map created for his protection by the man who'd been his mentor and loved him almost like a son, she couldn't find a good explanation to. The more she thought about it, the more she realised that, were she a Dark Lord, this would, in fact, make for a rather perfect plan.

"Have you made up your mind on whether to step out of line and trust me yet?" The voice made her jump again; something eerie was to be said for the way the silken syllables rolled off the empty canvas before her. His tone was neutral, the same kind of neutrality she recognised from overheard conversations between Order members when they suspected that they weren't alone. 'Guarded' would be another word.

"Why *should* I trust you?" she retorted, trying her best to imitate his unaffected tone.

"Because you have no other choice," he stated bluntly. "Because you realise that every day you stay on the run, the Dark Lord grows more powerful and your chances to destroy him are diminished."

The truth of his statement rang in her ears. She had tried to push it away before now, but the burning sensation in her gut and the slight wave of nausea reminded her that she would not be able to keep it up for much longer. People were dying, Harry was the one destined to stop it, and here they were, two teenagers, lost in the woods with little information and even less of an actual plan. She swallowed hard.

"You're manipulating me."

"I'm forcing you to step up and face what needs to be done," he answered harshly. "Call it what you will."

She closed her eyes, breathing heavily. The air suddenly seemed bereft of oxygen, pressure descending on her shoulders, making her crumble under the weight of the decision she needed to make. It was one those choices that came around only a few times in a human life...one that truly mattered and would change the world as she knew it. She felt as though the world was an injured bird in her palm and that she had no idea what would make it fly again and what would send it tumbling dead to the ground. It wasn't fair, but then nothing had been fair for a long time. Fair would have been not to leave a seventeen year old boy alone with the responsibility of saving the Wizarding World from tyranny. Fair would have been to lie in her bed in Gryffindor dormitory and mentally chide Lavender for having used too much perfume on her bed hangings again. Fair would have been to send an owl to her parents, worrying about the upcoming tests and getting back letters of reassurance and love...

"Ok." She wasn't aware of having spoken until she heard the word break the silence. She cleared her throat, waiting, terrified.

"Good girl," he said, and there was a sense of warmth in his voice that she didn't think she'd ever heard before. The approval went through her like water on a dried-up plant, and her heart picked up speed. She'd missed this, she realised...having someone else, someone older, guiding her in her decisions, filling her with comfort and easing her nagging self-doubt. She knew she couldn't allow herself to fully bask in the feeling of approval, coming from the source it did, and she blinked away a few sudden tears that had welled up in her eyes. She was not alone anymore. The feeling that if Snape had wanted to betray them, he'd had ample opportunity already was solidifying inside her, and she felt the first rays of hope touch her since the day they had managed to get their hands on the first Horcrux. She was not alone.

"Miss Granger."

She blinked away any remaining tears and focused her eyes on the seemingly empty frame.

"Yes, sir?"

Somehow, she fell back into their old pattern of address without even deciding to do so. When he spoke again, she swore she could almost hear a smile in his voice.

"Potter should consider himself lucky to have you with him. Now, can you describe your surroundings? Is there anything in the area that could be considered 'mythical' or 'great legend' by a self-important Gryffindor boy?"

"I don't think so, sir," she admitted after having thought the matter through. "What would it need to be, more exactly?" The frame was silent. She waited.

"I've got something Potter needs," he said, finally. "Something that will need to be found in a special setting for him to believe its authenticity. A small pond or a dramatic-looking ravine would probably work. Look for one over the next few days and contact me with your findings. Good night, Miss Granger."

He was gone. Her whispered 'Good night, Professor' fell softly from her lips and disappeared into the waiting darkness. She tumbled back on the bed and closed her eyes, suddenly exhausted. This time, as the moon began to wane on the night sky, sleep found her.

The Silver Crow

Chapter 2 of 14

The Sword of Gryffindor is found.

A/N: Slight parody warning in this chapter. I just couldn't resist. :-) Thanks to Lariope, my wonderful partner-in-writing.

Chapter 2 The Silver Crow

She waited four days. By then, the lack of doing something, of doing *anything*, had her so jumpy and irritated that even Harry had started to notice. *Quite a feat*, she thought grimly. Harry didn't notice much outside of his own thoughts these days. His obsession with the cursed locket they'd found had reached an all-time high, and she often found him sitting on his bed, just staring at the silver object in his hands. It worried her more than she wanted to admit.

She heaved a sigh and pulled on a jacket, preparing to go out to explore for a while. They had moved their camp again the day before, Apparating to a bare, mountainous area she'd often seen in a framed photograph hanging on her parents' bedroom wall. The look of the place suggested that they were somewhere in the Highlands...where exactly, she didn't know. Putting the small drawstring bag in her pocket, she lifted the flap of canvas serving as a door and ventured outside.

It was cold...much colder than anticipated...and she instinctively pulled her scarf higher, muttering a quick Warming Charm. An icy gale was beating down on the grey rock around her, and a kind of cruel beauty lay about the place. It was a harsh world, but an utterly majestic one as well; she felt an acute sense of awe walking amongst the great masses of heavy rock. Looking up, she scanned the landscape for something unique, something that would qualify as 'a special setting'. A little further ahead, fog was forming, thick and white, on a landing a few feet above her head. Squinting, she thought she could make out a narrow passage behind it. Deeming the spot mysterious

enough to be promising, she grabbed hold of the cold stone and began climbing.

The climb was slow and difficult. She reached the landing quickly enough, but the passage behind it was cramped and dark. The fog grew denser as she went on and caused her to slip, sending jolts of panic down her spine from fear of falling. With every yard, however, her mind seemed to quiet, the endless spinning of thoughts in her head slowing down to a void of sharp focus. On and over she went; down and through she pushed. It started to rain, small icy drops that bit at her face and hands. Her muscles began to protest, and her fingers started to feel numb, but she barely noticed the discomfort. A smell invaded her nostrils suddenly, and she reeled back. It was strong and unpleasant, making her think of eggs gone bad. It became stronger the further she went, and she fought to breathe through her mouth to escape it. The fog changed too, feeling almost hot against her cheeks, and a half spluttering, half murmuring sound started to overpower the smattering of the rain against the mountain side. Curious...and more than a little nervous...she pushed on.

It was a small area, sheltered by mountains on all sides. At the far end was a crack in the rock, from which great bouts of hot water and steam burst forth, spraying the ground and feeding a small, natural pool below it. The water was bright blue and opaque, making it impossible to see how deep the pool might be. Around the edge of the hot spring, the ground seemed alive, great big bubbles forming in the soft clay and releasing a strong smell of sulphur when they burst. She approached with caution, transfixed, as the water gushed and spluttered, enveloping her in the warm steam it generated with every new cascade. She leaned down to touch the water and found it hot to her touch, but not painfully so. Without thinking, she removed her boots and waded into the pool, feet bare against hard edges of rock and smooth, soft clay that welled up between her toes. The water became warmer the further she went, and she stopped after only a few feet when the heat became too much. Closing her eyes, she breathed in deeply, letting herself get lost in the contrast of the warm water around her ankles and the cold sprays of rain on her face. She stayed there a while, lost in sensation. Then, reality returned, and she reluctantly walked back out, half-collapsing onto a slippery rock and pulling the drawstring bag from her pocket.

"Good evening, Professor."

She hadn't had to wait long. It almost seemed as though Phineas Nigellus had been waiting for her call when she'd quietly voiced her request to talk to the Headmaster. *The Headmaster...* the title still sent a pang of sadness through her, the word having been so intimately connected with Professor Dumbledore in her mind. Remembering who she was about to speak to, however, she drew a shaking breath to clam down and concentrated on the task ahead. When the response came, it still managed to startle her.

"Miss Granger," he said simply, and she felt an overwhelming flood of comfort well through her. "I trust that you have managed to complete your assignment." He sounded so much like his normal, teaching self that, for a moment, she could almost convince herself that she was back at school, working under his scrutiny in the Potions classroom. The thought made a small smile tug at the corner of her mouth.

"Yes, sir," she replied...and quickly launched into a description of her surroundings, words pouring from her mouth without conscious thought, the relief of finally being able to talk to someone, to actually *do* something, making her forget who the person was on the other side of the black canvas. She felt as though she hadn't talked...really talked...in months, the rush of words extracting tension and anxiety from her like something drawing infection out of an open wound. He didn't interrupt her, and her voice finally died down, leaving her feeling deliciously empty and somewhat exposed.

He listened to her voice as wave after wave rolled off the painting in his private quarters. He'd moved the charmed object there after realising that it could be used for communication. It was safer that way; honour-bound though they might be to the current Headmaster of Hogwarts, the portrait-versions of his predecessors still had an awful tendency to gossip and speculate. He regretted not having discovered this possibility of communication earlier, but then, nothing much could be done about that now. He fought back a sense of worry as she spun her tale: the girl was strung so tight she risked snapping at any moment. He doubted she even realised it when her description of the discovered hot spring turned into a sad soliloquy. She spoke of the Golden Trio's fantastically failed attempts at finding the objects they were seeking, of the strain of living on such close quarters with two insensitive boys for weeks on end, of fears for the future and regrets of the past, of worry for loved ones and the aching loneliness of a person lost. In the half-hour of unbroken monologue, he learnt more about her than he had in the six years when she'd been his student, and more than he'd ever learnt about most people he'd met. He wasn't the kind of person who people got to know. He studied people...who studied him in return...but to study someone was a very different matter from getting to know them through open information and honesty. He found himself at quite a loss of how to react.

"Stay where you are," he said finally. "Once I've found out your location, I'll contact you again."

"Once you find...? " she exclaimed, bewildered. "What about the map?"

"The map only shows the United Kingdom and Ireland," he explained. "I have to extend the spell over a larger area. Now, what country are you in?" Stunned silence followed this question.

"I don't know," she admitted, having pondered the alternatives for awhile. "I thought we were still in Scotland."

"Obviously, you were wrong," he replied drily. To his surprise, a ripple of laughter sounded through the frame.

"I guess I was," she said, still giggling, though he could tell she was trying to hold it in. Pent-up stress, he assumed. Wonderful. Well, at least she wasn't crying.

"From what you describe, you seem to be somewhere with cold weather and high volcanic activity," he observed. "Since I doubt that two seventeen-year-olds would have been able to Apparate to New Zealand, you are most likely somewhere in Iceland. I will revert shortly."

The painting was silent again, and she was left sitting on the cold rock, staring at the empty canvas. Iceland. It made sense. Her parents had gone there for their honeymoon many years earlier, she remembered that now. The rain kept pelting her with its cold drops, and she shivered; the Warming Charm seemed to be wearing off. She took out her wand to recast it when the spluttering sound of a new outburst from the nearby geyser drew her attention. The water looked wonderfully warm and quite heavenly in its baby-blue splendour. The beautiful colour alarmed her slightly, since it just didn't seem natural, but the few diagnostic spells she cast deemed it quite safe. She had to stay here and wait anyway, she told herself, starting to remove her clothes and fold them neatly on top of the wet rock. She would probably never have the opportunity again. *Might as well*, her mind whispered softly. *Might as well...* Throwing a last self-conscious glance over her shoulder, she removed everything but her underwear, cast a Burn-protection Charm and slipped into the steaming water, making sure to leave the portrait face down on the grey surface.

He was staring at a student. An almost-naked student.

The thought burned viciously through his mind, and he quickly averted his eyes. It didn't help much; the image of her, relaxed and curious, wading towards the spluttering geyser in next to nothing...soaked and *transparent* pieces of next to nothing to make matters worse...seemed attached to the back of his eyelids. He forced it away, opening his eyes to stare hard at a fissure in the mountain next to him. Moving his eyes along the rock, he kept his gaze firmly focused on the surroundings, taking another deep breath to regain his composure. There were things to be done.

Retreating into the shadows, he cast a Disillusion Charm and quietly removed the Sword of Gryffindor from its sheath. He had to admit, the location was quite perfect for what he had in mind. He could have just left it outside the tent for Potter to find, of course, but Dumbledore had been rather adamant that it should be accepted through a deed of courage and valour. Quite ridiculous, really. The sword was under a powerful Arthurian Charm, that was true...a charm which dictated that a worthy knight would be able to withdraw it from its tattered companion artefact in times of great need. The symbolism was hardly subtle, but then the charm had been put on the sword by Godric Gryffindor, also known (in Slytherin House mainly) as perhaps the most flamboyant drama queen ever to walk the lands of Britain. Since the charm only extended to the relationship between the sword and the hat, however, there was really no need to take it into consideration on this occasion. Once retrieved, the sword could be handled like any other worldly object, passing from hand to hand without problem. But Dumbledore had insisted, and he would obey, as he always did. Potter would get to re-enact tales of great legend and feel heroic. It was probably the easiest way to convince the boy of the sword's authenticity...he reluctantly agreed on that count. He just wished

the display wouldn't have to be quite so gaudy... Sighing, he murmured a series of spells to get the sword into position and turned his wand towards the sky. Creeping deeper into the shadows, he sat down to wait.

He had just gone outside to look for Hermione when a flicker of light caught his attention. A beautiful, silver crow descended gracefully through the air, approaching slowly. The image made something stir in his mind, a memory half-forgotten, lurking just out of sight. He couldn't recall having seen this particular Patronus before, yet it seemed oddly familiar. The crow circled him twice, so close that he could almost reach out to touch each delicately defined feather. It gave a soft crooning sound, as though asking him to follow, and turned to the West. Transfixed and intrigued, Harry drew his wand and followed it.

The crow led him through the mountains, on a rocky, difficult path that seemed to go on forever. Darkness was heavy and compact around him, the silver bird his only light as he soldiered through the unknown terrain. Despite the cold rain on his face, he felt warmer than he had in months, the Patronus awakening hope and faith within him. He didn't know where it came from, but the feeling in his gut told him that the bird meant help in the desperate quest they were caught in. The silver light reminded him of his own stag. It brought comfort.

Rain changed into wet mist, and he pushed on through a high ravine, sound of rushing water reaching his ears. Climbing over a last boulder, he found himself in a small mountain clearing, dominated by a bright blue pool of water. The crow stopped over the centre of the steaming hot spring and crooned again. Almost reverently, he approached the edge of the pool, walking willingly into the ever-thickening mist. Another sound caught his attention...the first soft notes of Phoenix song, growing steadily stronger. It was a song of a time long lost, of legends and of myth. It told a thousand different stories in a moment's time: tales without words, filled with courage and beauty. He felt his breathing grow deeper, a sense of purpose filling every part of his body. His feet touched warm water, and he felt the skin sting as he waded into the pool. Somewhere between here and there, he'd removed most of the clothes he was wearing, his body responding sub-consciously to the feeling of sanctity that cloaked the place.

He was in to just below his waist when the song suddenly grew stronger. In front of him, a blade broke the surface, rising smoothly into the air. Gloriously, the Sword of Gryffindor rose from the water, followed by the person holding it. Harry gasped softly as Hermione came to stand before him, wet curls trailing down her chest and back, the gleaming sword placed as an offering on her outstretched hands. He swallowed hard.

"We found it, Harry," she said, her voice filled with wonder. "Here, take it."

He nodded slightly, extending his hand. Reverently, he grasped the hilt of the sword and took it from her hands, relishing the feeling of holding it again. Just like the time before, when he'd held it in a desperate fight against a giant Basilisk, it filled him with strength and courage...with determination. He would see the prophecy through, no matter the cost; he could see that now. The steam rising from the water seemed to clear the clouds of doubt and confusion that had filled his mind for so long. He felt cleansed, free even of the crippling anger...and even more crippling sense of guilt...he'd felt ever since Dumbledore died. He looked into Hermione's eyes and saw the same determined focus mirrored there. He swallowed again. Clear. It was all so very clear to him now.

Conscious thought gone from his mind, he acted on impulse, lowering the sword to his side and sliding his free hand into Hermione's tangled hair. The Phoenix song came to a crescendo, speaking of triumph, of battles won, and of true love reclaimed. As the last, ethereal notes reverberated through the air, Harry leaned in and kissed her.

Seen and Unforeseen

Chapter 3 of 14

The destruction of a Horcrux, and perhaps a few hearts.

A/N: Thank you, as always, to Lariope, who inspires this story with support and probing comments.

Chapter 3 Seen and Unforeseen

He couldn't look away. The scene in front of him was unravelling much too fast, and his brain couldn't seem to focus long enough to send the signal to his eyelids that they really needed to cut off his vision. His whole body had suddenly turned into something cold and heavy, unable to move, or even feel. Shock held him in place as he watched Harry fumble with the sword in his hand, trying to find solid ground on which to put it. Fumble, in order to get his right hand free to stroke the smooth skin of the leg that had come up to lock around his waist. *Fumble* with the object they'd been hunting for months and which might very well be their only hope for success in the impossible quest which lay before them! His vision mixed with red as he watched the sword fall into the warm, bubbling clay, not ten feet from where he was standing, disillusioned, in the shadows. He followed the beautiful metal lines to the sharp point, indignation rising inside him as the ground burst around it and sent flecks of mud onto the shiny goblin silver. Wordlessly, he raised his hand and summoned it to him.

The sword connected with his palm, and he felt a rush of warmth go through him, melting the icy shackles that had held him in place. He could breathe again, think again, close his eyes and ears to the scene unfolding just yards away, where Harry Potter seemed well on his way to ensuring that...no matter the outcome of his last meeting with Voldemort...he would not die a virgin. His eyes flashed upward momentarily, finding Hermione's face...or what part of it he could make out behind Harry's dark, wet head. He hardly recognised her...and still, she was exactly the same girl he'd seen every day for the past six years. As Harry broke away from their frantic kisses to hoist her half-way out of the water to press against the nearby mountainside, he took in every feature. She was beautiful like this, he thought, masses of wet curls tumbling everywhere, lips swollen and half-parted in panting breaths. He was grateful that the geyser drowned most of the sounds they made. He didn't think he could have handled the full picture.

You never had a chance, a voice in his head told him angrily. *You never showed what you felt. Hell, you didn't even know exactly what it was until a short time ago!*

Turning away from the water, he moved along the side of the pool, a sense of purpose finding its way through the rising bitterness and irrational feelings of betrayal. The sword was warm in his hand, strengthening and comforting him as he moved over to the pile of hastily discarded clothes he recognised as Harry's. Reaching down, he found the end of a silver chain and pulled the Horcrux locket free from its confines. He looked at it for a long time, trying to see the object that had haunted him for so long in its silver surface. It seemed strange to him now how a thing...albeit a cursed thing...could have tortured him so, simply by whispering soft lies into his heart. He moved his gaze from the locket to the couple in the pool, eyes hardening. Pearls of sweat and hot water were trickling down Harry's back, down to where Hermione's thighs hugged him closely. One arm was hidden from view, wrapped around her back, holding her in place and aiding their movements. The other moved in rough patterns, guiding the handsome hand over arm and shoulder, down along a pale thigh and up again, settling over a plump breast. *His best friend*. Irony how the truth could be so painful and make everything so clear all at once.

Never taking his eyes off the two lovers, he dropped the locket to the ground, raised the sword in two hands and drove it into the stone with everything he had. There was a sharp flash of green light, and a piercing scream tore through the air. Then... nothing.

It was over. He stumbled backwards, away from the sword, which stood proudly...buried almost a foot deep in the grey rock. The locket lay there, destroyed, black smoke rising softly from the wound in its heart. It was over. With one last glance over his shoulder, Ron Weasley turned the corner of the ravine and Disapparated into the night.

He'd let Fawkes free as Harry Potter entered the clearing. He hadn't expected him to sing; the bird had kept silent after finishing its lament over the former Headmaster, and hearing him now served as a vivid reminder of all that had been lost. To his ears, the song took on a tune of sadness and sacrifice, each phrase connecting with the part of his being which he tried most diligently to suppress. There were notes of encouragement in the song, little moments of silent valour amidst melodies of strength in the face of the impossible. A sense of loss rose within him, and for one terrible moment, he thought it would overpower his resolve and break him, allowing grief to take over. He had not grieved Dumbledore. There had been no time, no possibility and, most importantly, no inclination on his part to do so. Strength was in control, in the mastery of emotion. To admit attachment was to admit leverage; in order to protect what needed protecting, emotions must stay clear of the equation. This was where Dumbledore had failed...love for one boy coming in the way of duty to the world he was sworn to save. He knew...had known for a long time...what must happen to Harry Potter in the end, and to know this and allow an attachment to form would only lead to failure. Fortunately, the boy was enough like his father to give him solid focus on which to base detachment and dislike. He avoided dwelling on other parts of the boy's character as best he could. He had made the mistake of letting someone into his heart once. It would not happen again.

There was a harmony in the phoenix's song, trailing softly in the background, trying to get passed his defences. Little trickles of hope, tintinnabulating softly in his ears. No. He closed his eyes for a moment, warding his heart and tuning out the music. Turning his gaze back towards the pool, he watched, dispassionately, as Potter tugged at the scraps of white, transparent cotton still shielding Hermione's body from view, pulling them off to claim her more fully. His eyes roamed over the joining bodies, over smooth skin, flushed cheeks and tangled hair...over the image of young love, brought forth by passion. The phoenix continued to sing as the scene evolved, Ron Weasley entering the stage, a look of shock followed by utter defeat in his eyes. Before him, the redhead finished the task he had set up for Potter, pushing the ancient artefact into the ground with solemn finality. His face echoed what he, himself, already knew: that the beautiful songs of the golden bird were a lie; that hope was not, and would never be, part of this war. The Wizarding World might be saved, this time, just as it had been countless times before, but there would be no hope for the ones who sacrificed themselves to ensure its salvation. It would be easy, naturally, to forget these facts and lose oneself in beauty, in hope and friendship...perhaps even in love. And lose focus, which would ultimately lead to losing the war. Closing his heart more firmly to the ever more alluring melodies from the sky, he looked on as Hermione's face opened up in pleasure, little pants coming from between rosy, passion-bruised lips. She was pressed against the rough edge of the mountainside, and he could see flickers of pain enter her expression as the boy quickened his pace, mindlessly driving her harder into the unrelenting rock. Remembering the beautiful, smooth back he'd seen for the first...and most likely only...time just hours ago, he raised his wand and sent a wordless Cushioning Charm her way. Her eyes fluttered open for a moment, bewilderment and relief clear to him, before her breathing picked up and she let herself fall back into sensation. They were beautiful together, he noted...but also here, beauty was of no consequence. This, too, was a lie, a means of escape through an expression of false hope. He had watched the boy closely for the past year and thought he had a pretty good idea of whom his heart truly belonged to. It was not here, not with this girl, though he could understand the confusion...the illusion they made together was very compelling. In some forgotten part of him, he felt a tug of regret...he remembered illusions. They were wonderful while they lasted, engaging, powerful. But in the end, they always vanished, like so much smoke and mirrors. From the look on young Mr Weasley's face earlier, he had known that his was not a passing fancy, though he might have retreated to lick his wounds and save his pride just then. When the boy got his head together and decided to come back, things would not be pleasant. He pitied the girl.

Withdrawing a small flask from a hidden pocket in his robes, he left the shadows and laid it down, gently, next to the gleaming sword. It would be useful to her, and he was nothing if not useful. Summoning the phoenix to him, he held out an arm in invitation and stroked it softly along the back when it settled down, looking back at him serenely.

"Hogwarts," he stated simply, grabbing on to the tail. The bird nodded in understanding and spread its wings. A second later, they were both gone in a swirl of flames.

