

A Place in the World

by noodle

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Prologue – Spinner’s End, June 1960

Chapter 1 of 32

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Author's notes

An on-line translator was used to translate English into Welsh

Llygad y Ddraig - Eye of the Dragon

hello, neis i gyfarfod â chi - hello, nice to meet you

This is not intended as a cross-over fic. Some scenes, objects and places from Mary Stewart's Merlin Trilogy are used as plot points in this fic and will be properly cited when used. At no time do Ms Stewart's characters interact with Ms Rowling's characters. Familiarity with Ms Stewart's work is not at all necessary.

The passage that Toby reads is a summarised and re-worded scene from pages 19-20 of "*The Crystal Cave*" by Mary Stewart (1970), in which a six-year-old Merlin meets his uncle Camlach.

Canon characters are the property of J.K. Rowling, and I make no money from them. Many thanks to Justice for beta-works.

Eileen heard the crack of an Apparition and hurried downstairs, frightened and furious, but at the same time thankful that Toby was not at home. All emotions faded instantly to dumb shock as she looked upon her brother, who dropped to his hands and knees in front of the fireplace with a gasp of pain.

"Drusus, what happened?" Eileen ran to him and grasped his shoulders, pushing him up so she could look into his face.

"Cruciatius Curse. They know, Eileen, they know I have the Llygad y Ddraig."

"How?" she whispered, with a sense of creeping horror that the inevitable was unfolding.

"Betrayal from within our family; the traitors who practice the Dark Arts have finally succeeded. They are looking for me as we speak; I need to leave it with you. I will be the decoy and draw their attack. You must keep it hidden."

Eileen shook her head as the implications of her brother's news chilled her to the bone. "I can't."

Drusus grasped her hand. "You have to; it is a duty of our family. They will not look for you. There is no traceable evidence that you still exist, let alone where you are. Not even the Ministry knows. Eileen, if the Llygad is taken the dark will prevail without resistance; I curse the day our forbears ever got involved with their arts!" Drusus scowled at the fireplace and shuddered. "I don't have much time," he said, looking at her with tenderness.

He had been the only one who had not completely erased Eileen from memory, the only one who had not regarded her flight from an arranged marriage as an unforgivable insult. Indeed their patriarch would have killed her if Drusus had not smuggled her out of Wales and devised a means to keep her hidden.

While he was surprised at her marriage to Toby, whom she had met at a Muggle dance hall nearly two years ago, he unreservedly gave her his blessing. He approved of anything that helped maintain her cover. For Eileen, Drusus was the last link to her past, the last thread of her roots. She knew with a deep dread that he would soon be gone.

Drusus took something from inside his robes and lifted a silver chain from around his neck. He placed the object on the floor. At the end of the chain was a disc of pale blue multi-faceted crystal. Two silver dragons circled its edges, their tails linked at the bottom and their jaws grasping the chain.

"Eileen, you were always better than me with your charms. Make as precise a duplicate of this as you can. I will carry the copy; you take the original."

Eileen nodded tearfully. There was no escape from this. "And when they find your copy does not work?" she asked warily.

"It will be a long time before they attempt to use it. Things are not ready; they are still gathering their forces. There will be war, I know it. They will only attempt to use the Llygad when they have everything in place. The best we can hope for is the light will prevail before then, and we must help them to do just that." He watched his sister move quietly to the bookshelf and select a nondescript volume from the bottom shelf. Opening it, she produced her wand, knelt in front of Drusus with the object between them, and began the incantations.

The resulting copy was excellent. Drusus passed his hands over it, searching for any tell-tale flaws. Even the protective charms and wards were installed, giving the duplicate an aura of power that tingled in his fingertips. Without extensive diagnostics, the only way to tell the fake from the original would be when it failed in its task.

A muffled noise issued from an adjoining room, and Drusus was on his feet in a second with wand drawn. "It's alright," Eileen told him softly. She walked through the door and out of sight for a moment. Drusus held his breath as he heard her talking to someone, then felt his jaw drop open as she reappeared and approached him, carrying a child no more than six months old.

"You didn't tell me..." he began. He continued apologetically, "I guess you had no way to find me." His eyes brightened suddenly. "Well? What have we got? Boy or girl? Any magical abilities?"

"He's only six months old! It's way too early to tell if he'll be a wizard. For all our sakes I hope not. I hadn't planned on..." She shook herself and continued, "Severus Tobias Snape, meet your uncle, Drusus Ambrosius Prince."

Drusus took the infant from her and held him up for a moment. "Hello, neis i gyfarfod â chi." The raven-haired child stared at him, dark eyes rounded with curiosity. "He's definitely one of us," he chuckled, placing his nephew carefully on the hearth rug and disengaging a lock of his own raven hair from a surprisingly strong grip. "What do you think of these?" he asked, dangling the two objects above him. Severus reached out, eyes and hands trying to catch the tiny rainbows of dancing light refracted from the crystals.

"Drusus, stop it, he doesn't need to know this, any of it." Eileen was holding back tears with a heroic effort as she knelt beside him. Her brother placed an arm around her and pulled her close into a hug, keeping one hand free to entertain a fascinated Severus with the glittering counterfeit.

"It's his heritage, Eileen, as much as it is yours and mine. Our family did not always have a reputation of allegiance with the dark; perhaps one day we will be free of it but that freedom will not be won through ignorance