Her body hurt. It was the first coherent thought to make it through her mind once it was over. Her back ached with a dull pulse, and she seemed to have hit the back of her head against the stone sometime during... well, she really didn't know what word to use to describe what had just happened. From the moment she had glimpsed the sword at the bottom of the pool and dived for it, to the moment just seconds ago when Harry had shuddered against her, holding her so closely she'd felt as though they'd ended up slipping into each other's skin, her mind had been jumbled...too overloaded with sensation to reflect on what was happening or to try to make logical sense of things. Reality was coming back fast, however, hitting sore spots on her body with unrelenting blows. She noticed how her legs were wrapped around Harry's waist and how one of his hands was latched around her back, keeping her in place against him. She didn't feel him as clearly as she had a moment ago, but she could still sense him inside her, lodged firmly where she had not imagined he would ever touch her. Emotions were flooding her, starting in the deep pit of her stomach and working their way up in an agonising wave. How did this happen? How did she lose herself like this? She remembered clearly how excitement had spread through her, how the feeling of wanting, of *being wanted* had made her almost dizzy as she'd responded eagerly to Harry's touch. The world had seemed so clear, *sobright*, filled with passion and romance...songs of hope, love and belonging weaving their web around her, surrounding her, filling her, driving her need and making her yearn to surrender. And surrendered she had. They both had. *Oh, God...*

She opened her eyes, meeting Harry's, and had to quickly close them again as tears threatened to spill onto her cheeks. Forcing her emotions back under control, she blinked twice and tried again...only to realise that Harry had averted his eyes as well. Quickly, they started to untangle themselves, breaking the intimate connection and pulling away. Unprepared for the sudden demand to support her own weight, Hermione faltered, losing balance on the slippery ground. The second the hot water touched her back, she screamed, the dull ache she'd felt transforming into piercing pain. Immediately, Harry's arms were around her, lifting her up and moving quickly towards the edge, hugging her tightly and whispering desperate apologies into her hair. She couldn't think. The pain was too much, travelling up and down her spine like liquid fire. Hard, icy raindrops pelted her as they emerged from the hot spring, stinging like tiny thorns against her over-sensitised skin. She started to cry, unable to hold back, tension spilling over. She buried her face against Harry's chest, holding on to him tightly, refusing to let go even as he lowered her onto the ground and clumsily tried to wrap her in what she supposed must be his winter jacket.

"Hermione, please," he whispered, a very strained quality to his voice, as though he, too, was seconds from breaking apart. "I have to reach my wand." She loosened her grip a fraction and felt him pull away, rummaging through the clothes on the ground.

"*Impervio!*" The rain stopped, and she gratefully looked up at him from where she huddled on the ground, shivering from the cold. Seconds later, warmth spread through her, and the rock on which she sat softened under her skin. Wordlessly, Harry motioned her to turn around, pointing his wand at the damaged skin on her back. Relief flooded her as she felt the pain dull to a more bearable level.

"Is it bad?" she asked, looking over her shoulder at him. He nodded, lips tightly pressed together as he met her eyes. She spotted her bag over at the rock where she'd left it before and mentally went through its contents. There should be some Dittany left in there. She made an attempt to get up, but Harry held her down, having just come to the same conclusion.

"*Accio Dittany!*" She expected the bag to come flying for them to retrieve the phial inside it and almost jumped as something small swished by her from the opposite direction. Harry caught it in his hand and revealed it slowly. A small flask, bearing the Hogwarts seal, came into view, clearly marked with small, black letters. Harry's "How?" mixed with her startled gasp, and humiliation flooded her as she realised who must have brought it to them. Professor Snape had been there...had come in person to deliver the sword without her noticing. Had *seen* her. Seen the two of them... *Oh, God!* The Dittany burned on her back as Harry administrated it, and this time, she welcomed the pain. She turned her head and spotted what he must have seen also: the Sword of Gryffindor sticking proudly out of the rock, cutting through the middle of a broken and slightly charred locket.

They had failed. Not only had they not found a solution to how to destroy the cursed thing on their own, but when given the tool to complete the task, they had discarded it because of a mindless, lust-filled impulse. Shame flooded her cheeks, and she curled up into an even tighter ball, trying to hide from the world...trying to hide from herself.

She remained there as she felt Harry quickly dress and walk away, watching as he grabbed the hilt of the sword and pulled it easily out of the rock. The feeling of wonder that had filled the place before had evaporated now, and the overt symbolism of the act felt empty. They weren't heroes, and they never had been...just teenagers playing around in shoes that were too big, keeping alive by being lucky.

She kept watching him as he scanned the area, their breaths stopping in sync when he suddenly noticed another small object, half-hidden in the muddy ground. Bending

down, Harry reached out and closed his fingers around it, face deathly pale with shock. Returning to where she was sitting, he collapsed into a shaking pile, an almost inhuman, wailing sound tearing from his body. Gently, she took his hand in hers, prying it open, mentally steeling herself for what it might contain.

Dumbledore's Deluminator fell into her palm.

Ron.

Ron had come back, had managed to find his way back to them.

And now he was gone.

The flicker of hope she had nourished since the day he'd left them faded and died. He had been back and left again without a word. It was hardly a mystery as to why. Clarity broke in her mind; all illusions were gone, and in their place, reality echoed harshly. The answer was there, right in front of her, and had probably, on some sub-conscious level, been there all along.

She would never see him again.

A/N: Please review!

A Way to Hide

Chapter 4 of 14

Stress relief, escapism and a slight hint of voyeurism in the aftermath of the events at the hot spring.

A/N: A big hug and thanks to Lariope, as always.

Chapter 4 A Way to Hide

It was all he could think about, talk about, dream about even. Somehow, they had managed to make their way back to the tent, and shortly afterwards, they had left for a meadow somewhere in the south of Wales. Hermione hadn't said much since leaving the ravine, or he simply had not listened. His head was spinning with thought and emotion, trapping him inside his own mind. He practically fell into bed the second the tent was up, physical exhaustion getting the better of him, despite everything.

He had envisioned this moment for a long time: to fall asleep without the Horcrux watching him, without it infiltrating his dreams and poisoning his mind. When sitting outside the tent on the rare days of sunshine, he had day-dreamed of closing his eyes and drifting away into something that relaxed him and let him rest...something which gave him back his strength instead of tapping what little remained after long days of anxiety and frustration. It didn't happen now. He tossed on the bed as sequence after sequence played in his mind. He was running, trying to catch up with something important...someone important...but his feet wouldn't move. He would be stuck in slithering roots, or in wet marshland, fighting to get free while the thing...person...he was pursuing kept getting further and further away. He was back in the Black Lake at Hogwarts, swimming towards the surface, the temporary gills at the side of his neck closing up and his mouth filling with cold water. The Grindylows were closing in, grabbing hold of his legs and dragging him down with them. Each and everyone of them bore Ron's face, pale and angry in the water, eyes blue and chilly as his arms wrapped themselves more tightly around him, pulling him down to drown in their embrace...

The last one woke him up, or perhaps it was the sounds that penetrated the darkness from the bedroom next door. Hermione was crying. Not only crying...he had heard her cry at night before. She usually made little keening noises, like someone trying very hard to keep others from hearing. Not so this time; the sounds coming from the other side of the wall were loud, desperate and completely out of control. She was not crying this time, she was sobbing. Automatically, his arm lifted the blanket off his body, and his feet hit the soft carpet. Twenty-one steps to her bed. It was enough to clear his mind a little, to bring him out of the mental prison of his own obsession. His toes bumped into something hard on the floor, and he pushed it aside without even looking down. His eyes focused on the girl before him; she was his friend too and had suffered the same loss as he. They needed each other, now more than yesterday...when they could still pretend that everything would be alright again.

Silently, he crept under the covers and lay down beside her, fitting the front of his body to her back where she lay, curled up in an anguished ball, facing the wall and shaking. Whispering softly to her, he ran his right hand down her arm and side, trying to calm her. His left arm snaked its way under her ribcage, effectively wrapping her up in his body heat. He hugged her tightly, allowing his mind and body to lose themselves in her warmth and softness a little. His thoughts started back up, the pain she was obviously feeling seemingly passing from her heart into his. He shut his eyes tightly, trying to make them go away, to clear his mind and push the pain out of his head. It didn't work. He held Hermione tighter, trying to recapture the state of complete mindlessness he had felt earlier that day. It didn't succeed. It just wasn't enough. Just not enough. He needed something more, something much more.

"Harry, wha..." He cut her off by moving the lips that had begun trailing down her neck to claim her mouth, kissing her deeply. She tasted of salt and sadness, and he moved both hands to her face, wiping the tears that were still flowing freely from her cheeks.

"No. Harry, stop. Ple..." She struggled against him, trying to move out from where he had twisted them to trap her beneath his body. He moved his mouth away from hers for a moment, burying his face in her hair and pressing more firmly against her.

"Hermione, please," he whispered, still trying to calm her down by stroking whatever skin he could reach, easing the tremors. "Please help me forget. *need* to forget!" He finished the plea by taking her lips again, plunging deeper as she cried out into his mouth.

"I can't," she protested, breaking away and moving her face to the side. "Harry, I can't even think!" Her voice caught in her throat as a wracking sob mixed with the words.

"Then don't think," he urged, moving his face with her, trying to get her back. "Please, Hermione, don't think! I just want *to* not think for a while." He raised his head slightly, catching her face between his hands and holding it still, forcing her to face him. Her eyelashes were wet, eyes shining and overflowing as she met his gaze. Lifting his hand, he moved a thumb gently along the line of an eyebrow.

"Please, Hermione, I can't bear this," he said softly. "It's killing me, and I can't shut it off." She nodded slightly and blinked, as though she was right there with him, knowing everything that went through and confused him. "This is the only thing I can think of that will stop the madness." She looked at him solemnly and said nothing. He kissed her again, softly this time, letting his lips barely brush over hers. "Please," he whispered again, kissing the edge of her mouth before moving up to her cheek. "Help me make the pain stop for a while."

In reply, she moved her hands down to the edge of the old, worn t-shirt he had on and pulled it swiftly over his head. Gratitude filled him, gratitude that she understood what he really wanted, what he needed...for the two of them. Moving to the side, he helped her wriggle out of her own nightclothes, tossing them unceremoniously to the floor and pulling her back to him, seeking oblivion in her touch.

In a dungeon chamber many miles away, Severus Snape's eyes hardened, as the sounds from the blank painting on his wall changed to a vivid proof of the fact that Miss Granger had obviously not understood a single word of what he had just tried to tell her.

"Miss Granger, the Headmaster would like a word."

Phineas Nigellus was back. She had expected him to be, had mentally steeled herself ever since her brain had started to recover from near complete numbness. The hours between then and now hadn't made the concept any less terrifying, however. Not trusting her voice, she nodded slightly in confirmation. The minute man disappeared from the canvas.

"Miss Granger." No greeting. Cold and to the point. She was hardly surprised.

"Sir." A long silence followed. When he hadn't spoken after nearly two minutes, the thoughts inside her head burst forth and bubbled over. "Sir, I'm very sorry about what happened earlier. I should have..."

"You should have what, Miss Granger?" he cut her off. "Should have considered the importance of finding the Sword of Gryffindor to be above that of your own hormones?"

She hung her head, mortification tying her stomach into knots.

"I'm sorry, sir," she whispered, trying to keep tears from welling up. Silence spread out between them again, and she kept very still, desperately clinging to her self-control. She would not burst into tears.

"I care little for your snivelling apologies," he retorted, voice so sharp it cut right through her. "You let yourself be ruled by impulse and magic...flashy, gaudy magic on top of it!...when you should have known better. I thought Weasley was the weakest link in the chain, and yet he was the only one to complete your task...a key part to a mission many have died for!"

"I realise you are disappointed, sir," she tried to explain. "I..." The empty canvas seemed to almost explode from the frame.

"Disappointed?" he almost snarled, freezing her spine with that single word. "Make no mistake, Miss Granger, I'm in no *way* disappointed. I'm utterly and thoroughly *disgusted*!"

Something broke inside her, or perhaps it was already broken, only more so now.

"I'm sorry," she whispered, not able to think of anything else to say.

"Impertinent girl!" another voice suddenly broke in. "Did you not listen, just moments ago? Your apologies..."

"Headmaster Black," Snape interrupted, his voice soft with unspoken threats. "Please leave your frame. I shall require to handle this matter without *you* support."

The little man gasped audibly, clearly affronted.

"But, Headmaster!" he protested. "This girl needs..."

"I'm sickeningly well aware of this girl's *needs*, thank you," Snape cut in condescendingly. "Leave."

Had there been a door out of the portrait, she was sure Phineas Nigellus would have slammed it. As it was, she was left with only the black, empty canvas and the sounds of breathing coming from the man on the other side. She swallowed, mentally steeling herself.

"Now that we are alone," Snape began, "I believe there are a few things that need to be made very clear." She put the frame down on the covers of her bed, trying to distance herself from the scolding she knew must come. "First," he said softly, "I don't like to repeat myself, so I sincerely hope that the revolting display I was privy to earlier today was a moment of temporary insanity on your part, which will not happen again." Humiliation flooded her, and she bit her lip to stop it from trembling. "Well?" he insisted when she didn't reply. She cleared her throat, forcing it to make sounds.

"Yes, sir."

"Good. Secondly, we need to confer on the subject of the remaining Horcruxes. Dumbledore left me extensive notes on the matter, but insisted that Potter take care of as many as possible himself. According to what I understand, three have now been destroyed. Is that correct?"

"Yes, sir," she said again, trying to get her voice back to normal and focus on the subject at hand.

"Do you know what and where the others might be?"

"I'm afraid not, Professor," she admitted.

"But you have some theories?"

"Not many," she admitted again. "I'm afraid we don't have much to go on apart from the fact that they are probably of great value and tied in some way to the founders of Hogwarts."

For a second time, the canvas seemed to bulge, the anger on the other side nearly tangible.

"What?" he exclaimed furiously. "You mean to tell me that you have *nothing* of use? What were you going to do? Keep camping...hiding out in the woods...until these objects mysteriously fell into your laps? Or did you hope that if you spent enough time sitting unproductively on your collective arses, the Dark Lord would somehow conveniently implode?"

"No, sir," she managed, the lump in her throat painfully big now. "I'm afraid we're quite lost."

"Evidently," he spat, causing the first tear to escape the corner of her eye. She kept silent after that, not trusting herself to speak again. He went on for quite some time, berating her, Harry, Dumbledore and anything connected with the camping trip in general. She shut down after a while, numbness creeping back up her body. Tears started to spill from her eyes in earnest, and she found that she was too tired to stop them.

"Miss Granger."

She didn't answer, couldn't answer. Sobs were working themselves up her body in great waves, causing her to shake nearly uncontrollably.

"Miss Granger, calm down."

He might as well have asked her to stop time.

"Hermione, stop." She quieted down from sheer shock. When it returned, his voice was softer, darker and nearly hypnotically persuasive. "This is a crucial conversation, and one you are obviously not fit to have at the moment. Go to bed, Miss Granger. Compose yourself. I will contact you again when I believe that you will have calmed down sufficiently to be able to behave with some decorum and clarity of mind."

She heard him call a sharp order to Phineas Nigellus to close the connection...she assumed the former Headmaster was sulking in the professor's frame as he was nowhere to be seen on hers...and heard the sound of his footsteps grow fainter as he left. Too raw to think or to process anything of all that had happened, she curled herself up in a ball and relinquished control.

The empty frame hit the floor with a soft thud, falling to lie face-up on the carpet, half-hidden by the covers hanging over the edge of the bed.

He stepped out of the shower and walked the few steps to his bedroom. His hand rested on the doorknob for a moment, hesitating to turn it. He hoped the girl had stopped crying. Or that the fickle ex-Headmaster inhabiting the portrait would have got over his little huff and returned to close the connection like a responsible...well, he guessed 'person' wasn't exactly the right word. He berated himself for having put the thing in his bedroom...surely his outer chambers were well-warded enough that the sitting room would have done just as nicely. One would have thought that after spending a year experiencing the dulcet tones of Mrs Black on regular intervals, one would have the presence of mind not to put an object which could neither be removed nor silenced against the wish of its occupant in a room designed for rest.

His eyes went directly to the painting as he entered the room. It was still empty, but thankfully silent. He stepped close and listened carefully. Sounds of breathing. The connection was still open. Annoyed, but not terribly alarmed (unless she had the habit of snoring or talking in her sleep, he should be quite alright), he turned and walked towards his bed.

"Please."

He jerked around. Was she talking in her sleep or did she know that the connection was still open and was trying to contact him? He stepped back to the wall, listening intently.

"Help me make the pain stop for a while."

Potter! He almost said the name out loud, disbelief surging through him. *Impossible!* She had *agreed* that they would not do this. Agreed that she would not jeopardise the mission by indulging in emotional distractions with the boy. And yet, as he stood there, there was no mistaking the sounds of hitched breathing and bodies moving hurriedly together on a creaking bed. He gritted his teeth to keep from swearing out loud. Revealing himself to Potter was not an option, no matter how much he wanted to chastise the boy. Stalking across the room, he cursed under his breath, wanting very much to throw something. A moan travelled through the silence and seemed to echo off the walls. More of the same quickly followed, accompanied by the rhythmic sounds of bodies coming together.

"Hermione! Oh, God..."

He closed his eyes and pinched the bridge of his nose as the sounds became louder, the movements faster. He acutely wished for a suitable spell to make him temporarily deaf but came up empty. There were spells for such a purpose, naturally, but they normally came with some less-than-pleasant side-effects, and he absolutely refused to stick his fingers in his ears like some petulant toddler. He would endure. Potter was a seventeen-year-old male after all. The odds that he wouldn't have to bear it for very long were hugely in his favour.

As though in response to this last thought, a tell-tale cry tore through the room, confirming that Harry Potter, the great hero of the Wizarding World, had indeed managed to last all of five minutes. Hermione's breaths were still distinguishable amidst Potter's, telling him that she hadn't found the experience nearly as *relaxing* as her partner. He almost laughed. *Serves them right.* He removed his robe and slid into bed, preparing for some much-needed sleep, when:

"You alright?"

This could not be happening to him.

"Hermione, look at me. Did I do something wrong?"

Apparently, it could. The urge to scream renewed itself. Wasn't it enough that he put himself in daily mortal danger? Did the fates really have to punish him additionally by forcing him to listen to a pathetic 'morning after' talk enacted by his former students?

"Hermione." The boy's voice was serious now. He was obviously not prepared to let the matter slide and just go to sleep like a normal post-coital man. No, Saint Potter would act the gentleman's part. Bugger.

"I'm fine, Harry. Just go to sleep." He inwardly thanked the girl for trying, even though an imbecile could detect the blatant lie in that statement. He didn't have to see her face to know that she was crying.

"No, not until I fix this," Potter said. "Was it...I mean...didn't you like it? Was I doing something wrong?"

No, Potter, not at all. Crying is the normal female reaction to a satisfying shag, he thought nastily. *Pathetic!*

"Harry." He closed his eyes again and could practically see the scene unfold before him, as Hermione tried to ward Potter off.

"No," Harry repeated stubbornly. "I'm going to fix this. Tell me what to do."

"There's nothing you can do. Please, let's just go to sleep."

"No. I can't let you fall asleep like this, all upset. Let me help you."

"You can't help me, Harry," the girl argued. "Just drop it, alright?"

"But I want to," he protested. "You've managed to teach me everything I ever had a problem with. Teach me to please you." In his mind, he watched how Potter leaned forward to kiss the girl, coaxing her into compliance with his lips. "I want to see that look on your face again."

"What look?" Despite her protestations, her voice was trembling, and her breathing had started to quicken again.

"You know what look," he whispered, kissing her again, more deeply this time. "Tell me where."

His hand crept slowly over smooth skin, trying out the terrain. He circled one of her breasts, pressing a little firmer as he heard the breath hitch in her throat. Gently, he cupped the flesh and moved his thumb over her nipple, feeling it harden beneath his touch. She moaned softly, and he did the same thing again, caressing the other breast in the same manner. She pushed into his hand, and he added a little more pressure.

"Good?" She licked her lips, trying to respond. He moved in for another kiss, playing with her softness, trying out new techniques with his fingers. She moaned into his mouth, leaning into his touch more fully, unconsciously shifting her position to give him more access. He moved down, and she let out a sound that was at once protest and encouragement.

"Where?" Wordlessly, she moved a hand into his hair and urged his head downwards. He followed her lead to kiss her along the velvet of her throat and down past her collarbone. When his lips finally settled over one of her breasts, they both groaned. He started to play with his lips and tongue as his hand slid further down, over her stomach and down along the inside of her thighs.

"You'll have to show me how," he breathed, caressing the underside of her left breast with the tip of his tongue. His hand moved back up the thigh and began its search through her soft folds. A soft moan escaped her, and he immediately went back. "Here?"

"Yes."

"Like this?"

"A little softer. More...God!" She nearly cried out as he found a particularly sensitive spot and began stroking it. His mouth renewed its efforts on her breasts and he rejoiced as Hermione's breathing began to hitch, contrition being replaced with pleasure on her face. He kept stroking her, following her whispered directions until she was trashing under him, reacting to his every move. Letting go of her nipple, he moved up her body until they were face to face again.

"You close?" She whimpered in response, pushing into his hand and pulling his head down to her for more kisses. He broke away, moving to the side to play along her neck and ear.

"Can I be inside you?"

"Yes."

She turned to her side, lifting her right leg to let his left thigh slide between hers. He groaned as he slid back into her. It was just like before, but at the same time so very different. The heat of her was everywhere, and he slid deeper with ease, revelling in the increased wetness. He kissed her deeply, moving his hand over her to find his way back to where it had been, while his hips began to thrust slowly into her.

"A little more to the left." He immediately obliged, following her every lead as pleasure surged inside him. She had to correct him quite a few times, telling him, showing him where he needed to be. He pushed back the urge to quicken the pace, keeping his focus, doing his best to hold on as the passion mounted. Her face broke with pleasure and she cried out, arching against him.

Oh, God! Harry...

Harry?

His eyes snapped open, and a bolt of panic went through him. Disoriented, he looked around, his gaze immediately finding the empty, black frame on the wall. Oh, God. Hermione's moans were filling the room, and he realised he was throbbing hard under the covers, his hand moving over his length, having him only moments away from his own climax. He snatched it away as though burned, twisting around to his side. He suddenly felt nauseous. Tearing out of bed and stumbling into the bathroom, he splashed his face with cold water and stared at himself in the mirror. No. He would not be reduced to some perverted voyeur, fantasising about one of his former students. He was more than that. He would keep in control. Studiously ignoring the sounds of lovemaking drifting through the door, he stepped back into the shower, turning the temperature to a freezing cold.

Far away, in a rickety camping bed, Hermione shifted in Harry's arms, settling down to sleep. Her body felt tired now, and for that she was thankful. Perhaps she would find rest tonight after all. A thought kept nagging at the edge of her mind, however...a memory of a voice, uttering her name in a way that made shivers run down her spine. It couldn't have been real, she argued. She had been caught up in the moment, that was all, and her mind had been playing tricks on her as she fell over the edge into pleasure. Resolving to forget, she snuggled more deeply into Harry's embrace and closed her eyes. Just a trick of her mind.

A/N: Please review!

The Shell Cottage

Chapter 5 of 14

Rescue, reunion and crushing realisation.

A/N: Hugs and kisses to Lariope, who helps me twist the little things in this story and make it a hundred times better.

Chapter 5 The Shell Cottage

Phineas Nigellus stayed away for nearly a week...six torturous days and nights which brought him to the brink of madness. He took to sleeping on the sofa in his sitting room after the first two nights to escape the sounds. It was of little help; he still heard her in his dreams. After the fourth morning of waking up alone, spent and thoroughly disgusted with himself, he brewed a cauldron full of Dreamless Sleep and resolved to push the matter from his mind. He didn't contact her again. He told himself that it was because it would be unproductive...it wasn't as though she would actually find important information regarding the remaining Horcruxes between the Wonder Boy's thighs. She was of no use to him at the moment. That was all.

Several weeks later, he was sitting at the desk in his office, grading papers, when the minute, former Headmaster suddenly appeared in a portrait showing the beach of Avalon. He didn't acknowledge him straight away, still angry about the last stunt Professor Black had pulled where his picture was concerned. On the other hand, he preferred not to give him the incentive to do it again. Putting down his quill, he raised his gaze expectantly.

"Headmaster, the Granger girl is calling. She claims that she must speak with you."

"Really?" he drawled, trying to feel as unaffected as he sounded. "And what does she claim is so important that I should simply abandon my duties at her convenience?"

Phineas Nigellus smirked and disappeared from the frame. Less than thirty seconds later, he was back, this time looking rather apprehensive.

"They have been caught," he stated. "Ambushed by Snatchers and taken to the dungeons of Malfoy Manor. Potter has been bitten by Nagini and is bleeding heavily, and the Dark Lord is on his way. She says that you have every right to be angry, but that their situation is desperate. She is literally begging you for help. Tears and all."

Severus was out of his chair before Black had even finished, his mind racing as he mentally constructed and discarded a dozen different plans. He couldn't take them to Hogwarts. The Dark Lord must not know that he was involved. Heads would roll over Potter's escape, and he needed to not be amongst the punished. He needed an alibi. A very solid alibi.

"Headmaster Black," he said firmly. "Go to the portrait in the staffroom and call Amicus Carrow to me, along with Professor Sinistra. Make sure that they are here within five minutes." The little man nodded and left the frame in an efficient stride.

"Dobby!" he called, opening a drawer and rummaging through the immense stock of different potions filling compartment after compartment inside it. He found a small flask, which emitted a faint silvery glow, at almost the same moment as the house-elf Apparated into his office with an audible *crack*.

"Headmaster Snape asked to see Dobby, sir?" the elf squeaked, a slight tone of suspicion in his voice. He walked to the elf and pushed the flask into his hand without preamble.

"Harry Potter is currently trapped in the dungeons of Malfoy Manor," he said, ignoring how the elf's eyes seemed to widen to double their normal size out of fear. "He is gravely injured, and this potion should help save his life. You were once a Malfoy elf, so your blood is still tied to the place, which means the wards should still admit you. I need you to go there, fetch Mr Potter and Miss Granger and Apparate them to a safe-house. Preferably one with Order members currently in residence. Do you know of any? And more importantly, do you have admittance?"

The elf's eyes grew even more impossibly wide. "Dobby knows of three houses, sir," he squeaked in trembling tones. "But only one has people in it, sir."

"Good, take them there," he decided. "Make sure to tell Miss Granger that she is to contact me immediately when they have reached safety." He could hear people coming up the staircase now, most likely his summoned alibi. He drew his wand, put a Silencing Charm on the room to mask the sound of the elf's pending Apparition and nodded for him to go. With a second *crack* Dobby was gone. He lifted the spell, sat back down at his desk and waited calmly for Professors Carrow and Sinistra to enter his office.

He had done what he could. Now he could only hope that it hadn't been too late.

Darkness was fading. He could see little specks of light dancing somewhere in the periphery of his vision. His leg hurt with a dull, throbbing ache, and his whole body felt heavy. He struggled to open his eyes and then to focus. A room came slowly into view. He registered dark blue walls and a wooden ceiling, a scent of the ocean and faint sounds of seagulls in the distance. He blinked, trying to recall what had happened. *Where am I?* Going back, he found the memory of glowing yellow eyes and a hissing conversation in a dark, damp cellar.

"I will be sorry to kill you, Harry Potter," the snake had stated, uncoiling its long form and preparing for attack. "I hate to turn against my master, even if it is only a fraction of him."

"Don't worry, you won't have to," he replied, raising the Sword of Gryffindor in his hands in much the same way as he had many years ago, face to face with not only a snake, but a Basilisk.

"Brave lies." She launched at him, baring her fangs and burying them deep inside the flesh of his calf. Pain exploded in him, and he knew that this would be the end, even as he brought down the sword and felt it cut cleanly through Nagini's body, severing the head. Dropping to the floor, he tried to keep still, attempting to keep the poison from spreading too quickly to the rest of his body. He heard Hermione's voice from far away, calling for help. He tried to say her name. Their situation was hopeless. There was no escape out of the dungeon and no one to help them now. He called her name again, and she came to his side, ripping a piece of cloth from her shirt, trying desperately to stop the flow of blood. He laid his hand over hers, stopping her movements, and pulled her up to face him.

"Hermione, it's no use," he whispered, pain cutting out most of everything around him. "Please just stay with me. I don't want to die alone." He could feel the darkness closing in on him, even as she told him to hold on, to stay awake, to look at her. "I'll miss you," he whispered, reaching out to run his fingers over her hair one last time. Lifting a single auburn lock to his lips, he kissed it softly. Forming his lips into a half-smile, he closed his eyes and fell into the abyss.

"Harry! You're awake!"

"We thought we'd lost you, mate."

"Mum, Dad, come quick!"

Several different voices were shouting all at once, and the room was suddenly full of people, most of which were decidedly redheaded. For a second, he thought he was dreaming, that this was one of *those* dreams, but the thought disappeared as he was pulled into a forceful hug by a radiant Mrs Weasley. Next was Mr Weasley, then Fred and George (who he could finally tell apart now that one of them had only one ear). Bill and a very pregnant Fleur came after, kissing him on both cheeks and telling him how happy they were that he was still among the living. From everything that was said around him, he gathered that this was Bill and Fleur's home and that he'd been saved and brought there by Dobby. At the sound of his name, the elf ran forward, jumping on the bed to join in the hugging.

"Thank you, Dobby," Harry said, pulling the elf a little tighter. "You saved my life, yet again."

"Dobby was happy to help, Harry Potter!" the elf cried, his whole body glowing with pride. "Harry Potter was very sick when Dobby finds you, but Dobby takes you here quickly, and Miss Granger fixes the ugly snake wound!"

At the mention of Hermione, Harry's eyes darted through the room. "Where..." he started.

"She's sleeping, mate," Fred supplied quickly. "She's been up all night watching over you, so mum more or less ordered her to bed. She's fine though, so no worries. We'll tell her that you're alive as soon as she wakes up."

Bill's hand suddenly landed on Fred's shoulder, and the twin turned. Silence fell as the rest of the room followed suit, spotting the person standing in the doorway.

"Hullo, Harry," Ron said, looking straight at him for the first time in months. He suddenly couldn't speak, not even a simple 'hi'. Clearing his throat very loudly, Bill drew the attention of the other Weasleys, suggesting that they leave Harry alone to rest for a bit. They all filed out, one by one. Bill was the last to leave, stopping briefly to put a hand on Ron's arm and whisper something in his ear. Ron squeezed his hand in thanks and nodded. Bill left, and they were alone in the room.

For years to come, Harry would remember this moment: how his mind transformed from a thick fog to something crystal clear and transparent; how his heart seemed to expand in his chest until it filled him completely, and he was nothing but a beating heart and the rushing sound it produced as it pumped the blood through his body.

Missing pieces of a puzzle, a puzzle he'd been working on since that first trip on the Hogwarts Express, suddenly fell into place, and he found it hard to breathe. Now that he knew, it was impossible to understand how he could have missed it for so long.

"I thought I'd die without ever seeing you again," he said, eyes locked with Ron's as the latter approached the bed slowly.

"Me too."

"I thought I'd lost you then." He didn't have to elaborate. They both knew what he meant.

"Yeah," Ron agreed, taking another step closer. "I thought so too. That there was never a chance, I mean." He broke eye contact, looking down at his shoes briefly. Doubt resurfaced in Harry's mind, pricking him at the back of his brain, demanding answers.

"Why did you come back?" He didn't mean for it to sound like an accusation, but it did. Hurt flashed through Ron's blue eyes, and Harry watched as he pushed it away, soft determination taking its place. He sat down on the side of the bed. Far too close...Harry could see every detail on his face from this distance, from the slight curve at the corner of his mouth to each individual eyelash. The slight curve grew more pronounced, settling into a wistful smile.

"How could I not?"

And just like that, Ron kissed him...*really* kissed him...kissed him in a way that sent his senses reeling and relocated all emotion to his lips. Kissed him in a way that redefined the concept, that turned his world upside down, only to make him realise that *this* was reality, and that he had spent the last seventeen years standing on his head.

"I thought... Hermione..."

"No. Only you. Always you."

"But..."

"I was wrong. I didn't realise..."

"Me neither. God..."

"I know."

They only managed to get a few words out at a time, the conversation fighting its way out between the contact of lips and tongues, into the short moments of drawing breath or changing angles. Harry's hands went to Ron's face, cradling it as he pressed everything he felt into his mouth, as his lips told Ron's of secret dreams and confusing nights, and his tongue stroked the other with tales of repressed longing. Ron responded in kind, weaving his fingers through Harry's dark hair and pulling him closer, deepening the contact further. It went on and on, each utterly unable to let go and break contact. They kissed as though they were dying, and perhaps they were, falling together through the unknown, with only the certainty that this was a fall they had to take.

The sound of a door opening tore them apart, sending Ron flying off the bed and into a tense stance next to the nearby bookshelf. They looked up, meeting Hermione's eyes, face frozen in shock as she took in the scene...from the crumpled sheets of the bed to the bruised look of Ron's lips and the deep guilt in Harry's eyes.

"Hermione!"

She fled the room, throwing the door closed behind her. Running into her own room, she snatched up her drawstring bag and her jacket, exiting the house through the patio door that led to the garden. Refusing to think, she ran across the grass, along the edge of the cliffs that fell dramatically into the frothing ocean. Where did the wards end? Spotting a small grove of trees, she blindly stumbled towards them, turning inward as she fought to gather enough mental coherence to be able to Apparate. Closing her eyes, she ran the last few steps, picturing her destination clearly in her mind, preparing to turn. Just as she felt the tell-tale sensation of Apparition surge through her body, a hand grabbed hold of her wrist, and she felt a second person follow her into compressed space.

A/N: Please review!

The Pensieve

Chapter 6 of 14

Hermione journeys into a darker mind in preparation for a new mission.

Thank you, Lariope, and thank you, all of you who reviewed the last chapter. I'm thrilled to see that the HP/RW twist worked so well. If you have the inclination, please go back and re-read chapter 3--if everything works as I intended when I put it together, it should read rather differently in the light of last chapter. Anyway, curious to see what you think. And in the meantime, here's chapter 6. Enjoy!

Chapter 6 The Pensieve

Her wand was in her hand before they had even stopped spinning.

"*Stupefy!*"

Instead of feeling the grip on her wrist loosen, however, the spell rebounded, nearly hitting her shoulder, and her wand flew out of her hand. Panicking, she twisted, trying to break the hold, and managed to land an elbow in the chest of the robed figure towering over her. Her wrist was free, but the next second an arm went around her, trapping her other wrist and effectively locking her arm behind her back. The arm pulled and she lost her balance, crashing into a hard chest. She screamed.

"Miss Granger, desist!"

It took a couple of moments for the implications of the voice to register, but when they did, she slumped in relief. She raised her head and met the stare of her former

professor, blazing down at her in anger. For a moment, they stood perfectly still, heavy breathing the only sound between them. Something flickered through his eyes...a fleeting look of something stirring deep inside...gone so fast that she thought she must have imagined it. He released her roughly, virtually pushing her away.

"Get your wand."

"Acc..."

"Wordlessly."

She closed her eyes and held out her hand. The familiar piece of wood flew into it without delay. Knowing better than to expect praise from him, she just lowered her arm, waiting for him to speak. He regarded her intently for a few seconds and then turned his attention to the surroundings. They were in a Muggle kitchen, one which bore the looks of not having been used for a while. Two large windows allowed for some light to penetrate from a nearby street, illuminating the dusty counter. On one wall was a ticking clock, on another last year's calendar. A stack of old newspapers lay in a stand next to the wall. No curtains.

"Your house, I assume?" he asked, moving cautiously to the window.

"It's my grandmother's actually," Hermione replied. "She passed away last summer. It's been empty ever since."

"And you decided to leave the safe-house and come here alone in order to help with watering the plants?" he asked, sarcasm dripping from every syllable.

No. She would not let him provoke her this time. This house was quite possibly even safer than the one she'd just left. No one in the magical world knew that she'd even had a grandmother for most of her life, much less where her house was located. She didn't talk about her family. Even Harry and Ron had only ever heard of her parents. She swallowed. *Not now.*

"I'm astounded, Miss Granger," Snape remarked, coming a bit closer. "Normally, not even a Silencing Spell would shut you up. Not that I'm complaining."

She kept her gaze firmly on a crack in the wallpaper. It was a blue blossom pattern, she noticed. Funny, she remembered it being lavender. The moonlight perhaps...

"Miss Granger, look at me." She jerked a little. Last time he'd spoken, he'd been on the other side of the room. Now he was nearly in her face. A strong hand grabbed her chin, tilting it up a little. His eyes were completely black. "Now is not the time to fall to pieces," he said firmly. "There are things to do, duties to fulfil. I warned you not to get involved with Potter, but you decided not to heed my advice. Perhaps this will teach you that there are consequences to every action, sometimes a lot more severe than you could ever imagine."

Her brain seemed to freeze, refusing to operate the connections in her body and help her move away.

"You knew?" she breathed, something closely related to fear in her voice.

"That Potter was in love with the redheaded moron?" he said, rather snidely. "I'm afraid it was painfully obvious ever since Miss Brown's brief interlude. Not to mention Miss Weasley's."

She turned her head, breaking his hold on her, physical and mental. He didn't reach for her again.

"Betrayal is a powerful thing," he said instead. "Strong enough to turn saints into villains and back again...to twist the hearts of men and gut them of everything noble and just until the only thing left is a shell filled with vengeance." He leaned in and whispered to her, almost brushing the edge of her ear with his lips, "Isn't love grand?"

She refused to listen. His words made something twist inside her, something ugly and violent, wanting to claw and crawl its way out of her stomach in flows of red blood. Anger such as she had never felt surfaced within her, threatening to spill from her fingers in great bursts. She wanted to hit things, to hurt them, to pull the metaphorical knife from her back and bury it deep within flesh and bone of another body. Snape studied her intently, noting the shifting emotions as they played on her face.

"Before you run off to kill someone, Miss Granger," he said matter-of-factly, "I have a small project where I believe you could be of use."

Some of the manic look disappeared from the girl's face and was replaced by mild curiosity. He had to admit: sometimes that Gryffindor willingness to serve...and tendency to have their noses permanently stuck in other people's business...could be rather convenient. He pitied the girl, briefly wondering if she had any other friends than the ones who had just pushed her out of their Golden Trio. He was slightly impressed with her composure. He had been standing in the small grove of trees for close to an hour when she'd come running past. The map had shown him that Potter was in a house full of Weasleys only a few hundred yards ahead, but since he couldn't see anything but cliffs, he assumed that it was kept under the Fidelius Charm. Studying the map, he had seen the dot marked 'Harry Potter' turn from a neutral grey (sleeping or unconscious) to a bright yellow at the arrival of more Weasleys than he dared to count. The dot 'Ron Weasley' appeared next, causing the Harry-dot to shift over apricot and orange to a deep, pulsating pink. The pink grew deeper as the two dots practically overlapped, only to shift abruptly to a sickly green at the appearance of the dot labelled 'Hermione Granger'. He certainly did not want to ever know exactly what the girl had walked in on, but it wasn't hard to divine the basics of the overall picture. In a way, this was good for him. He needed her anger. Sliding his right hand into a hidden pocket on his robes, he withdrew a wand and handed it to her.

"I have reason to believe that there is an object of great worth currently hidden in the Lestrange vault at Gringotts. Bellatrix was kind enough to lend me her wand." The girl accepted it mutely, her eyes bombarding him with questions even as she kept her mouth firmly shut. "As a female, you are better suited to impersonate her, and I have my own, legitimate reasons to visit the vault. You will need these, however." Opening another pocket, he withdrew several phials of what looked like silver mist, swirling within the glass confines.

"Are these Bellatrix's memories?" she asked, quite taken with the beauty of the liquid thoughts.

"No, *they are cooking recipes from my great aunt Rupie*," he was tempted to say...but that would only rile the girl. He nodded instead. "The security measures at Gringotts have increased considerably in the last year. Simply walking up to the counter under the influence of Polyjuice Potion would not be sufficient. Goblins might be shunned from polite society, but they are no fools, and they know their standard break-in plots. So," he concluded, handing over one last phial, this one filled with a thick, murky substance, "you get to be a Death Eater for a day. Now come here. You need to be close if I am to Apparate the two of us through the wards at Hogwarts. Charming though this place may be, I highly doubt that there is a functioning Pensieve stored away in one of the bedroom closets."

She hesitated. *Hogwarts*. The calm stone and the warm hearths, a place bubbling with life and learning *Home*. A fierce longing struck her, and she fought to keep tears from welling up in her eyes. She would be home again, if only for a short while. Stepping close to Snape, she took hold of his arm and was surprised as he pulled her closer, guiding her arms around his waist. "Keep as still as possible," he instructed. "I have to dissemble the wards while we're in transit. Try to empty your mind as much as possible so as not to interfere."

She nodded into his black robes, holding him a little tighter. She trusted him, she realised. Perhaps she always had, or perhaps it was simply because he was, at this moment, the only solid thing she had in the world. Breathing deeply, she took in scents of wool and spice, of parchment and various Potions ingredients. She closed her eyes and let the sensations fill her, tuning out the workings of her mind. A second later, they were both spinning.

"Headmaster, I've been unable to contact the girl. I believe she's..." Phineas Nigellus broke off, taking a closer look at the pair that had just Apparated into the room. "...standing half-naked in your bedchamber. How vastly inappropriate."

Snape's jaw clenched quite noticeably, and he glared at the man in the gilded frame while Hermione blushed, stepping away quickly.

"These are Muggle clothes, Black," Snape replied evenly. "I assure you they would be considered fully appropriate outside of the magical world...though how it is any

business of yours how she is dressed or where she is escapes me. If I needed an extra conscience, I would go up to my office and chat to Dumbledore." Phineas looked quite cross.

"Pardon me for caring about the school's reputation," he mumbled sarcastically. "Well, then, since you have found her, I shall be on my way." He turned on his heel and almost dove towards the edge of the frame.

"Phineas!" Snape barked, making the man stop in his tracks and unwillingly step back towards the painting's centre. Snape approached the wall slowly, carefully enunciating every word. "Remember your oath, Phineas," he said softly. "You are bound to the Headmaster's office, to serve me and to protect my secrets. I have tolerated your impertinence, but it will end here." He turned half-way, indicating Hermione with his right hand. "No one must know that Miss Granger is here, or that I have ever spoken to her since she stopped being my student. You will not gossip to Albus or any of the other portraits, or in any way indicate what you know, or *think* you know, to anyone with whom you might come into contact. Furthermore, you are to keep the portrait connection closed for the time being and stay away from your frame unless I call you. Are we clear?"

"Crystal," Phineas snapped, marching from the frame with all the dignity he could muster. Hermione thought he rather resembled one of the angry gnomes that usually frequented the Weasleys' garden. Immediately, Ron's face appeared in her mind. She pushed it back, focusing instead on the man before her.

"Sir?" she asked, waiting for him to turn around. Instead, he went over to another wall and pushed a series of points in the oak panelling with his wand. Part of the wall fell back, and a beautiful dais appeared. She had never seen a Pensieve before, but she figured that was what it must be. Transfixed, she approached it, watching the silvery substance swirl inside, giving off a pale, blue light. Sticking her hand into her bag, she withdrew the phials of liquid memory.

"Should I pour all of it at once?" she asked, looking at him for instructions.

"Please do," he confirmed, moving aside to remove his cloak and hang it in a nearby armoire. When all of the substance had fallen into the Pensieve, he held out a hand in invitation. "After you, Miss Granger," he said. "Insanity awaits."

Twice, she thought she would faint, and many times more, she was certain that she would end up losing what little was in her stomach. Harry had told her that it felt like watching a scene from the outside, only being in it. The description didn't match her experience at all. As she walked through the memories, darkness seemed to seep into her pores, getting under her skin and spreading through her entire body. She felt dirty, with an overwhelming need to claw at her own flesh, to get whatever was inside of her out. She wondered if the tactile qualities were the result of Bellatrix's mental instability. These were not just memories, they were little pieces of soul and mind, wrapped together with a heady dose of insanity.

The urge to heave intensified as she walked through scenes of violence and deceit, feeling bouts of sadistic pleasure mix with chilling indifference as Bellatrix tortured yet another of the Dark Lord's prisoners. She began to understand the Cruciatus Curse, felt the power that flowed through her...Bellatrix...as she held the mind and body of another person literally in the palm of her hand. She fell deeper, went closer, took in more of the impressions that whirled around her, inside her, showing her the twisted wonders of a mind that possessed lots of creativity and next to no sense of remorse.

She met the Dark Lord, cold and handsome in his youth, with eyes that cut right through her and hands that did the most painfully pleasurable things. She worshipped him in his growing power, the beautifully ruthless magic he weaved around her like a thick, deadly web. She submitted to his mind, to his touch, to his ambitions. There was no greater pleasure than to serve him, to aid his triumphs and be rewarded. And he rewarded her richly... She was infused with magic, infused with the darkness that he carried like a shroud. The following separation killed her a little every day, but she guarded her memories fiercely, even though it meant giving the Dementors other things to feed of. She felt her mind slipping, losing touch of herself and of reality for long periods at the time. It didn't matter. She still had him, and he would come for her.

She was lying on her back on the cold stone floor in her cell in Azkaban, looking up at the stars and waiting. Her mark had been growing stronger for a while now, awakening her through the faint prickling in her skin. She held it closely against her heart as she stared into space, ignoring the filth of the cell and the spiders and cockroaches that sometimes crawled over her body. None of it mattered. He was on his way. She would live to serve him again. When the mark burned black, the scream started in her toes, travelling through her body like liquid fire before it tore from her throat, leaving her gasping for air.

"I think that will be quite sufficient for tonight," Snape said softly, taking hold of her limp hand and pulling her off the ground. A flash of white light later, her feet touched the dungeon floor, and she faltered. Her legs were too weak, threatening to send her crumpling into a heap on the flat stone. Trying to regain her balance, she clung to him, putting her face against the dark robes to stop the world from spinning. She heard him mutter a short curse, and then she was floating, floating through the air until she landed on a soft, cotton cloud. Unable to fight the exhaustion any longer, she let her head fall to the side and closed her eyes.

A/N: Please review! Each and every one really makes my day.

Gringotts

Chapter 7 of 14

Sometimes, simply acting the part is not good enough.

A/N: Hugs and kisses to Lariope, as well as to everyone who reviewed. Thanks guys.

Another, semi-related thought: I just posted a pile of word frequency statistics on fanfiction love scenes (my fics) over at my livejournal (redorchids.livejournal.com). It's a very late response to a post by TheOhara on the subject (if you haven't read it, you really should, that's one of the funniest things out there) and a pretty funny concept. I'd love to get more people to compare with. What do you say? :-)

Chapter 7 Gringotts

Breaking in was almost too easy.

She had taken the Polyjuice Potion and slipped into Bellatrix's skin. After the many ventures into the woman's mind, the transition felt almost natural. She remembered how

the longer limbs felt as she sat down on a chair to put on her shoes and how the dark hair danced as she shrugged her shoulders. The clothes felt like home, all dark silk and wool, warm and comforting. They left the chamber and reappeared in Diagon Alley. A wind caught a dark tendril and blew it into her face. She pulled the cloak closer around her and smiled; it still smelled like *him*, even though nearly twenty years had passed since he'd taken it from his back and wrapped it around her shoulders.

"Shall we?"

She rose from her reverie and remembered who she was, where she was, with whom and why. Further down the street, she could see Gringotts, gleaming in all its marble splendour in the morning sun. She nodded, and they walked towards it, side by side. He didn't offer his arm, and a quick connection with her "memories" told her that Bellatrix wouldn't have accepted it even if he had. There was a deep unease in her mind whenever her eyes fell on Snape. Part of it was jealousy...that another should be so high in her Lord's favour...but there was something else as well, something she couldn't define, which told her in no uncertain terms that no matter what he did, or what he said, she would never fully trust Severus Snape. Nevertheless, she walked beside him through the doors of the bank, head held high.

With a small pang of fear, Hermione went straight to a counter to the right, marked 'privileged customers' and fixed the goblin on duty with a look of cool indifference. If the goblin was intimidated, he didn't show it, but simply took out a form and laid it on the marble counter before him.

"Vault number?"

"261"

"Key, please."

"I'm afraid it was taken from me," she said, the words falling easily from her lips. "As I informed you during my last visit." The goblin's expression didn't change, but she somehow knew that she had just passed the first control. He wrote something unintelligible on the form before him and looked back at her.

"Wand."

There were several stages of security questions after that, but the stolen memories gave her answer after answer without difficulty. She lashed out at the goblin twice, venting her fear and frustration while making sure to keep in character. This morning, before they left, she had gone over every single visit Bellatrix had made to Gringotts since her release from Azkaban, and the effort proved valuable. Before long, she and her scowling companion were motioned over to a small cart and driven off into the darkness.

"Leave us."

The accompanying goblin made a curt bow...so curt it bordered on insulting...and sealed the doors behind them. Hermione couldn't quite contain a small gasp as she turned to face the contents of the vault. She'd seen it before in her head, but to be only feet away from pile after pile of gold and jewels was really quite different. Snape brushed past her and went deeper into the vault to where a very credible copy of the Sword of Gryffindor was proudly displayed on a velvet pillow. He drew his wand and muttered something; sparks of light flew from it, touching the silver blade. White wisps of smoke began to rise from the metal, forming into distinct forms in the air above it. First, it showed Snape, lifting the sword out of a glass show case and hiding it on the inside of his robes; then it whirled into a different scene, one in which the same man could be clearly seen putting the sword down into its current position. After this, the smoke faded, and nothing else happened. The man put down his wand and turned to face her.

"It has not been moved," he said clearly, looking straight into her eyes. She looked back, slipping back into Bellatrix's mind and filing the comment away for later, the way he'd instructed her to.

"The Dark Lord will be pleased to hear it," she said simply. "Shall we go back then? I am sure you have many important things to do. Grading children's essays perhaps?"

"Ever the charmer," he replied coldly, stepping past her in a brisk walk towards the door. She followed him until he raised his hand, then blinked twice and drew her wand.

"I'm ready, Professor," she said, sliding completely back into her own mind again, shuddering as Bellatrix's memories seemed to cling to her and pull her back, like wet marshland. Snape stepped close and drew his own wand, putting it to her right temple. She mimicked his movement on the other side of her head.

"Focus," he instructed. "Push the memory towards the tip of your wand and start pulling away slowly once you feel the two connect." She closed her eyes and looked inward, trying to sift through her thoughts and find the ones she wanted. A presence crept into her mind from the point on her right temple, helping her filter the memory into a complete, credible unit before she pushed it towards the slightly warm connection point on the left.

"Good," he murmured, and she opened her eyes to watch the silver thread flow from her head. Ending the wand movement in a short flick, she withdrew the last of the memory and let it fall into a glass phial he was holding out before her. When it was done, he sealed the sample with a wave of his wand and put it in his pocket. Almost in sync, they turned back to face the piles of treasure. There was still much work to be done.

Hermione had scanned half of the shelves on the right side of the vault when she saw it. It was standing amidst a collection of beautiful golden goblets, melting in so well she'd almost missed it. Squinting, she managed to make out the badger on the golden surface and felt a wave of triumph surge through her. Helga Hufflepuff's cup. They had the fifth Horcrux.

"Over here," she called, walking closer. He caught up with her as she was almost at the shelf.

"You are certain?" he demanded, looking up at the object to see for himself.

"Yes," she confirmed, raising her wand to summon it to them. Before the first syllable was out, his hand cut her off, covering her mouth and silencing her rather forcefully.

"Are you out of your mind?" he hissed, letting his hand fall to grab her arm in an almost bruising grip. "Pray tell me, Miss Granger, as one who saw Albus Dumbledore sport a black and shrivelled limb for close to a year, how you came to the conclusion that it would be wise to summon a cursed object into your unprotected hands!" His words worked as a slap across her face, and a thin layer of something...something she hadn't realised was there...lifted from her eyes. She shook her head, trying to focus.

"I don't know what happened," she confessed, looking up at him. "I felt drawn to it. A Luring Curse, perhaps?"

"We'll see," he said grimly, drawing his wand and moving it in a wide arc above them. Coloured mist erupted from nearly every object, ranging from a sickly yellow to the darkest shade of black. She looked at the cup, which was standing in a sphere of dark red. The colour swirled with streaks of black and purple. It was the most sinister thing she had ever seen, including the locket that had poisoned her mind for weeks on end. There was something about the cup that the locket hadn't possessed, something which made the hairs on her arms stand on end. The golden object seemed to draw her in, pulling at strings in her body that had her breath quicken and a sense of deep longing spread down the back of her legs. She wanted to touch it. Needed to touch it. Not thinking, she reached out her hand, only to have it captured and twisted behind her back.

"What *is* that?" she gasped, trying to shake off the enchantment as Snape muttered spell after spell she didn't recognise from over her head. Slowly, the pull of the cup lessened, and when she looked back up, the mist was all but gone, and she could breathe more easily.

"Take it down and make the copy," he ordered, and she raised her wand in a third attempt. This time, he didn't stop her, and the cup flew smoothly into her hand.

"*Geminio*," she said, pointing her wand at it and watching a second, identical cup appear. She quickly put the real one in her bag and levitated the fake object to its place on the shelf. "There," she concluded, pocketing her wand. "It's done. Let's leave." She moved to walk towards the door, but once again, he stopped her.

"I'm afraid not," he said, the stony expression she'd seen quite frequently over the past couple of days back on his face. "The enchantments need to be reactivated or the goblins will know that something is amiss. This is a high security vault. A security spell is run daily to check for inconsistencies in the overall protection scheme. The absence of a curse this strong would set the alarms off immediately."

"Can you replace them?" she asked, fear creeping back up her spine. If he couldn't, they would probably still make it out, but how long before the Lestranges were alerted to the breach of security and traced it back to Snape?

"I'm afraid only you can cast that spell," he replied tersely. "Though I fear I will have to assist in some capacity." The look on his face worried her immensely...his jaw was clenched so tightly she feared for his teeth.

"What do I need to do?" Even as she asked the question, she mentally approached the part of her mind holding the stolen memories. If it was something he couldn't cast, she assumed it was somehow linked to Bellatrix.

"Look into your mind," he said, rather harshly. "I believe you will find the spell somewhere in the earlier memories. Once you do, tell me what you need."

Slightly perplexed at his request, she delved into the memories, sifting through the darkness. She thought she had seen everything, but apparently there was something else, something she had missed. Looking deeper, she focused her mind on the vault, deciding that the spell she was looking for had most likely been cast somewhere close to where she was now standing. Growing frustrated, she went faster, deeper, launching herself into sensation, pursuing the inner parts of the mind. The farther she went, the sharper the focus became, insanity decreasing as the path closed in on the memories Bellatrix had guarded most jealously. Sensation flooded her as she re-experienced moments with Voldemort, chillingly cold in all their burning passion. Her own mind rebelled, trying to escape the onslaught and make it back to safer ground. Just as she thought she wouldn't make it, she caught a glimpse of glittering gold and pressed on. Rounding a mental corner in the maze that was the other woman's mind, Hermione suddenly saw it.

She was on her knees on a bed of golden coins, legs spread as wide as she could get them, panting as she focused her wand on the gleaming object on the shelf. She cried out as the cutting sensations tore into her thighs, combined with the hard thrusts deep within her. Blood trickled down her breasts as she focused her last strength, forcing the syllables out between bruised and swollen lips. His hand joined hers, helping her to finish the last, fluid movement, whispering the words in her ear. Everything suddenly broke inside her, and she rejoiced as he tore into her flesh, sending her soul soaring through pure blackness.

Unable to stay a minute longer, Hermione tore her mind out of the memories and fell to her knees on the stone, violently ill.

"Scourgify."

A hand was on her shoulder, steadying her as she wiped at her mouth with the back of her sleeve. It wasn't really necessary, since the magic had cleaned everything in, on and around her, but the symbolic value of the gesture made her feel a little better. The hand moved down her arm to grab her elbow, and she unsteadily managed to get to her feet. She held her head down, unwilling to meet his eyes. Once she did, what she had seen in her mind would be inescapably real, and she would have to face what she knew she had to do.

"Miss Granger."

She pretended not to hear, even though she knew it was fruitless. Prolonging the process was the coward's way out, and she was not a coward. Standing where she was, however, sick to her stomach and dressed in Death Eater robes, the famed Gryffindor courage she was reputed to have felt like something out of an old book of fairy tales. She didn't feel brave. Not at this moment in a Gringotts vault, surrounded by gold, power and the presence of a man to whom she must shortly surrender everything. A man who had made it undeniably clear that he did not want her. She bit her lower lip hard to keep down the tears that threatened to well up in her eyes. The look of disdain on his face as he'd turned her down... Even now, the memory of it made her want to die.

It was on the first night after running away from the Shell Cottage. She woke up screaming, her mind swimming with violence. Her body was tired, however, pulling her eyelids down automatically, pulling her back into sleep. As soon as they closed, the screaming recommenced, and she jerked them open, rolling over to her side and pinching herself hard to keep conscious. That was when she saw him, lying just feet away, black eyes open and watching her in the darkness. With a pang, she remembered where she was and all that had happened.

She wanted to close her eyes and force away the images that entered her mind. Harry, who had held her as she slept less than twenty-four hours ago, was in love with someone else. It hurt her pride more than her heart, but that didn't make the pain any less excruciating. Her mind replayed the kiss she'd walked in on, again and again. She had never seen Harry look like that...had never made him look like that...as though his life held something precious beyond belief, something several degrees more important than the destruction of the last Horcruxes and the salvation of their world. And Ron's face (what little she had seen) had echoed the look. And she was alone. For seven years, she hadn't been alone, and now she was, her two best friends too caught up in themselves to notice. It wasn't painful, it was unbearable. And now, she couldn't even close her eyes and repress because the venture into the Pensieve had filled her mind with pictures of torture and death, which surfaced as soon as she let her guard down. I need to forget...

Boldly, she moved closer to the man lying on the other side of the mattress. In her state, it didn't matter who he was, only that he was a man and that he would be able to help her. He didn't move as she reached out a hand, running her fingers lightly over his bare chest, down towards the edge of his trousers. She leaned in to kiss him, only inches from impact when he suddenly broke the silence:

"Miss Granger, if you are restless, there is a bottle of Dreamless Sleep in the first cupboard to the left in the bathroom. Please remove your hand from my person and spare me the indignity of being forced to act as a stand-in for your former devotee." She rolled away as though burned, shame flooding her cheeks. Oh, God! She had just propositioned Professor Snape. Oh, God, oh, God, oh, God... Jumping off the bed, she practically ran into the bathroom, searching through the indicated cupboard and downing the potion in great, big gulps. Almost instantaneously, she sensed the effects, feeling her legs turn to water and her body glide down the wall to spread out over the cold tiles. She thought she heard footsteps just before nothingness took her and was grateful that they would not reach her in time for her to be sure they were really there.

To say that the girl had had a shock would have been an understatement. As far as he could see, she was nearly catatonic. He could well understand it...the scenes of Bellatrix's mind were sure to be troubling to a young and very innocent girl. The woman was insane in more ways than he dared to count, and her relationship with the Dark Lord since his return had twisted what little rationality was left after the Dementors' fourteen-year feast. He had watched her during the first rise: utterly enchanted, obsessed, willing to do anything that the Dark Lord commanded. But at least then, she had been reasonably sane. The years in Azkaban had warped enchantment into fixation, obsession into mania and willingness into compulsion. He had seen the memory that the girl had just had to access, though he hadn't grasped the significance of the spell at that time, and he understood the girl's terror. He would have liked to find another way or to have given her some time to process what had to be done at least. As much as baser parts of him ached to take her, his mind still riled at the prospect of being used, and he hated himself for wanting. Unfortunately, time was not on their side. The Polyjuice lasted for exactly one hour, and more than half that time had already been spent. Hoping the girl wouldn't hex him, he pulled her roughly into his arms and let his self-control slip a fraction as he claimed her lips in a searing kiss.

If breaking in had been easy, getting out was even more so...which was probably lucky since her brain seemed to have shut down completely from the moment he'd kissed her. Her mind was a jumble of confused images, some her own, some from Bellatrix's memories, and she couldn't keep focus anymore. Sharp pains in her feet brought her back momentarily, and she heard Snape...Severus...Something swear under his breath and wrap her tightly in his cloak, shielding her from outside view. The potion was wearing off. She was changing back, and her feet were now too big for the dainty shoes Bellatrix used to wear. The rest of her was shrinking, the clothes starting to hang

from her smaller frame. The tug of Apparition had never before felt so liberating.

As soon as they stopped spinning, she kicked off her shoes, needing them off her. The cloak went next...suddenly anything that reminded her of being inside Bellatrix's body and mind made her feel sick. For an hour, she had *been* her...thought with her mind and experienced the pleasures of her body. The fact that she had enjoyed it was the worst of all. That she *could* enjoy such... She felt dirty all the way to the bone. The buttons were trapped, refusing to cooperate, and she cried out in frustration while tearing at the fabric with both hands. Tears were streaming down her face now, threatening to suffocate her, and she was screaming...screaming without knowing or caring what words came out.

Suddenly, the pressure on her throat lessened, and other fingers joined in with hers, making swift work of the buttons. Then there were lips...warm, powerful lips...crashing down on hers and pulling hidden moans out through her mouth from the back of her throat. His touch was entirely different from what it had been just a short while ago, when he had been re-enacting a set scenario for the sake of a curse, and the simple change in demeanour helped to calm her. Bending down, he put one arm beneath her knees, lifting her from the floor and carrying her over to the bed, where they collapsed together in a tangle of limbs. She could sense the blissful blank of passion begin to cloud her mind and kissed him back with abandon. "Thank you," she whispered over and over as her body responded feverously to his touch, letting him pull her deeper.

Thank you.

A/N: Please review!

The Shell Cottage Again

Chapter 8 of 14

Hermione rejoins the Golden Trio.

A/N: Thanks to Lariope and all kind reviewers. Thank you, thank you!

Chapter 8 The Shell Cottage Again

She woke him up several times during the night, coaxing him out of sleep with her lips and hands. After crossing all boundaries, he saw little reason to deny her...or himself for that matter. The damage was done, and he might as well enjoy it while he had the opportunity. Very likely, he wouldn't even live long enough to regret it. Mapping her soft skin with his hands, he teased and tricked her body's secrets from beneath his fingers, filing them away with each moan, gasp and tremble. There were worse memories to take to the grave.

She left the next morning. He more or less ordered her to. He helped her with his wand as she removed strand after glittering strand of Bellatrix's memories and then handed her a roll of parchment containing some of the notes Dumbledore had left him.

"Perhaps Potter knows more," he said, watching as she put the notes carefully into her small bag. "Something to shed new light on where the last one could be hidden."

"I'll pretend they were concealed in my book," she said. "Explaining how I suddenly have the Hufflepuff cup will be slightly trickier, though."

He felt the corners of his mouth tug upward at the thought. For the boys to accept any tale involving Hermione Granger single-handedly circumventing Gringotts security and escaping unscathed with a cursed object, they had indeed to be even dimmer than usual.

"I believe a Confundus Charm would be prudent," he advised. "Take a moment to read the notes before you leave. I doubt you will have much time on your own once you rejoin the Golden Trio." She nodded and followed his lead into a small sitting room, settling down into one of the chairs next to the fireplace. He went back into his chambers to shower and dress, bringing the Muggle jacket she'd worn when he'd found her with him as he came back out. She accepted it with a small smile and stored away the parchment.

"Well," she said, fidgeting with the strings on her bag. "Goodbye, I guess." She took a step closer, clearly unsure of how to act under their current circumstances. His eyes caught her lips briefly, drawn there by the small movement where they touched together with her tongue to increase moisture. For a fleeting moment, he considered kissing her, but dismissed the thought almost at once. Kissing her now, in the morning light, would be taking a step too far. Better to leave it.

"Check in with the portrait every day at midnight," he said instead. "Phineas will be waiting for your report."

"I will." She gave him a small smile. "Are the wards open?"

"Yes."

"Goodbye, then."

"Goodbye, Hermione."

She turned on the spot and disappeared with a soft 'pop'. Closing his eyes briefly, he set his mind on the next task. Moving to the Pensieve, he summoned all of Bellatrix's memories and added them to the phial that contained the one they had constructed at Gringotts. Swirling the mixture softly, he watched the mist settle and integrate into a single smooth entity. Satisfied with the result, he opened a secret door in the panel and walked into an adjacent room. The only thing inside was a trunk...old and worn, with seven different locks.

Drawing his wand, he set it to the seventh keyhole and watched as level after level moved aside. Looking in, he saw his prisoner, lying wrapped in blankets and ropes on the floor of the large compartment.

"Good morning, Bella," he whispered coldly, even though he knew the unmoving form was in no condition to hear him. Setting to work, he touched his wand to the top of the phial and began the process of returning the memories. While he worked, he cleared his own mind, preparing to enter hers once the task was completed, filtering out any trace of suspicion or inconsistency that the missing days or new memory might have caused. Fortunately for him, Bella's mind was rather like Swiss cheese these days, time and space moving in irregular patterns through her brain, difficult to follow even for herself, not to mention her master. The Dementors had taken so much already, damaged the mind so severely, that missing elements occurring now would most likely be dismissed as normality if anyone cared to take a closer look. He doubted it would come to that, but it never hurt to be careful.

When he was done with her mind, he returned her clothes and levitated her out of the trunk. Wrapping her in his cloak, he Apparated to a dark corner of the gardens of Malfoy Manor and woke her up as they hit the ground. A last Confundus Charm later, they were on their way to the main building, Bellatrix urging him on with barely concealed contempt as they went to report to the Dark Lord that the Sword of Gryffindor was, most definitely, still safely contained within the walls of Gringotts. All was well.

Hermione's feet touched soft grass next to a slender willow tree. She walked towards the house slowly, dreading to go inside. Would Ron and Harry still be there, and what would they say to each other now? In the span of a few short days, she had lived so much, and so much was changed inside her. There was a stranger in her chest, one who barely cared about what the boys had been up to. She should feel betrayed, she knew. She did a little bit. Harry had been her first, after all, and to be tossed aside without a warning stung, love or no. But it didn't hurt as much as it was *supposed* to, and that scared her, at the same time as she had very little patience with such an emotion. She had seen worse, felt worse, *been* worse even. After sharing her soul with Bellatrix...even if only for a short while...whatever she would encounter as Hermione couldn't be truly terrible. Or so she felt.

Someone was in the orchard at the back of the house. Harry, huddled up on a bench beneath bare branches. He looked cold. Cold and lost. She wondered what had happened in the days when she'd been gone.

"Harry!" For a minute, she thought that she had been the one speaking. The name had echoed through her mind at the exact same moment she had heard it out loud. Recognising the voice, however, she turned her head and saw Ron exiting the house, pulling his scarf higher around his ears to protect them from the February wind. She stopped moving in the direction she'd been heading and edged instead towards the other side of the house, slowing her steps to watch the two of them.

Harry didn't look up as he called his name, but kept his eyes firmly on something small that was nested in his hands. He walked up to the bench and sat down, leaning close to Harry's slightly smaller frame to protect them both against the wind. Harry still didn't acknowledge his presence and kept focus on rolling the Golden Snitch back and forth across his naked fingers.

"Hey." He reached out and caught Harry's hands in one of his, stilling the movements. The other boy didn't respond. "We'll sort it out, mate," he tried. "We always do."

"I can't get it to open." Harry's voice was hoarse, as though he hadn't spoken for a very long time. "I've tried everything I know, and it just. Won't. Open." He clenched the Snitch in his fist, slamming it into the bench in frustration, crying out as the hand collided with the hard rock. Ron leaned over and gathered it back to him, holding the bruised member between both of his, coaxing it open in his lap and softly caressing the cold skin. Harry looked from the joined hands to him, finally meeting his eyes. "Seriously, Ron, what are we doing?" he asked, defeat in his voice. "We've been looking for three days...the whole Order has...and there is no sign of her anywhere. I know I shouldn't, but I can't help to think that..."

Ron silenced him abruptly, removing his left hand from his lap to push it into Harry's hair and cut him off with a kiss. He could not let Harry voice his worry...their worry...out loud or he would lose hold of what little hope he had left. So he kissed him deeply, insistently, trying to press something of himself into Harry to counter the sadness, to soften the fears, if only by a tiny fraction. His other hand moved on its own accord, climbing up to Harry's face to touch him more intimately. His head started spinning, and he moved closer, letting himself get lost in sensation. It was their first kiss since the First Kiss, and it was just as intoxicating. Touching Harry like this, he couldn't wrap his mind around the fact that he had lived for nearly eighteen years without doing it. The past three days had been torture, now that he knew how it felt to step into light so bright it blinded him. To be so close and unable to touch, hindered by the waves of guilt that seemed to be an almost physical entity between them. He felt that pain crash and burn now, falling from them as they soared...

"Hey! Ron! Leave off the snogging and come inside," Bill suddenly called from the patio door, effectively breaking them apart.

"Get lost!" he called back, sliding his thumbs along Harry's cheeks as he leaned back in. The feel of Harry's lips burned through him from head to toe. He couldn't stop now. Just not possible. He needed this, and from the way Harry's arms wrapped tightly around his waist, he figured Harry did too. Bill didn't reply, and he pushed his brother from his mind, making more room for the way Harry's hands caressed his back and how their thighs brushed together as the kiss deepened again.

"I'm sorry," Bill said, making Ron jump from the sudden impact of a firm hand on his shoulder. He and Harry both looked up, half-angry and half-dazed, trying to make sense of the interruption. The look on the scarred face made the protests that had welled up inside die on his lips, however; he hadn't seen his brother look quite as tense for a long time.

"What's happened?" he demanded, feeling his heart plummet even as he got the words out.*Not another death. Please... not...*

"Hermione's back," Bill said, almost gently. "Come inside."

Too shocked to speak, the two boys stumbled to their feet, following the eldest Weasley brother into the house.

He was used to thinking of her as small, much smaller than himself, not that he was overly tall. Ron was the tall one. She used to be small. Standing before him now, she looked different, more impressive somehow. He shook his head, trying to make the random thoughts running through his brain form into some sort of logical chain. Hermione was standing in the kitchen. Alive. She was alive. He nearly fell to his knees in a mixed reaction of relief and gratitude. The day she'd disappeared... She had saved his life, somehow getting Dobby to them and healing the fatal wound on his leg, and he had repaid her by driving her out of the house. Shame still went through him in scorching waves as he thought of how he'd treated her. They had shared so much, and she had accepted him when he was all lost. She had been his friend, his lover, his comfort when the world became too insane for him to handle. And he had let himself get swept away, so dazzled by the sudden realisations of his own heart that he forgot all about hers. *God, the look of her face...* What could he say to her, even now?

Before he had time to think of anything, Hermione threw herself around his neck, catching Ron with the same movement. Something tense shattered in him, and he hugged her fiercely, laughing with relief, squeezing to convince himself that she was really there, that he hadn't unintentionally killed his best friend. Ron was right there with him, holding both him and Hermione so tightly that he had to fight to get air into his lungs. They stood there for close to three minutes, each whispering words of desperate apology into the girl's ears. Hermione said little, letting them do the talking. For a moment, things felt nearly normal again. Finally, they all let go and sat down around the table. Forestalling any questions, Hermione opened her drawstring bag and set Helga Hufflepuff's golden cup on the wooden surface, alongside a roll of old parchment.

"Is that...?" Harry began, cutting himself off as he reached out towards the object with an incredulous look in his eyes.

"Yes," she confirmed softly, smiling slightly as Harry's whole being seem to infuse with new hope. "It's the fifth Horcrux."

"Blimey, Hermione," Ron said, clearly awed. "How did you get hold of it?"

"Yes, how on earth..."

"This," she said quickly, throwing Dumbledore's notes into their eager hands. "Once I'd left, I found these hidden in the book he left me."

They practically threw themselves over the parchment, giving her a few moments in which to plan her next move. She would prefer not to Confund them, if she had a choice. Greater good or no, they were still her friends, and lying to them, however expedient at this moment, felt utterly wrong. They had been her first real friends, the only people in her life she could really call by that title. Despite the confusion, the hurt and everything else they had experienced lately, they were still her friends. She needed them to be. Even if it meant having to lie. The parchment in front of her held Dumbledore's notes, but they also contained an extra part, added by her to look like the original. In the addition, the cup was hypothesised to be held in a security box in a Muggle bank...stipulating that since the Wizarding World at large was generally handicapped when it came to Muggle things, this would be a very safe hiding place for the precious object. The text was accompanied with theories as to the cup's

protection, most of which were flashy, cruel to unsuspecting Muggles and relatively easy to dismantle. According to the notes, Tom Riddle had been only barely out of school when he made this particular relic after all.

It was a hasty solution, thrown together in her mind while she waited for Bill to call the boys inside and quickly spelled unto the parchment. The venture into Bellatrix's mind had been of use once again. She found that she had a lot more insight on Voldemort's character now, seeing him as someone a lot more complex than the caricatured arch-villain which dominated the minds of Wizard society. She knew the logic in her cover story was flawed in many places, but hoped that Harry and Ron would be sufficiently distracted by the fact that the cup was actually there, *right on the table*, to think too much about how it had got there in the first place. She was correct. Ron and Harry skimmed through the text, marvelled a bit about the brilliance of Dumbledore, lauded her for being Muggle-born and therefore familiar with Muggle banks and left it at that. Harry ran to get the sword and returned within seconds, short of breath but radiant. It felt so much like old times that she had to bite the inside of her cheek to keep from crying.

"Here," Harry said, handing over the sword by the handle. "If anyone deserves to kill that thing, it's you."

She really wanted to. Standing there, with the sword in hand, all she could think about were the things she'd had to do to get it. She swallowed hard, pressing images of red mist and pain aside, shutting out memories of blood trickling down her body and the blackness of Bellatrix's mind. Unbidden, an image from later on rose within her mind's eye: an image of a different kind of darkness, experienced in a windowless dungeon chamber where the absence of light only served to strengthen the pleasurable sensations of the other senses...

"Thanks, Harry, but I think you'd better," she said, holding out the gleaming object. "According to Dumbledore's notes, the more pieces of soul you kill, the better your chances are against He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named in the end."

Harry didn't argue. Swiftly, he placed the cup on the floor, took the sword from her hand and ran it, without preamble or hesitation, into the heart of the cursed object. A piercing scream tore through the air, and another Horcrux lay dead on the floor. One to go.

Which was, naturally, exactly what Ron said as he stepped forward to examine the smoking, charred golden cup. She looked up at him with the ghost of a smile and sat back down at the table. There was still much more planning to do.

The hours between ten and midnight passed in sluggish agony. She couldn't sleep but didn't want to stay awake either. Not for the first time, she wished she had a Pensieve of her own, to help sort her thoughts and alleviate the hurricane of fragments swirling in her brain. The three of them had planned for most of the day, going through everything they had in meticulous detail. Most things suggested that the last Horcrux was located at Hogwarts, that Voldemort had planted it there on the cold winter day when he went to ask Albus Dumbledore for the position as Defense Against the Dark Arts teacher. Applying for a position he must have known he wouldn't be able to get practically screamed of an ulterior motive, and if not Horcrux-related, why would Dumbledore have shown that particular memory to Harry as part of his preparation? They had spoken to Bill and Fleur regarding known Ravenclaw artefacts and came up with a few plausible candidates, a sapphire necklace and a charmed quill from the tail feather of Rowena Ravenclaw's familiar among them. The next step would be to get to Hogwarts somehow. Something in her stomach lurched slightly at the thought. Checking her watch one final time, she took out her bag and withdrew the portrait from its confines. Phineas Nigellus was already there, waiting impatiently.

"You are late, Miss Granger," he chided. "I haven't got all night."

Muttering an apology, she quickly retold the day's events. Once she'd finished, the little wizard disappeared from his frame, leaving to pass on the information to the man on the other side of the connection. She waited.

"The Headmaster is very pleased," he said neutrally, returning at last. From the look of his face, she got the impression that he would have wanted to say something completely different, but that something was holding him back.

"What did he say?" she asked, finding it very disconcerting to hold a conversation through another person.

"Forgive me, Miss Granger, but I'm a portrait, not a parrot," he replied, rather snidely. "If the Headmaster would have wanted you to hang on to his every word, he would have spoken to you directly."

"Did he..."

"I imagine three days of your company was quite enough, despite, shall we say, your *charming behaviour*," he continued, ignoring her small protest. "So, if there's nothing else?"

Her mind was suddenly numb, and she could do nothing but shake her head. With a smirk and a swirl of his robes that would have made his current master envious, Phineas Nigellus Black swept from his frame.

A/N: As always, please review!

The Forbidden Forest

Chapter 9 of 14

In the face of war, there's no time for perfect solutions. With the clock ticking down to the final battle, the Trio learns something about trusting their instincts.

A/N: This is my favourite chapter, which naturally makes me all nervous, wondering whether people will like it or not. A big thanks to Lariope, who coached me through it all and helped me find Ron's voice.

Chapter Nine The Forbidden Forest

They decided to wait until the Easter holidays, hoping that fewer people around would make the mission safer. It was only about five weeks away, and they had lots to plan before actually going. It sounded like a rather short time to wait, so naturally, as soon as the plan was cemented, time slowed down to an almost unmoving entity.

This house is too small, Ron thought, quickly removing the hand that had been almost at Harry's thigh as Hermione entered the sitting room, book in hand. She sat down on the sofa, flipping through page after page, seemingly oblivious to the tension she was causing. Slowly, Ron edged his hand back underneath the table, letting a few trembling fingers draw a caressing circle on Harry's right knee. Chess pieces fell in a clatter to the floor from the other man's reaction, making Hermione jump as well. She eyed the two of them, and her face seemed to turn a little paler, even as she forced the corners of her mouth into a strained smile and left the room. Harry immediately leapt to his feet, calling after her as he followed, leaving Ron alone in the firelight. *Shit!* He slumped back into the chair, battling the impulse to just grab the board and throw it into the fireplace. Or *something*. Anything. He did not know how much longer he could keep this up; the sneaking around, with its emotional rollercoaster and constant interruptions, was really getting to him. He understood Harry's reluctance to let things go further while staying in the same house as Hermione...he really did...but that didn't make it any easier to bear. In weak moments in the night, as he lay alone, consumed with thoughts of Harry, he half-wished that Hermione had never come back, that she had gone somewhere else, somewhere safe in the Muggle world perhaps, where she would have been far away but without them having to worry.

The loathing that followed these thoughts was eating him alive, and with it came, inevitably, the little voice that told him that had he not left when he did...had he stayed in the tent and not abandoned the people he loved...things would have been different. With his betrayal in the woods, he had created his own purgatory. Somehow, it seemed fitting.

"Are you alright?" He looked up. Bill was standing in the doorway, leaning against the wood with his arms crossed.

"I dunno," he said, shaking his head a little. "I'm not sure... of anything really."

Bill entered the room and sat down in the chair opposite...Harry's chair. With a wave of this wand, the scattered chess pieces flew from the floor and repositioned themselves on the black and white board. He let his hand hover over the board for a few seconds and then gestured to one of the pawns, beckoning it forward.

"Your move," he said simply, leaning back. Mutely, Ron raised his hand and pointed the way for a pawn of his own. They played in silence for a while until a misguided move had one of Ron's knights thrown to the floor by a triumphant white tower.

"So," Bill said, picking up the fallen piece and setting it back on the table. "Are you going to talk about it or will I have to force it out of you?"

"I don't know what to say."

"Well," Bill replied, resuming the game by knocking another pawn, "let's start with what has you sporting that feverish, haunted look day and night. Is he considering going back to Hermione?"

All blood seemed to leave Ron's face in one, rushing motion, and for a few, painful seconds, his lungs refused to breathe. Despite the jealousy that burned through him at regular intervals when he saw them together or thought of the weeks they'd spent alone in that tent, the thought that he might lose Harry had never crossed his mind.

I thought... Hermione...

No. Only you. Always you.

Had he been wrong? Did Harry have second thoughts? The image of Hermione rose in his mind, her back pushed up against the mountainside, skin wet and flushed from arousal and warm water. They had been flawless together, wrapped thickly in the magic of Phoenix song, keeping his eyes captive even though the pain threatened to burn holes in his retinas.

"Okay," Bill said, interrupting his thoughts and pulling him back to the present. "I obviously poked my wand into the nest of Doxy eggs with that one. So if not that, then what's wrong?"

"No, maybe you're right," he choked, connecting dots in his head, looking for patterns in what had happened...and not happened...over the past three weeks. "Maybe that's what's actually wrong and he just hasn't told me yet."

"Stop," Bill said firmly, reaching out to lay a hand on his arm. "Don't breed monsters that aren't actually there." The physical contact did ease the reeling thoughts a little, and he drew in a shuddering breath. "Ron, listen to me."

"What?" he demanded, looking up at last, trying to ignore the fact that his eyes were feeling quite dangerously wet.

"Love is not easy," Bill said quietly, squeezing the message into his arm as he spoke. "It's very rarely what you thought it would be and even less often what you'd want it to be. But, Ron," he made a tiny pause, just long enough to fully capture the younger brother's attention, "if Harry is what you need, what you crave, inside and out, then there's nothing you can do. I wish I could tell you to give it time, that things would fall into place eventually. Don't get me wrong, they most likely would, but there's no sense in ignoring the danger you are both in. You might have a century together, or you might have a few weeks. If you truly love him, then make bloody sure he knows it before the end."

A last squeeze on his arm, and Bill rose to his feet and left the room. Ron remained in his chair, dazed and unfocused as his brother's words kept replaying in his head.

Right, he thought, swallowing hard to gather some courage. His eyes fell briefly to the chessboard as he pushed his chair back to get to his feet. A knight and a bishop were circling in on the opposing king as the other bishop and a rook kept the black queen firmly cornered.

Checkmate.

He caught up with her in the orchard, by the same tree he'd been sitting under on the day she'd returned. The branches were budding now, waiting only for that first, warm spring day to burst into bloom. Pulling her down on the bench with him, he ignored her protests and half-hearted struggling to get away.

"Hermione, we need to talk," he said with more composure than he felt. "I don't want this tension between us any longer. We need to focus on Hogwarts, on the last Horcrux, on Vol...You-Know-Who and everything else, and I can't do it when all I think about is you and Ron and the unbelievable mess we are in."

"What do you suggest?" she asked, voice almost free of emotion. He would have preferred her to be yelling.

"I'm sorry," he said honestly, putting his hand to her chin to tilt her face upwards. "I'm really sorry, Hemione. I used you, and then I betrayed you, and there's nothing I can do to fix it."

"It's okay, Harry," she whispered, turning her head away. "We were both there. I understand." She stood up and moved to walk away; a hand on her wrist held her back.

"Where are you going?" he asked, worry in his voice now. "Please, Hermione, we need to fix this..." She twirled, pulling her hand from his grasp and let the anger she'd kept hidden underneath the numbing pain boil to the surface.

"Let me go, Harry," she nearly hissed, pulling her wand from the pocket of her robes at the same time. "Things are not fine between us, and you can't fix them in one night! I can't talk to you right now. I need you to be my friend, but I can't watch you love Ron when you couldn't love me."

"Of course I love you!" he interjected. "You are my best friend, Hermone, I..."

"No, you don't," she interrupted, voice calmer now. "Not like that. The only time you ever looked at me like that was when we were under magical influence."

Harry made some half-successful attempt at denial and then closed his mouth, just looking sadly into her eyes.

"I'm alone," she said, struggling to get the words out as she steeled herself for what she had to say. "You and Ron were the only family I had...I don't get on very well with my parents...and now... I'm alone." She let Harry pull her into a crushing hug, drawing comfort from the warmth of his body, however painful it was to be so forcefully reminded of what she *didn't* have. She allowed herself to hug him back, taking in the words of comfort and assurances that they *always* needed her, that she would never be alone. *Lies*. Forcing her tears back, she withdrew from the embrace and put a gentle hand on Harry's cheek.

"Go to Ron, Harry," she said seriously. "There is no time for all of us to be okay with this, and we all know that things might not," she paused, "be the same afterwards." She tried to smile but feared she didn't manage very well. Her face felt numb and unwilling when she tried to get the muscles to shift.

"Where are you going?" he asked, sorrow plain in his voice, and she realised she had won. He wouldn't stop her.

"Don't ask me that," she said, stroking his cheek for what would most likely be the last time. "If you want to fix this, then don't ask. I will stay safe and I will come back. We'll still go to Hogwarts at Easter, and I'll return before then to fine-tune the plan. But for now..."

Struck with sudden inspiration, she reached into her bag and pulled out an old, gilded frame, set around a black canvas. His brow furrowed in confusion as he recognised the portrait and even more so when she handed it to him.

"Here," she said, "take this. Check in once every few days or if you need to contact me. Headmaster Black will deliver our messages." Harry looked back at her, wheels turning.

"But the only other portrait is at Hogwarts," he protested. "It's in Dumbledore's office."

"Not anymore," she said, a genuine smile spreading on her face as she watched him draw blank after blank mixed with faulty conclusions. "Take care, Harry," she said. "Love him well."

Before he could say anything else, she turned and walked quickly towards the Apparition point, disappearing from sight.

His head was spinning as he stepped back through the patio doors and made way towards his bedroom. Hermione was gone. Gone somewhere she would be safe and where he couldn't follow. He wondered briefly if there was someone else, someone behind the scenes helping her. The memory of a silver crow surfaced in his mind, mixing with images of the Sword of Gryffindor, rising without explanation from the surface of a lake...or hot spring as it was. She had been gone for three days the last time and returned safe and sound with the Hufflepuff Cup in hand. Hidden notes or not, it suddenly seemed an impossible task for just one person. He let out a breath he hadn't know he was holding and felt the greater bulk of the guilt he'd been carrying fall from his shoulders. Someone was helping her. She was safe. Breathing more easily, he turned the handle of his door and walked inside.

"Hullo, Harry," Ron said, and the progress he had made with his breathing was instantly lost. Ron was standing in the middle of the room, barefoot and shirtless, trying desperately not to fiddle too much with his hands. The moonlight hit him from the side, gliding smoothly over his face and body. His mouth was suddenly very dry.

Love him well.

The painting fell to the floor, and he felt his feet propel him forward until they were both standing on the soft carpet, only inches away from one another. He felt Ron's hands touch the top of his robes, stroking softly along the edge of the neckline. Their eyes locked together, and Harry moved his hand to Ron's arm, leaning on him for balance as he kicked off his shoes and socks. They watched each other for a long time, nearly unmoving. Even in the midst of battle, at the height of an adrenaline rush, he had never felt his heart beat this fast. Ron's hand made a last caress along the edge of his robes and then slowly, hesitantly, began a trembling trail across the centre of his torso, moving downwards.

Love him well.

With a groan, Harry grabbed him, taking his face in both hands and kissing him with all he had. The tension that had been building for the past three weeks swelled and released, shooting into him in tiny jolts of electricity wherever Ron's fingertips came into contact. He felt the hem of his robes being yanked upwards, pulled over his head with the rest of the garment, and shivered as the cool night air brushed against his chest and back. And then there was warm skin against his, and his brain short-circuited. He couldn't get enough, couldn't touch enough. His hands travelled over Ron's back, over his shoulder blades and down the curve of his spine to the edge of the threadbare pyjama bottoms he was still wearing. Following the edge, he moved to the front, running his hands over stomach and chest back to Ron's face, pulling him deeper into their kiss.

For every touch he initiated, Ron mirrored his movements, awakening his very skin with tiny shots of magic. And then Ron moved his lips down his neck, and a strangled cry broke from his throat. Nothing with Hermione could have prepared him for this. He had fallen into pleasure before, letting the sensations of his body force his mind to stop spinning, but with her, it had always been an activity, a means of escape, like sleep or exercise, only more effective. With Ron, it was barely a thought, coupled with an unrelenting, driving need, releasing pleasure from every cell in his body. Blood was pounding in his ears as Ron kissed and bit his way across his left shoulder, and he wondered where it all came from. With Hermione, it had all seemed to be centred in his groin, leaving him pleasantly light-headed, but now, there was blood everywhere. He could feel it pumping through his veins with every erratic beat of his heart, feeling it fill his heart and mind, flooding to every toe and each tip of his fingers. Dragging his hands over Ron's chest, he tried to keep them from shaking as he reached the draw-string cord at the top of the trousers. The sounds Ron was making against his throat were driving him mad, causing him to snag the knot not one, but four times. Just as he finally managed to get it open, he felt Ron's hand slip under the elastic of his shorts and wrap around his aching length.

Pleasure exploded from everywhere...heart, toes, behind his eyelids...and he felt his knees go weak beneath him as he struggled to breathe. He was dimly aware of words falling from his lips, of cries and moans as Ron continued to stroke him, bringing him almost to the brink of agony. He welcomed that as well, needing more...God, so much more...his recent climax having only taken him to a new level of excruciating arousal. Kissing desperately, they fell to the floor, the nearby bed forgotten as their bodies moved together, crawling and climbing, trying to touch every single inch of skin while never letting go of the other's lips for more than a few seconds. They might have spoken things that were actual words, but if they did, neither of them noticed. The contact of skin was their language now, speaking loudly with each kiss and caress as they soared together. Harry felt a stream of pure freedom surge within him, gathering speed with each moan and gasp; when Ron broke apart in his arms, it flowed freely between them, and he knew that he had never been truly, unequivocally happy until that very moment.

Physically sated, they kept looking for more, finding the pleasures of soul and mind in deep kisses and hands that stroked soothingly over flushed and heated skin. The connection was like a wave between them, feeding off the deep currents to move into new peaks, crashing onto a sparkling beach only to draw back and start again. When they finally made it to the bed, dawn was visible at the horizon, sending delicate beams of gold to dance across the ocean.

"I wanted to tell you how I felt," Ron confessed as he spooned up against Harry's back to face the window. "I had this whole thing planned out, rehearsed it and everything. Now it just feels so..."

"Unnecessary," Harry filled in, pulling him a bit closer. "Yeah, I know what you mean."

Smiling, they drifted off to sleep.

She landed exactly where she had departed, in the middle of a sitting room, next to his leather sofa. She had been worried about the wards, half-expecting to find solid resistance when she spun, forcing her back to the point of departure. She had thought to Apparate into the Forbidden Forest, right into the glade where she and Harry had almost fallen victims to a very angry herd of centaurs, and sneak into the castle through one of the secret passages. When she focused on her destination, however, she met with only compressed air, welcoming her into the space she wished to occupy.

The room was empty, and she looked around for the door she knew would be there. The bedroom was empty as well, so she removed her robes and climbed into bed, letting the familiar sensations soothe her. He would come soon enough.

She woke up a little while later, someone shaking her roughly by the shoulder. He was angry; she could practically feel the emotion radiate from his hands. Smiling, she opened her eyes and reached for him, making sure to stretch enough for the sheet to fall down to expose her upper body.

"It was this or back to my grandmother's house," she said, interrupting him before he even had a chance to speak. "If I'm to die in two weeks, I'd rather spend them here than there."

He was silent for a long time, just long enough for her courage to slip and embarrassment to set in. When his hand settled over her right breast, the moan was equal parts relief and pleasure. Reaching for him, she found the front of his robes and pulled. She would not be alone. Not tonight.

A/N: Please, please review! I'm really anxious to know what you thought of this chapter in particular. Thank you all for reading!

The Writing on the Wall

Chapter 10 of 14

The Trio prepares for the final battle.

A/N: This story is finally picking up some readers. Good work with the pimping, pleople! Keep it going!

Chapter 10 The Writing on the Wall

The days trickled by as Easter approached. Hermione spent her time researching for the most part; her impromptu host had handed over everything he had received from Dumbledore, and she was slowly making her way through the heap of information. Many times, she marvelled at the amount of detail she found in the documents. Little bits and pieces she was certain no one else knew, about Harry and about Ron and herself. There were detailed accounts of the work of the Order of the Phoenix, both during Voldemort's last rise and during the current one. There were outlines of plans...many plans...each one more intricate than the next. Plans that had failed and others which had succeeded, each and every one commented in the margins as to what had gone wrong and what had gone easier than suspected. Her heart clenched as she read Dumbledore's notes from the previous year, outlining his lessons with Harry, his orders for Snape and his notes on what needed to be done once he was gone. It was frightening to read...the man had planned for his death in such meticulous detail, going through every scenario, every possibility, to make sure that his death would be instrumental in the continued war. The man had been dying from the curse in his hand, but had nevertheless found the strength to go out with a bang, in a way that would push Harry out of his shadow and unto his own two feet. Dumbledore had not wanted to wither away, had not wanted to fall quietly, like a last, dry leaf on a shrivelled tree. She felt a pang of sympathy for Snape as she read the plans for the "murder." To kill a man he'd known for almost all of his life, even on his own request, seemed unfeasible. She wondered briefly if she would have been able to do it, had she been in his shoes.

Snape stepped into the room just as she replaced the document on the top of the pile. He looked tired, she noted, tired and worn. She could only imagine what it must be like, running a school where most members of staff despised him, where almost everyone thought him a cold-blooded killer. Softly, she put her feet down on the carpet and approached him. He exhaled deeply as her hands fell on his chest and pushed outward to remove his cloak, and she could feel the muscles in his back begin to relax under her fingers. They made love on his desk, the smell of parchment and ink heavy in her nostrils as she wrapped her legs around his back and pulled him deeper into her. At least she could give him this, she thought, placing little kisses along his collar bone while he caught back up with his breathing. At least she could be of use. They never talked about what was happening between them, and she figured it was just as well. This was a stolen moment, a short window of opportunity where they could enjoy each other without repercussions. She refused to think about what would come afterwards, because most likely, nothing would. She smiled at him as she returned to her work, turning to a new section of the assembled notes.

"Dumbledore's tomb has been breached," he said, coming up beside her and searching through a pile on her left. "The Dark Lord has taken the bait; it's time to move into position for the last act." He often did that, she thought...referred to their lives as part of a play. In a way, he was right...she had her own script right in front of her on the table. He didn't come straight out and say it of course, but she sensed a bitterness inside him whenever Dumbledore or his plans were discussed. She couldn't really blame him; he had been part of this play for longer than she had been alive, and in spite of Dumbledore's good intentions, he did tend to see people as chess pieces rather than human when he plotted against Voldemort. Some of the plans she had read through were downright flawed, and others far too risky. It seemed Dumbledore and Voldemort had a very dangerous trait in common: both liked to weave majestically intricate plots, and both had a weakness for drama. Despite it all, however, Snape had acted his part flawlessly...for both his masters...and his patience for servitude was wearing thin. Perhaps this was why he had accepted her into his space so freely; perhaps she was his reward for good services rendered. She wondered if somewhere, beneath the piles of parchment, there was a letter from Dumbledore, suggesting the very thing. At this point, there was very little she wouldn't put past the man.

"Should I talk to Harry?" she asked. "Tell him about the wand at least?"

"No, he cannot know what it means," Snape replied. "The boy's mind is not nearly sufficiently protected. The Dark Lord must not know, which means Potter must not know."

"I understand," she said. "It's only...It feels a bit harsh to send him into battle this way, without knowing that there is a chance..."

"If he had listened and applied himself at Occlumency, we could have given him more," Snape interrupted. "Albus could have given him more, not just a few memories of the Dark Lord's childhood and a few veiled clues about the state of his soul. I could have helped him directly, and not from the shadows through one of his friends. He chose not to learn, however, and we must adapt to his choices, no matter how inconvenient."

She bit back the retort that had been on the tip of her tongue. He was right, she realised that. She remembered how Harry had behaved during their fifth year all too well, and to pair him with Snape during that time had not been one of Dumbledore's brighter ideas. Still, she knew how frustrating he found it to be left in the dark, how easily he fell into traps at the smallest temptation. To know all that she knew now and tell him nothing seemed... cruel. Especially now that she knew what he would have to face. She had been speechless when she'd found out, certain that she must have misunderstood. Harry couldn't die. Dumbledore could not have decided on a plan where Harry had to die. She lost a small part of herself that day, and when she woke up the next morning, she felt decidedly older. She'd taken to watching him on Dumbledore's map for a little while every day since then, wanting to be close to him, even though he was geographically very far away. She missed him.

Walking over to a chair by the fireplace, she took the map into her hands and touched it gently with her wand. Ink started to spread into lines and curves on the parchment, drawing a beautiful map of Cornwall. The dot labelled 'Harry' appeared, seemingly suspended in thin air due to the Fidelius Charm on the Shell Cottage. Letters appeared

next, telling her what he did, how he felt, when he'd last slept. There were other symbols as well, links to more information, she suspected, available with a specific password. She had not managed to break through yet, and quite frankly, she didn't know if she wanted to know what those sections contained. She let the index finger of her right hand trace the name softly. Harry's dot was pulsating with a steady, spring-green glow, which according to Snape meant that he was at rest and feeling well. The small black dot labelled 'Ronald Weasley' was almost in the same space, and she felt a sting of jealousy touch her. They were in love; it was plain to see, even through the interface of an enchanted piece of parchment. If the desperate gambit Dumbledore had thrown together at the last minute, involving his own wand, didn't turn out the way they hoped, Harry would at least have had this. He would know love before he died. She wondered if she should be so lucky. Her eye wandered over to Severus...she had started to call him that now...where he stood, leaning over what he named the 'war table.' What they had was not love, even her eighteen-year-old mind understood that. They had passion and they had a rather well-functioning sort of companionship, forged from necessity and...she suspected...loneliness. Sometimes...during the pre-dawn hours mainly, when she woke up from a dream and had the chance to watch him in the light of the fire...she wondered what it would be like to love him, how a man like him would respond to such an emotion. She didn't have to hear it to know that he was a man not used to kindness. It often shocked her how big an impact little things of random niceness had on him.

"If you want to do something useful today," Severus interrupted her thoughts, "I would suggest that you get started on the volumes from Flourish and Blotts that just arrived."

Obligingly, she closed the charmed map and walked over to the indicated parcel. Inside were two thick, old-looking books:*The Four Founders of Hogwarts* by Arthur Scott and *Life and Death of Rowena Ravenclaw* by Cecilia Clearwater. Picking up the first one, she sat back down in her chair, quill and parchment beside her, ready to work.

"Bill, can I talk to you?"

Bill turned away from the cupboard he'd been raiding for things that might pass for breakfast and looked at Harry. He was barefoot, wrapped in a maroon bathrobe and looked very much as though he'd left bed in a great hurry. The expression on his face bothered him...there was determination there, and courage, but there was also an underlying emotion he couldn't place. The boy looked almost haunted. Frowning, he gestured to the table. "Do you want to sit down?"

Harry hesitated and then shook his head slightly. "No, I'm fine. It will only take a second."

"I'm sorry, but you look nowhere near fine," Bill replied, taking two teacups from a shelf and putting them on the table. "I don't have to be at work for another fifteen minutes, and I can Apparate there. Sit. Have some tea."

Harry complied, sliding into a chair and taking the teacup in both hands, moving a finger in gentle circles over the rim. Bill poured the tea and sat down across from him, biting into a chocolate-chip cookie. "Here, have one. They're great with the tea. Makes them all soft and gooey inside." A quick smile crossed Harry's face. "This is breakfast?"

"It is when I'm the one making it. Fleur usually summons croissants from a nearby bakery." Harry snorted.

"Your mum would keel over and die if she knew."

"Probably, yes," he agreed, smiling back. "So, how can I help?"

The smile immediately fell from Harry's face, and he turned his attention back to the teacup. Bill took another bite of his cookie, waiting for him to start.

"It's nothing much, just... you still work at Gringotts, right?"

"I do."

"I've never... what I mean is..." Harry looked up at him, meeting his eyes. "I never took the time to learn how everything works in this world. Administration-wise, I mean."

"I see... Is there something specific you need from the bank?"

"Yes. No, not really. It's just..." He winced and looked down again. Bill pushed the cookies across the table, bribing him to go on.

"I want Ron to have everything," he blurted suddenly. "If I..." He swallowed hard. "If I die, I want him to have it. Grimmauld Place, whatever's in my vault, anything else that I have." He swallowed again, looking up at Bill, entreatingly. "Can you help me?"

It was a very reasonable train of thought, and very practical. But they were still the words of a seventeen year old man preparing for things he shouldn't have to think about for at least another century. He closed his eyes and sipped the hot liquid in his cup, willing his hands to keep from shaking and spilling the tea all over the front of his robes. Harry Potter, the acclaimed future saviour of the Wizarding World, sat before him, asking for help to prepare for his death. It was unbearable.

"Of course," he said, having to clear his throat to get the words out. "I'll run a check on your accounts this morning and bring the paperwork with me when I get back tonight."

"Thank you, Bill," Harry replied, so quietly he felt the words rather than heard them. Taking another sip of his tea, he watched as the hope of the Wizarding World got to his feet and walked out of the kitchen to rejoin the man he loved...his youngest brother...in bed upstairs. His heart clenched, and he put down the cup, rising swiftly from his chair and moving down the hallway.

The morning light was slipping in through the blinds of their bedroom, turning his wife's hair to shimmering gold where it flowed over the pillows. He couldn't imagine how it would feel to lose her now...to even contemplate such a thing...so soon after their love had begun. He'd known her for less than three years and known what it was like to love her for a little more than two. It wasn't nearly enough. From what he'd seen in the last month or so, and known for far longer than that, Ron loved Harry every bit as much as he himself loved the beautiful woman lying before him. Perhaps even more...Ron and Harry had lived through so much together and had known each other so thoroughly long before romance entered the picture. If Harry didn't make it...he forced himself to let the thought pass through his mind...if he died, then he truly feared for his brother. He didn't want to think about what he would do if Fleur was suddenly no longer in his life. Pressing back the thought, he sat down on the side of the bed and stroked her softly across the hair and face, leaning in to press a loving kiss on the soft, rosy lips.

"Mmm... bonjour," she whispered, smiling against his lips as she woke up under his ministrations. He deepened the kiss, pressing her into the pillows, proving to himself that she was there, alive, just as she should be. A kick to his side broke them apart, and she followed him up to a half-sitting position.

"Ah, le bébé s'est réveillé," she commented, putting a hand on her swollen stomach. "Vaut mieux que..." She broke off, eyes widening, and reached for him. "Qu'est-ce qui se passe?" she demanded worriedly, and he suddenly realised that there was something on his face, making it feel wet and slightly drawn out. He wiped his cheeks quickly with the back of his hand, blinking to clear his vision.

"No, nothing's wrong," he said, wrapping his arms around her as she caressed his face and placed tiny kisses all over. "Just happy you're here, that's all." She smiled. "I'm 'appy too," she said, nuzzling his ear a little before falling back against the pillows. Another kick made her whole midsection point right, and she groaned softly. "And ze bébé is 'appy also," she confirmed wryly. Laughing, he bent and pressed a kiss on her forehead.

"I'm off to work," he said. "I'll see you tonight."

"A ce soir," she confirmed, waving a small hand from behind the belly. "'Ave fun."

Fun. He thought back on Harry's request, letting the weight of it crash back down on his shoulders. No, he very much doubted fun would be part of this day.

She left on Good Friday. Somehow, the significance of the day, in Muggle terms, really stood out to her. She hesitated as she pocketed her small bag and prepared to Apparate. Would she ever be back here, in these chambers, or would all things come to an end? Severus had left early in the morning, without saying goodbye. Part of her was grateful for that, while another wondered if she would see him again. Sensing that she most likely would, she wondered, instead, if she would see him alive.

Phineas Nigellus was in his painting as she departed, nodding briefly in greeting as she spun on her heel. He would meet her at the cottage as decided, moving through space in a different way than she. The wind pressed her hair into her face as she landed, and she watched grey, frothy waves hit the rock of the coastline as she moved towards the house. Somehow the elements seemed to know that something was coming. Tonight, they would all make a stand.

A/N: And for those who don't speak French:

bonjour good morning

le bébé s'est réveillé the baby has woken up (i.e. 'the baby's up')

vaut mieux que... I'd better...

Qu'est-ce qui se passe? What's happening? (i.e. 'What's wrong?')

Please review!

The Battle of Hogwarts

Chapter 11 of 14

The time has come to make a stand.

A/N: Hugs and kisses to Lariope and all reviewers.

Chapter 11 The Battle of Hogwarts

The first part of their plan went off without a hitch and in a blur of motion. Hogsmeade was under curfew and wrapped in a Caterwauler Charm, so they got in through the secret passage in the Shrieking Shack. Hogwarts was practically deserted; nearly all students and the majority of the faculty had left to spend the holidays with their families. They ran into Neville and Luna, who happened to be among the few remaining, by the Room of Requirement and received an update on what had happened in the school during the year. Thankfully, Ginny had gone home to the Burrow and wasn't with them. He didn't think he could face her now, not on top of everything. He briefly wondered whom she would hex first...him or Ron...when she found out why he'd actually left her. He hadn't known at the time, but it was clear to him now that Ron had been the reason all along. Back then, he had mistaken the nagging sense of guilt in the centre of his heart for the weight of his destiny; he hadn't been wrong, he just hadn't known that there was more to his destiny than a distant fight to the death with the man who had tried to kill him repeatedly over the years.

Hermione was all business, leading them across the castle in a search through secret rooms and passages neither he nor the Marauders' Map had known existed. It was clear she hadn't been idle during the weeks they had been apart. It became equally obvious to him, as they worked their way through the castle, that his earlier suspicions had been correct. There was someone else in the works, someone who helped them from behind the scenes. She had changed in the last two weeks, so much he could practically see it. She was older, calmer, more professional. There was a new sense of grace about her, something in the way she moved that reminded him forcefully of something...someone...else, something he couldn't quite put his finger on. He ransacked his mind but came up empty. From the way she navigated through Hogwarts, he was starting to suspect that it was someone on the staff, which narrowed down the options considerably. Flitwick or McGonagall. Somehow, though, neither option generated that small 'click' in his mind that told him he was on the right track.

His mind did click after visiting Ravenclaw Tower, on the other hand. While Hermione berated herself for not having realised that the Gray Lady, the Ravenclaw ghost, was, in fact, the daughter of the House founder, a memory suddenly drifted to the front of his mind. Lines and lines of bookshelves, a myriad hidden and forbidden things, stowed away by Hogwarts students for centuries. A glittering tiara, placed on the head of a stuffed troll to mark a hurried hiding place. The Rawenclaw diadem...the last Horcrux...was within reach.

Breaking into a run, he rushed towards the seventh floor, his friends hot on his tail.

In the Headmaster's office, Severus Snape folded the enchanted map before him and hid it securely in a secret pocket on the inside of his robes.

"It is time."

The portraits surrounding him nodded grimly and disappeared, one by one, from their ornate frames. Phineas Nigellus was the second to last to leave, followed only by Dumbledore, who tried to catch his eye before stepping out of sight. He took a moment to look at each expanse of black canvas while smoothly clearing his mind and bringing his nerves under control. Hogwarts' call had gone out. The last stage of the plan was in motion.

Pulling up the sleeve of his robe from his left forearm, he put the tip of his wand to the mark and watched it burn red.

She followed Harry as he ran across the castle, up to the familiar corridor on the seventh floor. Harry quickly paced back and forth three times, muttering under his breath, and a door appeared. She couldn't quite hold back a gasp as they entered, stunned by the sight of rows and rows of everything imaginable.

It was all a blur after that; too many things happened in too short a time. They found the Horcrux, and then Draco Malfoy showed up, stepping out of the Vanishing Cabinet with Crabbe and Goyle at his side, wands drawn. There was a duel, and then there was fire...fire such as she had never seen; fire that did not only feel alive, but *sentient*, chasing them down the aisle in malevolent pursuit. As they slammed the door shut and leaned against it, robes singed at the hemlines and Draco floating unconscious in the air before them, she still didn't know how they had managed to make it out alive. Well, she thought briefly, forcing back the bile that was suddenly rising in her throat, not all of them had. Crabbe and Goyle had fallen victims to their own, cursed flames along with the hidden piece of Voldemort's soul. She could still hear their screams

inside her head.

"What do we do with him?"

She looked up. Ron was standing next to Harry, poking Draco's unconscious form with the tip of his wand.

"I don't know. Tie him up and hide him somewhere, maybe."

"Chuck him back into the room, I'd say."

"Ron..."

"Yeah, I know. Sorry. Just tie him up then?"

"Yeah, maybe. We need to get going, find Voldemort..."

"Harry!"

"So what, Hermione? We have them all, the only piece that's left is the one inside his body. I want him to find me. Voldemort, Voldemort, Voldemort!"

"Potter!"

They jumped. Minerva McGonagall was hurrying down the corridor, several of the other professors in her wake. Neville and Luna were with them, apparently having run for help. She watched in amazement as the stern, old witch swept Harry into a tight hug, and the shock kept mounting as she and Ron were pulled in as well.

"Thank goodness you are alright!" her Head of House exclaimed, releasing the utterly stunned versions of themselves. "When Albus told me...through his portrait of course...that he'd sent you out on a dangerous mission, I was so angry I could have killed him myself. I'm sorry I didn't get the chance to see you at Bill's house, but he insisted that you needed some time alone."

Almost as if on cue, Bill Weasley suddenly materialised next to them, coming up the staircase followed by what seemed to be most of the Order.

"Headmaster Black came to summon me," he said in response to the unspoken question written on everyone's faces. "He told me to gather the rest of the Order and bring them here, that an attack on the school was imminent."

"And Dumbledore came to me," Arthur Weasley confirmed, stepping into line beside his eldest son, "through his portrait in the Wizengamot quarters. He said the same thing. Kingsley was there too; he is coming as soon as he can get a team of Aurors together."

"We brought supplies," Fred informed, placing the large trunk he and George had been carrying down on the floor. "Our whole stock is practically in there, or anything we could think about that could be useful in a fight at least."

Everybody looked to Professor McGonagall, whose face had gone back to a graver version of her usually serious expression. She eyed the group of people filling the corridor, and Hermione did a quick count. Four teachers, the Head of each House, twenty-six members of the Order of the Phoenix and five students, plus an unconscious Draco Malfoy, who was still hanging suspended in mid-air behind them.

"Very well," McGonagall said, the small tremble in her voice pushed away almost immediately. She turned to her colleagues, who were flanking her on either side. "How many students are in residence?"

"Five in my House."

"Seven, not counting Mr Malfoy over there."

"Three, Miss Lovegood included."

"And four in Gryffindor, Mr Potter, Mr Weasley and Miss Granger not included," McGonagall said. "Horace and Pomona, would you please gather your students and bring them here? Miss Lovegood and Mr Longbottom, would you be so kind as to do the same for the people in your Houses? Those who are underage or who do not wish to stay will be transported by Portkey to safe locations, the rest may fight as they wish. God knows we could use the extra wands." Slughorn and Sprout nodded and left the corridor, Luna and Neville following closely behind.

"That makes nineteen students and five members of staff, if we can persuade Mr Filch to join us," McGonagall continued. "Filius, I will leave you in charge of strengthening the castle enchantments. Take as many people as you need. The rest of you, please come with me. If there's an attack, we need to know about it as quickly as possible and be strategically placed to meet it. Thank goodness the Carrows went home for the holidays. This will be complicated enough without them. Where is Snape?"

"I saw him just as I came up here," Flitwick said, ignoring the tension that settled over the group of people at the mention of their former colleague. "He left through the main doors."

"Good," McGonagall said. "That further simplifies things." Hermione did a double take, surprised by the dismissive tone of her former professor. McGonagall had been very close to Dumbledore. Was it possible that she *knew* what had actually happened? During their time together, Severus had never said anything to indicate that the other professors had been privy to Dumbledore's plans for his own death or to anything related to Severus's part in it all, but McGonagall's casual dismissal of his whereabouts made her wonder. She looked at Ron's father and thought she saw something cross his face as well, even as he kept his mouth firmly shut. *How much does the Order know?*

Her thoughts were interrupted as people murmured their agreement to McGonagall's orders and started to file out. She saw Bill and Charlie team up with Flitwick and Lupin and move away with Mr and Mrs Weasley, among others, towards the Great Hall. The three of them kept with the Transfiguration professor, who brought them back to her office, where Draco Malfoy was promptly tethered to a heavy armchair and gagged before they left.

"He's just a boy," McGonagall answered sternly as Ron voiced concerns that he might wake up and get loose. "And he did not kill Albus, even with a direct threat of death to his family hanging over his head. I won't hurt him unless absolutely forced to." Ron opened his mouth to protest, but one look from his Head of House had him close it again. Any further argument was cut short by Lupin, his voice ringing loud and magically enhanced through the castle.

"Death Eaters are attacking from the Forbidden Forest. Everyone to position and ready to fight!"

"*Sonorus!*" McGonagall aimed her wand at her throat and moved away in a swirl of black robes. Hermione felt her head begin to spin from the overload of impressions surrounding her; people were running everywhere, team leaders shouting orders and sparks flying as Hogwarts' defenders prepared themselves for battle. A sudden movement to her right jerked her out of her jumbled thoughts, and she saw Harry fall to the floor, collapsing like a rag doll unto the grey stone.

"Harry!"

She whipped her head around and fell to her knees next to Ron, who was holding down a screaming, twisting Harry as he threw his head from side to side. His hands were clasped against his scar, as though he was trying with all his might to stop the skull from splitting open.

"He's here!" he panted as he finally regained some semblance of self. "He's at Hogwarts! I could see the castle through his eyes." He quickly withdrew the Marauder's Map

from his pocket and tapped it with his wand, searching frantically. "He's not here," he muttered desperately, moving his hands over the map. "Why isn't he here?"

"Perhaps he's just outside the grounds," Ron suggested, moving in closely to examine the map himself. "In the forest or just outside the gates, or...look!" He pointed eagerly at a small dot moving quickly through a secret passage towards the very edge of the parchment. "It's Snape, and he's heading straight for..."

"...the Shrieking Shack!" Harry cut in, following the small dot with his finger as it disappeared out of sight. "Of course! I thought I recognised the room. You're brilliant, Ron!" Harry pressed a quick kiss on his lips, making Ron throw Hermione a shocked glance and blush slightly. She forced herself to ignore it, looking quickly around.

"Harry, put on the Invisibility Cloak," she instructed. "Ron, get the map to McGonagall as quickly as you can. She'll need it more than us."

"But..." Ron began, clearly taken aback.

"Not now, Ron!" she snapped. "We have to move! You-Know-Who is at the school, and we need to get to him before he has the time to send in all his troupes! We'll meet you by the front doors. Now go!"

Ron nodded briskly and tore away down the hall. Quickly, she cast a Disillusion Charm on Harry and herself, along with several Protection and Distraction Spells. Harry withdrew the shimmering cloak from another pocket of his robes and covered them both with it. It was much more difficult to move under it now that they were both fully grown, and once Ron joined them, they would have to move at nearly a crawl to avoid being seen. Ron was waiting for them, Disillusioned, as they arrived at the doors. Painstakingly slowly, they navigated through the grounds, away from the advancing attackers and towards the Whomping Willow. Behind them, they could hear shouts and screams mixed with explosions and cracking stone as the Death Eaters surged forwards. The Battle of Hogwarts had begun.

He moved through the grounds and into the tunnel in an efficient stride. He knew from experience that the Dark Lord did not enjoy to be kept waiting. On his way, he passed by at least a dozen Death Eaters in holding position at the edge of the Forbidden Forest, poised to strike. If the hairs on his neck standing on end were anything to go by, a number of Dementors were approaching as well. An attack was coming; he could practically feel it in the air. He wondered briefly what would happen to the school, to the intricate mass of polished stone that had been his home for as long as he cared to remember. Members of the Order should be arriving shortly, ready to protect the castle and its remaining inhabitants with all they had. Dumbledore would see to it, while the other Headmasters spread the alarm to other magical institutions. He mentally went through the other portraits' access points and ticked St Mungo's, Gringotts, Beauxbatons, Durmstrang and the Ministry off his inner list. He only hoped it would be enough.

The Dark Lord was in a treacherous mood as he entered...he could feel a mix of anger and arrogance coming off the other man in waves. The mark on his arm throbbed with a steady sense of discomfort, and he took care to empty his mind before he pushed open the last door. A quick report and then back to Hogwarts, keeping out of the madman's way as best as he could. He was suddenly immensely grateful that Nagini had been slain; there were enough factors to consider without having to keep a fresh supply of antivenin within reach at all times.

"Severus."

Voldemort was standing at the back wall, observing the main doors of the castle and most of the grounds through the clear display of an enchanted window.

"My Lord."

"The battle is about to begin," he said, moving the wand in his hand back and forth between the long skeletal fingers. "This time tomorrow, Harry Potter will be dead and Hogwarts will be officially mine."

"It's already yours, my Lord," he said softly, trying to divine what was coming. He had sent the message from his office, that special touch to the Mark that meant that Harry Potter's whereabouts were known. He had expected Voldemort to come charging to Hogwarts, not summon him and set up a base of operations outside the grounds. There was something unknown in the equation, and it worried him.

"Yes, of course," Voldemort conceded, still not turning to face him, "but after tonight it will be out in the open. Once Harry Potter is dead, I'm stepping out of the shadows. It's high time I claim what is rightfully mine."

He murmured something flattering in response, keeping his head respectfully bent towards the floor while following the other wizard's every movement from the corner of his eye. When Voldemort didn't continue, he braved a direct glance on the wall. Spells were flying now, and he could see the Dementors gliding across the grounds in a long, deadly line.

"They are blocking the entrances," Voldemort said, noticing where his eyes had wandered. "I've had them in position since early this evening, as soon as I felt the boy's mind shift in preparation for travel. The Floo network has been cut off as well. The only way into the grounds at this point is through this very room. Once the castle's defences fall, the boy will have to come to me."

Severus's mind was reeling. The Order would be Apparating directly into the castle as per the portraits' instructions. It was the fastest and most practical way of entry, and so he'd lifted the wards on the castle and grounds immediately after sending out the call for help. If all entrances had been blocked before he touched the Mark, however, and Voldemort now saw Order members appearing in the grounds...he would know. The only person capable of lifting the Anti-Apparition Wards that surrounded Hogwarts was the Headmaster, and once articulated, the accusation would be impossible to deflect. He felt fear hit him even as he struggled to bury it under layers of Occluded indifference. He needed to get back to the castle, and above all, he needed to distract his master sufficiently for him not to pick up on his treason until he could safely leave. He could not afford to be exposed now, not with so much left to do.

"So you can still see into the boy's mind?" he asked, a trickle of relief running through him as the Dark Lord finally turned away from the wall to face him.

"Certainly," he said, as though this was the easiest thing in the world. "When he's nervous or excited, the emotions are very clear. It's grown stronger lately. The boy is in love." He articulated the last sentence with amused disdain, arrogance dripping from every syllable. "I always find love extraordinarily amusing," he continued, "the way it turns worthy adversaries into begging heaps of useless desperation, pleading for the lives of people who couldn't save them even if they tried." Severus allowed himself to chuckle, mirroring the cold smile on his master's face.

"Indeed," he said, moving casually a bit to the left so that Voldemort had to turn his back almost completely to the enchanted wall to be able to face him. "So, what can I do for you, my Lord?" Before the words had fully passed his lips, Voldemort's hand twitched in a smooth come-hither motion, and he felt his wand tear from the relaxed grip in his hand. He bit his tongue around the protest that threatened to escape. *Calm down*, he told himself, looking into Voldemort's red eyes and schooling his face into one of curious indifference.

"I require your wand, Severus," the Dark Lord said, holding it up before him and dragging his gaze across the smooth wood. "The one I took from Dumbledore is not functioning as well as I had hoped." A new wave of fear gripped him before he pushed it back down. The Dark Lord had the Elder Wand, a mystical artefact reputed to pass only by blood from owner to owner. If Voldemort did not have the Mastery, who did he think did?

"Surely, this cannot be, my Lord," he said, stalling for time. On the wall behind them, figures were beginning to appear, emerging through the doors and on the battlements of the castle...far too many to be passed off as the staff and students in attendance during the holidays. "Dumbledore was not the wand's master, you told me so yourself. He did not kill Grindewald. You did."

"And still, the wand does not respond to me," Voldemort said. "There is a connection, I feel it clearly, but the wand is distant, as though it's waiting for something."

"For what, my Lord?" he forced himself to ask, dreading the answer.

"The wand responds to death," Voldemort said softly. "It also responds to power. Now tell me, my faithful servant, which singular act is the ultimate demonstration of power in our world."

To kill a wizard with his own wand, he thought, even as his jaws clenched tightly together. Voldemort's eyes were on him, studying his reaction with a malevolent smile on his face.

"You have always understood my needs well, Severus," he said softly. "And you have been a most useful servant for it. I value what you have brought me over the years, but as things are now, at the cusp of my final victory, I believe your usefulness has run its course." He took a step forwards, twirling the wand in his pale hands. "Now, Severus Snape," he said, pointing the wand straight at his heart, "will you die bravely, facing your master, or will you attempt to run? I must admit, it would greatly disappoint me if you ran. Dignity has always been a trait I have much valued in you, and I would prefer to end your life on that note."

He swallowed, forcing his body to remain calm as he kept his gaze steady. It was too late. Too late for daring plans or desperate dashes to freedom. He was wandless, caught in a small room with the most powerful Dark Wizard alive. There was no chance for him to talk his way out of this. Voldemort had summoned him to end his life, and all he could do now was to face death bravely and hope that he had done enough. A smile spread across his face as he saw Death Eater after Death Eater fall to the ground on the magical exposition on the wall. Hogwarts was pushing back, and it looked as though they might be winning. As though he had just read his mind, Voldemort turned his head, taking in the scene through the enchanted window. For a few seconds, the expression on his face was one of near-complete shock, then his eyes slowly narrowed, and the gleaming red inside them began to burn.

"Traitor!" he hissed, bringing the wand down in a slashing motion. He felt himself fall to the floor, jerking from the force of an imaginary knife cutting through his body. Blood sprayed across his robes, across the wooden floor and across the walls of the small room as the Dark Lord towered over him in fury. The smile on his face grew wider even as Voldemort broke past the barriers of his mind and found piece after piece of evidence of half a lifetime's worth of betrayal. He pushed these memories to the front, willing him to see the plotting and the deception...his unwavering loyalty to a man he didn't trust and a boy he didn't even like. Laughter worked its way out of his body even as pain slashed across his skin in motions of liquid fire, and he offered up memories of misinformation and secrets, crowned by a flash of Bellatrix's unconscious body inside the magical trunk and the theft of the golden cup from Gringotts.

With a cry of outrage and one last jabbing motion, Voldemort brought his wand down and cut his throat.

He felt blackness creep in on his vision as the Dark Lord threw his wand to the floor and swept past him in a blurry mass of dark material.

"I believe you might be my greatest disappointment, Severus Snape," he said. "But no matter. When the night is over, Hogwarts will be mine, and the boy you will have died to protect will have joined you on the other side."

He swept from the room, the sound of his footsteps echoing hollowly against the wooden floorboards before fading altogether. In the split moment between complete silence and swirling blackness, he thought he saw movement out of the corner of his eye, as though someone was emerging out of thin air. *Too late*, he thought, feeling oblivion grab hold of him even as warm hands reached for his damaged skin. *Too late*.

And then there was nothing.

A/N: Yes, massive cliffie. Three more chapters to go. Reviews will get them posted more quickly *hint, hint.* Until then, I'm keeping the next chapter hostage. Muhahahah! :-)

The Prince's Tale

Chapter 12 of 14

All is revealed at last.

A/N: A Big thanks to Lariope, my wonderful beta, and to all of you who reviewed the last chapter. If I'd known that blackmail worked so well on you guys, I would have used it sooner. :-D Anyway, here's chapter 12. Enjoy!

Chapter 12 The Prince's Tale

The second Voldemort's footsteps could no longer be heard, Hermione burst from their hiding place and fell to her knees at Snape's side, pressing her fingers to the wound on his neck. Ron watched in shock as she started to tear their former professor's robes apart with her free hand, rummaging through the pockets on the inside.

"Oh, God, oh, God, oh, God..."

Her hand was everywhere, moving over Snape's body in quick, jerky movements. A small phial was found but crashed to the floor a second later as it slipped from between her trembling fingers. She swore loudly, and the sound of that one word scared him more than the rest of the scene, pool of blood included. He'd never heard Hermione swear before.

"Wand. Wand. Where the *fuck* is my wand!"

Tears were running down her face while the blood, thick and red, kept pulsating from beneath her fingers. He stood by and watched, paralysed, as she found another phial, managed to get the cork out and poured the liquid on Snape's neck and chest.

The man screamed. He had never heard a man scream like that before. Smoke rose from where the potion had touched, filling the air with a sickly sweet smell of burning flesh. Hermione worked faster, less frantic now, the reaction helping her to find some sort of mental coherence. Her wand was out of her robes, moving in intricate patterns over the mangled skin, trying to get the wounds to knit together. Suddenly, he felt movement beside him and realised that Harry had drawn his wand and was pulling out from under the invisibility cloak. Shaking off the numbing shock, he followed, joining his wand to his friends' as they worked the wounds on Snape's body. Slowly, gradually, the bleeding lessened and then trickled to a stop. He was just about to draw a sigh of relief when a gurgling sound penetrated his mind, raspy and weak, as though spoken by someone who was already dead.

"Potter."

Harry looked over in disbelief, even as Hermione broke down in wracking sobs against Snape's shoulder. He saw a small stirring in the hand that angled out behind her, as though his former professor wanted to lift it up to comfort her but was lacking the strength to do so. He watched Harry's eyes move from Snape to Hermione and widen in disbelief. He followed the gaze, and understanding came crashing down.

"It was you," Harry stated, voice laced with a curious mix of disbelief and wonder. "All this time when I felt that there was someone helping us...it was you?"

"Yes."

"But...*how*?" Harry spluttered. "You're...I saw you! You..."

"No time," Snape interrupted, a horrible, wheezing sound tearing through the air as he tried to breathe. "The Pensieve will tell you everything. You have to go." He turned his head slightly, breaking eye contact with Harry and finding Hermione's tear-stained face. "I'm out of time."

"No!" she protested, hands wandering over his robes again, looking for something else, something that would help her. His hand moved with obvious difficulty, capturing hers on top of his chest and stilling her movements.

"Yes, Hermione," he said, forcing the words out. "This is where my part in the performance ends." She shook her head vehemently, new tears pooling in her eyes. The hand on his chest moved, lifting the heavy, immobile weight of his arm to press the palm against the wet skin of her cheek. Something indefinable changed in his eyes, and he visibly swallowed.

"You're wasting your tears," he rasped thickly, "though I appreciate the gesture." The last word came out in a cough that sent tiny speckles of blood spraying across his robes and the lower part of Hermione's face. Her eyes widened in horror, and she immediately brought the cuff of her robe up to wipe it away from his mouth and chin, as though trying to convince herself it hadn't happened. "You did admirably," he whispered, each word sending a new trickle of blood from the corner of his mouth. "Now, leave me. I will see you again as the curtain falls."

The hand dropped, and Hermione moved with it, lowering her head to place a trembling kiss on Snape's lips, urging him to respond even as sobs began to wrack her body. So this had been her secret. Even as he saw it with his own eyes, he couldn't quite believe it. His body had gone back to being frozen in time, and he watched the scene unravel as though watching it through somebody else's eyes. Snape's head fell back against the floor, eyes closed and face pale with blood loss. Hermione cried harder, curling herself into an impossible position around the broken, bloody body, refusing to let go. He saw Harry try to lift her, trying to pry away her hands, but she only screamed and held on tighter. He felt himself move forward, touching her shoulder gently.

"Hermione, let go," he said, trying to pull her towards him. "He's dead. There's nothing more you can do." She shook her head fervently, pressing her face deeper into the black fabric. "Come," he tried again. "He's not breathing, and there's no spell to make someone breathe again once they've stopped." He took Harry's hand, pulling him with him to a standing position. "We need to see the Pensieve," he said, suddenly remembering their instructions from the dead man on the floor. "Hermione..."

"Breathe," she said suddenly, jerking into a sitting position and looking up at him with frantic eyes. "I can make him breathe!"

"No, you can't..." he started, but firmly closed his mouth again as she lunged back into action, pressing her lips firmly to Snape's where he lay on the splintered floor. To his amazement, he watched how the man's chest began to rise and fall, filling with air as Hermione pushed it into his lungs.

"CPR," Harry murmured in his ear. "It's a Muggle thing. I don't think it will help, though. He's lost too much blood." He repeated the last sentence to Hermione, who stubbornly refused to listen.

"I'm not giving up, Harry," she said, her voice hitching on the last word. "He's helped you more than you'll ever know, and I'm not abandoning him while there's still hope." She moved two fingers to Snape's neck, pressing against the skin in search of a pulse. "Go with Ron," she said, her tone telling both of them that her decision was final. "Find out what's in the Pensieve. I will see you later." Her voice suddenly died in her throat and her movements faltered. She looked up at Harry...at both of them...with a curious look in her eyes, as though she had suddenly realised something and was trying very hard to keep more tears from falling. "I will see you both again," she stated firmly. "Stay safe."

"You too," Harry said, his voice suspiciously thick with emotion. He felt Harry's fingers thread between his, his body pulling him away from the scene. Moving under the cover of the invisibility cloak, he rounded the corner into the secret passage, leaving Hermione slumped on the blood-soaked, wooden floor. The image of her came with him, however, and he felt it burn more solidly into his mind's eye with every step. He was an utter berk, no...more than that; he didn't think there was a word disgusting enough for someone who left their friend alone in a pool of blood, refusing to help, as they just had. The feeling intensified as they made their way across the grounds towards the castle. Voldemort had launched a second attack, and from the looks of it, it was more damaging than the first. He could see McGonagall fighting a pack of Dementors by the front doors, while Flitwick was wrapping long, fiery ropes around the base of the North wall, fending off Inferis. Bodies were lying on the ground, strewn across the grass like fallen stars. He collided with Harry's back as his friend suddenly stopped and heard a strangled cry break from his lips that he did his best to block, hand pressed tightly over his mouth.

Remus Lupin was lying dead in the grass by the front doors, wand broken beside him, sliced nearly to ribbons by long, sharp claws. Greyback had finished the job.

He didn't notice much after that, following Harry through a daze of emotion as they walked through hallways and up the stairs. Dumbledore's office was empty, the portraits of former Headmasters and Headmistresses black and vacant in their frames. To one side, over by a small alcove, stood an ancient, stone basin, emanating a strange, silver-blue light. He looked at Harry, who nodded, taking off the invisibility cloak and draping it gently over a nearby chair. Together, they approached the Pensieve and raised their intertwined hands to touch the shimmering swirl.

Scenes flew by as he fell through the memories, Ron's hand firmly clasped in his. He saw his mother as a child, sitting in a tree house with a young Snape, talking about magic. He followed them to Hogwarts, seeing their first ride on the school train and the first meeting with his father and his friends. He observed as Snape grew up, watched him struggle with animosity and disappointment as his only friend began to slip away, at the same time that he realised with a sinking sensation that he was falling in love with her. He watched the humiliation visited upon him by the Marauders, including the episode which almost led to his death. He watched as Lucius Malfoy stepped in, turning his head with tales of greatness and power, and met Voldemort, experiencing the raw magic that seemed to emanate from the Dark Wizard's very skin. Magic that could be his, Voldemort promised, drawing him forever out from under the crushing weight of all things ordinary, of all things despised and ridiculed. When he realised the true price for his allegiance...as the Dark Lord connected the dots between the stolen prophecy and the girl he loved...it was already too late. She died, despite Dumbledore's promise to protect her, and he felt something wither away inside. He would never again fully trust the old wizard, but gave his oath to protect Harry Potter, nonetheless.

Snape's memories of the following years mixed with Dumbledore's, and he watched himself grow from a boy to a young man through their eyes. He watched Order meetings and private discussions, following the plans progress on how the war could be won. He watched victories and defeats, a wave of shame hitting him as he learned the story behind Dumbledore's black hand and the promise he had forced from Snape because of it. He had been wrong, once again. When it came to Severus Snape, it seemed he was doomed to always be completely and utterly wrong.

A string of planning followed, teaching him more about the Horcruxes and outlining the final plan. When it was all revealed, however, his mind faltered, understanding escaping him. Dumbledore had set him up to *die*? Nausea warred with blinding anger as he watched the scene unravel, as he watched Snape's face mirror the shock he felt inside.

"*So the boy... the boy must die?*" He heard Snape say, disbelief mixing with fear in his voice.

"*And Voldemort himself must do it, Severus. That is essential.*"

Anger, such as he had rarely felt, welled up inside him. Anger for himself, who had been led to believe that things were about ~~choice~~ and that he could make a difference. Anger for the lack of trust, for the missed opportunities he might have taken, had he known sooner. This anger was dwarfed by what he felt for the people around him, however...the people who had laid down their lives for him...so that he could live and succeed against Voldemort. Laid down their lives because they *believed* in Dumbledore and trusted his plans. And all for nothing. All to bring Tom Riddle just one step closer to mortality so that some other person could be set up to finish the job. He pressed Ron's hand so tightly, he feared he might crack a bone or two. How long? How long before it would all end and the Wizarding World could breathe freely again. Dumbledore had groomed him for close to eighteen years. How long before someone else was ready to take his place?

His eyes met Ron's, and suddenly, he knew. Ron would do it, Ron or Hermione. If he died, one of them would see the plan through. This was why Dumbledore had encouraged him to keep his friends, to confide in them and keep them close. So that there would be a back-up. He felt bile rise in his throat, despite the fact that he was now only part of a memory and technically didn't have a throat. He had felt bad when leading them into danger. Now, he was leading them to their deaths. Ron's arms came around him as the memory version of himself doubled over, fighting for air he didn't need. He kept still in Ron's arms for a long time, waiting for his anger to ebb and new strength to come. There had to be more, some twist in the plan that would make it all come together and redeem the man he'd looked up to for all of his magical life.

There has to be more.

He flew through the remaining memories, looking, searching for clues. He saw Snape, working tirelessly to help them, watched the conversations he had with Hermione through Phineas Nigellus' portrait as he looked for solutions. He watched him aim his wand at a golden cup in a glittering Gringotts vault, removing the curses that surrounded it and leaving it free for Bellatrix to take. Bellatrix, who suddenly looked quite sane and smiled exactly like Hermione. He watched him stand in the very office he and Ron had just left, issuing orders to the portraits on the walls. They would raise the alarm when the call came and Hogwarts needed assistance, he told them. The Ministry might have fallen, but there were still people in it that were ready to fight; their task was to make sure to find them in time.

Finally, he saw Snape sitting in a chair in what must be his own quarters. Dumbledore was in a chair opposite, watching him with a worried expression on his face as the dark man stared into space. Harry had never seen Snape look like that...so utterly... defeated.

"What was the point, Albus," Snape said, looking up at Dumbledore with suspiciously shiny eyes. *"What was the point of protecting him all these years just to send him to his death?"*

Dumbledore rose from his chair and moved over to the fire, fiddling with something in his pocket and not meeting his servant's eyes.

"Love is a peculiar thing, Severus," he said at last. *"And sacrifice based on love even more so. You've seen for yourself the magnitude of Lily's sacrifice for her son, protecting him from death and injury, even now, many years later. Imagine then the force of Harry, giving his life in sacrifice, in accordance with a true prophecy...not for a specific person, but for our world. Through one choice, he will change the world and save it from Tom's aggressions. It will be new, and it will be protected, and as much as it pains me to send him down that path, I can't see any other way."*

Snape nodded in resignation, and Harry felt himself rise, leaving the Pensieve with Ron's hand still firmly clasped in his. Anger seemed to fall from him as he rose, peeling away like an old skin. Words from Trelawney's prophecy came back to him, bouncing against the words he'd just heard from Dumbledore's mouth. Love. It always came back to love. Knowing now what he had to do, what his destiny was truly about, he took a great gulp of air and broke the surface.

"No," Ron said as soon as they touched back on the office floor. "No! I'm not letting you go out there and kill yourself."

"Ron," he tried, still fighting to process what he'd just seen. *He was the last Horcrux.* He was the only one who could kill Voldemort...the Chosen One...because he ~~was~~ Voldemort. It still didn't seem possible.

"No!" Ron shouted, grabbing him by both arms and shaking him roughly. "We'll find another way, we'll..."

"There is no other way!" he interrupted, feeling panic rise within him, even as he struggled to keep his calm. He had prepared for this, dammit! *For two fucking years* he had mentally prepared for the fact that he might have to die in the end. He'd been calm, together, *resigned*. Now, with Ron in front of him, at the moment of truth, all he could feel was icy panic clogging his veins and freezing him from the inside. *I can't die now. I can't. I'm not ready. I can't...*

He wasn't aware that the words were tumbling from his lips until Ron cut him off, muffling his voice with a kiss so fierce it was nearly bruising. He fought back, pressing his arguments unspoken into Ron's mouth, wrestling his protests in a furious battle of lips and tongues. Ron's hands were in his hair, fingernails dragging against his scalp, clawing to get in, clawing to get through to him. He felt his resolve falter, even as the sense of fatality set in, peeling away layer after layer of personal choice. He was spiralling downwards, toward the utter certainty that there was no other way. It was him or the world, and he had to choose the world. He was the Chosen One. His decision had been made before he was even born.

He fought with all he had, but Ron refused to give up, filling him with passion and life, of love so strong it made him dizzy. *This is the last time*, he realised suddenly, and the thought burned through him like molten lava. The last time. It didn't seem possible. They had only just begun. Five weeks of loving Ron...five weeks when he'd actively known it...wasn't enough to fill his heart, only just enough to make sure he knew that he wanted more...that he wanted bloody forever. Ron bit into his shoulder, and he cried out, relishing the pain as it spread from the mark. The pain kept him grounded; he was here, in this office, with Ron, loving Ron. Moving against him, he fisted the material of his robes in his hands and pulled hard, nearly ripping the fabric. Ron was only seconds behind, and when they tumbled to the floor in a tangle of naked limbs, it struck him how familiar it all was. The circle closed slowly in on him as he poured everything he was into his boyfriend, fighting to get closer, to tell him, to make sure he knew exactly what it had all meant to him. Words had been unnecessary then, and they stayed unnecessary now, as their bodies ruled the laws of communication. The stone was cold against his back and unmerciful on his knees, but none of it mattered as Ron caught him around the back with his legs and held him down as he penetrated the last armour. The battle grew more violent, transforming into a cyclone of movement, bodies sliding and grinding together as fingernails raked long, red lashes across Harry's back. They fell into sync, moving together with the same breath and the same heartbeat, melting into one struggling, writhing unit of limbs. When the end came, he screamed, and his voice was Ron's voice, and Ron was crying out with him, trembling against his skin as wave after wave of release wracked his body. Panting, he opened his eyes, locking his gaze with the clear blue eyes beneath him, and suddenly, they both knew.

They were one...and he had to leave.

He collapsed in Ron's arms, letting grief take over, kissing him as much as he could while his body convulsed in wracking sobs. Ron held him tightly, mirroring his reactions, tasting their tears as they flowed freely down their faces. Outside the castle, the battle was raging...they could hear the sounds of crashing objects and screaming people filter in through the window panes. Time was running out.

Breaking off a last, lingering kiss, they removed themselves from the floor and dressed quickly. Harry picked up his wand from where it had rolled into a corner and moved towards the door.

"I'm coming with you." Ron's voice was quite steady as he grabbed his arm, holding him back.

"No," he said, a memory of green light and Cedric Diggory's body slumping to the ground flashing before his eyes. "No," he repeated, "I have to do this alone." The punch that hit him across the face took him completely by surprise and made him stagger to regain his balance.

"Fuck you, Harry!" Ron yelled, shaking out his hand as Harry looked up at him with watering eyes. His bottom lip seemed to have split; he could taste the coppery tang of blood in his mouth. "You can't go alone. You're *not* alone in this!"

He brought his fingers up to dab against his lip, measuring how badly he was bleeding. "I'm sorry, Ron," he said softly, meeting angry blue eyes. "But for this, I have to be."

Ron seemed to deflate at his words, all anger leaving him in a rush of air and fall of his shoulders. "What about me, then?" he asked, defeat warring with bitterness in his voice. "What about me, eh? What the *bleeding hell* am I supposed to do? *Move on*? Marry Hermione? What?"

"Ron..."

"No," Ron said firmly, making him bite back the words on the tip of his tongue. The redhead stepped close, moving both hands to his face and caressing him softly. "If you die, all bets are off. I will fight to the end, and I will bring down as many Death Eaters as I can, You-Know-Who if I can manage it, but then..." He trailed off, moving a thumb gently over the split lip, whispering words to make the skin knit back together. "Wizards live a long time, Harry," he whispered. "Far too long to keep sane when missing you...needing you...every single day. Perhaps there is something else, something mystical that will save you, but if there's not, and Dumbledore is right, then ..." He leaned in and kissed him tenderly, making Harry's heart beat rapidly in his chest. *So this is it*, he thought. *This is where it ends*.

"I'll see you soon," Ron promised, pressing a last kiss on his swollen lips. "Either way, I'll be seeing you soon." He opened the door and walked out, not looking back. Numbly, Harry pulled the invisibility cloak from the chair and disappeared from view. It was time to face Voldemort.

A/N: Please review!

King's Cross

Chapter 13 of 14

Final confrontations.

A/N: Thanks to Lariope, as always.

Chapter 13 King's Cross

He walked across stone and then grass, making his way towards the Forbidden Forest. Chaos was thick around him, spells of every colour colliding and crashing, showering the grounds in sparks. It was almost beautiful. People he didn't know, or barely recognised, were fighting in his wake. Lots of people; Hogwarts' call had been heard. He noted several people in the uniform of the Department of Magical Law Enforcement, Kingsley among them. He passed in silence, just as the dark wizard pulled up a silver shield in front of him to deflect a nasty-looking curse of dark purple. He saw Hermione, duelling Bellatrix Lestrange, watching her get the upper hand and then falter, hesitating a moment too long. The jet of red connected with her midsection, and she collapsed in the grass, twitching slightly before becoming very still. Bellatrix's maniacal laugh rang in the air for only seconds before she glowed green and fell, a smile still on her lips. Out of the corner of his eye, he saw Snape...which was impossible because Snape was dead...fall to his knees, wrapping Hermione's body in pure golden mist that was emanating from the tip of his wand.

He walked on. A herd of Centaurs galloped passed at the very edge of the forest, bows held high in preparation for battle. From the lake, he could hear screaming...sounds of terror in the face of death as the Giant Squid lifted his prey and pulled them with him into the depths of the Black Lake. He wondered where Ron was, if he was safe or fighting for his life somewhere in the darkness. He let his heart swell and light surge through his body with the memory of him, and felt the pain lessen. It would be alright.

The temperature suddenly dropped, and the familiar sensation of paralysis started to grip him. Looking ahead, he saw an entire swarm of Dementors, gliding slowly towards him through the trees. He reached into his pocket for his wand, but felt something else touch his fingers. The Golden Snitch came into view, gleaming softly in the moonlight.

I open at the close.

The last piece fell into place and it all came together. With a trembling hand, he raised the small sphere to his lips and whispered, *"I'm about to die."* The metal was smooth and soothing against his bruised lips. He withdrew and watched as the shell peeled away, leaving a small, black stone in the palm of his hand. Without reflecting, just somehow knowing what must happen next, he closed his hand around it and turned, back and forth. Shadows rose from nearby trees and bushes, forming into lost loved ones, who came to stand before him proudly, like living shadows of their former selves. His mum was there, and his dad, and behind them came Sirius and Lupin, strolling down the path hand in hand. They approached him as well they could, letting him feel their love and their presence while staying short of actual touch.

"Don't be afraid, Harry," his mother whispered in his ear. "We're right behind you, and we'll stay with you through the end."

"Thank you," he whispered back, feeling his heart settle down a little. He wasn't alone. He turned to Sirius, who smiled at him, cracking little jokes and assuring him that death wasn't all that bad really. The younger...and certainly much more handsome...version of the man he'd known wrapped his arm around Lupin's waist as he said it, and Harry could have sworn that his godfather actually gave him a small wink. Bewildered, he turned to Lupin, who managed to look slightly embarrassed and blush faintly despite his incorporeal form.

"Remus, I'm sorry," Harry began. "I never wanted you to die. Just when you'd had your son and everything."

"Yes, I was sorry to leave Teddy," the other man replied, a glint of sadness in his eyes. "But, you know, time passes differently here. You're not bound to travel along the line in just one direction and at one speed. Here, on the other side, you can float through it, going backwards and forwards as you like. I wish I could have held my son again, but I'll be able to watch him, to follow his life, and if I miss him too much, I'll simply go forward in time to the day when he'll join me here. As for the rest..." He took Sirius' hand and placed it firmly against his chest, directly over his heart. "It was probably for the best that I left. Better for Dora. My heart was already long gone when she tried to claim it, you see."

Harry nodded in understanding, even as something sharp sliced through his gut. Was this how it would be for them? The next time he saw Ron, would he be a father? Would he marry and bring a wife and children into the house he'd pictured for the two of them? Or would he do as he'd claimed, and join him here on the other side, where they could have forever...even if it was a different kind of forever than they would have had alive? Raising his hand to his mouth, he touched his lower lip briefly, feeling the small scar that was forming there. It was real, had been real, and as he watched Sirius run the back of his fingers softly along Remus's cheek, he knew. They would meet again, would find each other again, and there would still be love.

Finding the calm he had been looking for, he drew a deep breath and turned towards his path. His four companions flanked him on either side, acting as life-size Patroni as he walked through the corridor of Dementors and into the waiting darkness.

He woke up to glittering light. Dumbledore was beside him, smiling so exuberantly Harry wasn't sure if the light was coming from above or straight from the old wizard.

"Harry," he said simply, reaching out a hand to help him get to his feet, pulling him into a tight embrace. He whispered things in his ear as he held him, words of pride and joy, praising his courage and general character. He relaxed against the older man, feeling calm and happiness trickling into him, becoming part of the blinding light that surrounded them.

"Am I dead?" He asked at last, as Dumbledore loosened his grip. The older wizard smiled.

"Not entirely, I would say," he stated cryptically. "This is a world in between here and there. An ante chamber of sorts. Whether you move forward or turn back is up to you."

Harry pulled back, noting as he did so that the space he was in greatly resembled the magical platform at King's Cross, only... shinier.

"But Voldemort killed me," he protested. "He hit me with the Avada Kedavra, and I didn't fight back. How then..."

"Ah," Dumbledore said softly, cutting him off. "I believe there are two very good reasons for that. The first is your blood, Harry. Tom used it when he rebuilt himself, creating a bond between him and you as surely as he did the night he accidentally gave you part of his soul. The blood in him keeps you tethered to the living plane. Alone, it would not have been enough, I admit, but there was a second factor in place tonight. You see, Harry, Voldemort tried to kill you with my wand."

"Your wand?" he asked, bewildered. "Why would Voldemort have your wand?"

"Because he broke into my tomb and stole it," Dumbledore said simply. "Of course, it's not exactly *my* wand, I only got to borrow it for a few decades."

"So then whose wand is it?" Harry asked, still not sure how this tied in with his not being entirely dead...if there truly was such a thing.

"It belongs to Death," Dumbledore said. "I believe you've read *The Tale of the Three Brothers* that was in the book that I gave Miss Granger. The wand received by the oldest brother, the Elder Wand, or Deathstick as it has been called, was carried by me for little more than half a century."

He paused, and Harry nodded, waiting for him to carry on.

"The Elder Wand is unique," Dumbledore continued. "It doesn't choose its wizard or witch, as other wands do. It belongs to its master, and to that master only, and it always longs to go back to him. This is what makes the wand so special, Harry," the old wizard explained softly. "The Elder Wand only gives temporary allegiance, and only to those who carry a part of its master within themselves."

"I thought it passed over by killing the previous owner," Harry said, brow furrowing. "At least that's what the book said."

"Yes," Dumbledore agreed, "that is a common misinterpretation. No, like all wands, the Elder Wand works in harmony with a chosen soul, magnifying its power by vibrating alongside it in perfect symmetry, helping it to channel the magic around us."

"Death has a soul?" Harry blurted, having been unable to get past that particular notion to hear the rest of Dumbledore's speech.

"Yes," the other wizard said, smiling. "Everything has a soul, we just call it by different names. Take love for example. Does love have a soul, or is love what makes up your soul? Are you created from it or it from you? Philosophers much wiser than I have pondered these questions for millennia, always reaching the same answers, and always reaching different ones."

"So what does it mean?" Harry asked. His head was starting to spin.

"It means, dear boy, that Death holds a certain note, or a certain melody I should say, in the great symphony of magic that makes up our world...and his wand is attuned to that melody. The Elder Wand only works together with wizards and witches whose souls have connected with Death, and who have overcome him. Once you meet Death, you see, Harry, you always carry a part of him with you, regardless of whether you brushed passed him in a narrow escape or met him face to face as you brought him a new flower for his gardens. For me, it meant meeting him to escape, creating the very elixir that could keep him at bay forever. For you, and more importantly, for Tom, it's directly connected to the state of your souls."

He broke off and gestured over to a bench at the far end of the station, under which a scaly, flayed-looking creature was writhing in agony. Thankfully, it didn't make any noise...Harry didn't think he could have stood to hear what it had sounded like, had it been capable of screaming. The scales seemed to cut through the damaged skin, going both into and out of the creature at once, as though the scales were somehow eating away at the flesh. He felt a wave of pity well through him at the sight and took a subconscious step forward.

"Don't, Harry," Dumbledore said, taking firm hold of his arm. "There's nothing you can do to help him."

"You mean *that's*..."

"Yes. That is the remaining part of Tom Riddle's soul, what he has reduced himself to in his quest for immortality. This is why the subject of Horcruxes is considered such an abomination. Killing people is bad enough, of course, but death is a natural part of life and can never create anything truly terrible in the long run. Chipping off your soul, on the other hand, severs your connection to life and death, to love and to the universe. It makes you... into nothing."

"And the Elder Wand?"

"The Elder Wand is meant to be with an entity that is all soul, for lack of a better term. Voldemort has nearly nothing of his left, and so when the wand came upon you, Harry, upon a being that was in possession of one whole soul...imbued with the essence of its master through the many times you have directly escaped death and through every piece of Voldemort's soul you have effectively killed...and one small fragment of the wizard who currently wielded it, it chose you. It chose you, and killed the small fragment of Tom in your mind, and since the curse was connected to Tom, and you are connected to Tom, the force of it pulled both of you into this place."

He broke off again, eyeing Harry seriously over the rim of his half-moon spectacles.

"You have another choice to make, Harry," he said softly. "If you choose to move on, Voldemort will have to follow, and you both will be dead on the mortal plane. If you choose to go back, however, he will come back too, but as a mortal man this time, possible to kill just like any other. You have been brave beyond belief, and you have made the ultimate sacrifice. I could never ask anything more of you than what you have already done. The choice is yours."

Harry swallowed, weighing the options in his mind. It didn't matter how many angles he looked at the problem from, though; his mind always came back to one thing, to one simple question. He cleared his throat.

"Could you tell me... I mean...is Ron...I mean, are Ron and Hermione...?" Dumbledore smiled, as though he knew exactly what he was asking.

"Both Mr Weasley and Miss Granger are still among the living," he confirmed. "Love is a gift, Harry," he said, "and a gift to be proud of. I will escort you back."

Looking up into the twinkling, blue eyes one last time, Harry took the white-robed arm he was offered and closed his eyes as the world began to spin.

He floated back into himself, back into his body that was lying face down in the soft dirt. Voldemort made quite a show before he took him back to the castle, quite clearly disturbed by the effect his last spell had had on himself. He couldn't open his eyes to watch the scene as it developed around him, but from the excited voices surrounding

him, he gathered that the Dark Lord had slipped away for a moment, fallen to the ground and stopped breathing.

He was deposited on the ground and forced to keep himself still through a long, extravagant speech of purity of blood and how the opposition had fought valiantly, but since Harry was now dead, they had no further reason to fight. He was just contemplating how best to reach the wand in the pocket of his robes and attack, when a voice sounded through the others, causing his blood to simultaneously freeze and sing in his veins.

"No!"

The next second, Ron's hands were on him, burning through his skin as fingers grazed his face and wound themselves caressingly into his tangled, dark hair. Lying perfectly still at that moment was the hardest thing he had ever done, including walking to what he was sure would be his own death. He needed to tell Ron that he was alright, needed to stop the cries that seemed to tear from Ron's throat to pierce his heart like sharp-edged knives. And then Ron was gone, torn from him by a blast from Voldemort's wand, thrown into a heap in the grass a few feet away from him, like a ragdoll someone had tired of playing with.

"Love." Voldemort spit the word out, making it sound like something utterly despicable. "This is what love will get you! A boy, a young man...a pureblood of infinite potential...crawling in the dirt, like so much filth, grieving for the life of his traitorous lover!"

Harry forced himself to remain still, even though every instinct in his body told him to act, to fly off the ground and take on Voldemort with his bare hands, ripping him to pieces for the pain he was causing.

"Well, young Weasley," Voldemort continued, a softer, more deadly quality to his voice now. "There is still a chance for you to live, should you choose to accept it. I can fill you with power...your blood is worthy after all...with power beyond your wildest dreams, more than enough to make you forget this degrading *infatuation* with your fallen hero. Join me, and I will take away all the pain, as though your young lover never existed. Now, what do you say."

"Never!"

"Too bad then," Voldemort hissed. "Well, you will still serve a purpose as the wizard who showed the world what happens to people who defy me." Something came swooshing through the air, and Harry chanced opening the eye closest to the ground a tiny fraction, needing desperately to see what was going on around him. The Sorting Hat was flying through the air, landing neatly on Ron's head, where it sat for a couple of long, excruciating seconds and then burst into flame.

Every muscle in Harry's body tensed up, preparing for battle. If he was quick enough, he could push the hat from Ron's head and still get a decent shot at Voldemort. Opening his eyes fully, he scanned his surroundings, preparing to pounce, when suddenly, everything changed.

The flames that should have rendered Ron into a screaming, twisting mass of limbs seemed to only lick the outside of his body, as though prevented from touching him by a skin-tight shield. Then the hat fell to the ground, and a gleaming sword was in Ron's hand...the sword that hadn't made it out at their fiery escape from the Room of Requirement. Voldemort was still taunting his opponents as Ron attacked, coming at him at a furious speed and slicing the reptilian head clean off the skeletal body. Shock spread through both sides of the front as the head fell to the ground, rolling a few yards and then lying still. The body collapsed where it stood, spilling warm blood over soft earth. The world was frozen, wizards and witches staring at the fallen body, as though expecting it to melt, or knit together, or turn into smoke or something else worthy of a Dark Lord's demise. Recovering from his own astonishment, Harry leapt to his feet, pulling Ron away from the fallen body and firing Stunners as quickly as he could at the remaining people on Voldemort's side.

Chaos broke out and screams filled the air...screams of fear, and triumph and outrage. The following battle was brief but deadly; when the smoke settled, more than fifty bodies littered the ground. Fortunately, Kingsley and his men had been quick on the uptake, and less than ten of the dead bodies were casualties for their side. He watched as the Aurors rounded up the last remaining Death Eaters and then turned to Ron. Ron, who was still staring at him as though he'd just sprouted an extra head. He was looking quite dishevelled where he stood, dirt in his hair and on his clothes, splatters of blood on his face and most of his torso from the force of the blow that had severed Voldemort's head. The Sword of Gryffindor was still in his hand, tainted with red, just like the rest of him. Looking more closely, he also noted a long tear in the black robes, showing off a long, partially healed wound that spread across his left shoulder.

"You're hurt!"

"Greyback cornered me. Bill killed him."

"Oh."

"Yeah."

He found himself at loss for words. Around them, people were moving quickly, efficiently, Mediowizards popping in and out, collecting the injured and marking the dead. The grim feeling that seemed to spread through the grounds like a thick fog confused him; whenever he had allowed himself to imagine this moment, with Voldemort finally gone, he had imagined something happier than this. Victory cheers. Joy. Love and kisses all around. He hadn't imagined this. He hadn't thought he would be standing in the middle of a battlefield, surrounded by missed opportunities and arrested potential, moulded into flesh by each and every fallen body. He had imagined that the sun would come out, bathing them in glorious light...not continued darkness, with almost a hint of rain in the air. The weight of his destiny was supposed to lift now that he had fulfilled it, not come crashing down with thoughts of 'what now?' For a moment, he faltered, his mind suddenly blank. He looked at Ron, who seemed to mirror some of the same confusion. His whole life had been about fighting, about beating Voldemort. What was his place in the world now, if he even had one?

"I can't believe you're alive," Ron whispered, wonder in his voice. "When I walked away, I was so sure... It was like everything inside ~~me~~^{new} I would never see you again."

Ron's hand was on his face, feeling the life of his skin with his fingers, as though he couldn't quite trust that he was actually real. He raised a hand and put it over Ron's, mapping the features of his own face together with him. If he was honest with himself, he didn't quite believe he was alive either.

Ron's hand moved across his hair and continued down the neck, trailing past his collarbone, and settled in the spot above his heart. He could feel it now, beating in a steady rhythm beneath their joined hands, pumping life through his body. *I'm alive*. He looked at Ron and felt something connect inside him. He still had no idea what the world wanted from him, or what place he wanted to occupy in it now. But he knew this. He knew Ron, and he knew what he wanted in the world that was just the two of them. He immediately grasped it...felt it somehow...the moment when Ron understood, when he realised the same thing about his own existence. He felt their breathing speed up, falling into sync as they drew closer, passing from one to the other and moving in soft caresses over half-parted lips. Their foreheads connected, and then the side of their faces, rolling intimately together, skin on skin. He felt Ron's fingers on his throat, felt them move upwards in slow, trembling circles across his jaw line. One of them angled his face a little...it was impossible for him to tell who had moved first...and then Ron's lips were on his. And the world made sense.

Letting his instincts take over, he grabbed the back of Ron's head and pulled him to him, pouring all of the fear and adrenalin and relief of the last hours into his mouth, throwing himself into the ecstasy of being alive, of being *there*, in a world of two that made utter, perfect sense. Ron moaned against him and wrapped his arms tightly around his neck, kissing him back for all he was worth. Blood rushed through his heart, pumping to every vessel in his body. It was painful and glorious, and somehow entirely new...as though he had needed to die to know just how wonderful it felt to truly be among the living.

They stayed there, on the grass in the middle of Hogwarts' grounds, until Fred and George appeared, pulling them apart with laughter and lewd comments about doing it in public places. Harry took Ron's hand in his, pulling him towards the gates, towards the closest Apparition point. He could have taken off right there...the wards still appeared to be open, judging by the amount of people popping in and out of the grounds...but he wanted to walk, wanted to run across the grass with Ron close on his heels, their hands firmly clasped together. They arrived at the gates, quite out of breath, and Harry smiled as he grabbed Ron's shoulder and pulled him into his arms. *Shell Cottage*, he thought, picturing the small grove of trees clearly in his mind as he spun. They landed on soft, dewy grass; dawn was slowly creeping across the horizon, transforming the sky and ocean into a shimmering grey. Breaking apart with bouts of laughter and playful struggle, the two men turned and raced towards the house.

A/N: I just had to rewrite this scene and make some sense of the Elder Wand. It bugged me to no end in canon. :-) Hope you enjoyed, please review! Only the epilogue left. Stay tuned.

Nineteen Hours Later

Chapter 14 of 14

Phineas Nigellus says his final goodbyes.

A/N: And here it is, the obligatory epilogue. Slightly different than in DH. A tiny bit. :-) A big thanks to Lariope, who has made this story so much more fun to write. Lots of hugs and kisses.

Epilogue – Nineteen Hours Later

She woke up in his bed—or their bed as she had begun to call it over the past few days. Her body hurt terribly, worse even than when Dolohov had cursed her at the Ministry of Magic two years ago. She looked around, finding him lying on the top of the covers next to her, rolls of parchment and heavy books strewn around him like a blanket. She lifted a hand and put it against his chest, feeling his heart beat against her palm. Alive. He was alive.

Her eyes moved to the wall, finding Phineas Nigellus watching her from his portrait.

“Well done, Miss Granger,” he said, sending something that could almost pass for a smile across the room. “I must say, you managed to surprise me.”

“Thank you, sir,” she said. “So we won?”

“You did indeed,” Phineas replied. “The Dark Lord is no more, and Harry Potter is being hailed left and right as the darling of the Wizarding World. I believe Dumbledore is having a party in that hideous vineyard painting up on the fourth floor right as we speak.”

“Harry made it?” She could scarce believe it, even as happiness bubbled through her. “How?”

“Oh, something about a wand,” Phineas said, waving his hand dismissively. “Dumbledore tried to explain it but you know how he is. The man does tend to be long-winded.”

“Where is he?” she demanded eagerly. “Is Ron alright?”

“Oh, I do believe so,” the minute wizard said wryly, waving his wand at the back of the canvas. Sounds began to flow through the frame, easily recognised and loud enough to make Hermione blush, intermingled with her friends’ breathless voices. “If you wouldn’t mind, Miss Granger, I would very much appreciate to have my portraits returned to their original locations. Dumbledore might be chatty at times, but with all the activity going on—with all four of you—lately, I believe I would experience a more suitable and modest atmosphere hanging in one of the finer establishments in Knockturn Alley.”

“Consider it done, sir,” she said, and Phineas Nigellus closed the connection. Next to her, the man was stirring, rising from sleep.

“Good bye, Miss Granger,” the former Headmaster said. “At this time of new beginnings, I believe I shall withdraw to a portrait in the Ravenclaw tower I’ve often wanted to visit and make one of my own.” He nodded his head in farewell and swept from the frame, leaving the canvas empty and black—the way she’d first come to know it.

Smiling, she turned her head, moving the hand she held over Severus’s heart up to stroke his face gently *New Beginnings*. As his eyes opened, she met the dark gaze steadily and leaned in, stopping just before impact to give him the choice, should he want to turn away. His lips claimed hers so completely, she lost track of herself for a moment, melting into him as he deepened the kiss.

Victory was sweet.

THE END

A/N: And there it is, folks. Story completed, with a happy ending nonetheless. (See, I am capable of writing them :-D)

This has been an incredibly rewarding story to write. I've loved every second of it. I wanted to write different relationships than I normally do, and I wanted to attempt to erase the border between slash and het a bit, since in my head a lovestory is a lovestory, and that's what I wanted to write. Other than that, I greatly enjoyed playing with canon titles (Did you notice? All chapters have canon or twisted-from-canon titles.) and filling some of the DH plot holes that have annoyed me for a long time. :-) So yes, definitely a great story to work on. Hope you all enjoyed it.

Thank you all for reading and for the lovely reviews. Please continue to pimp this story. :-) Until next time... /Red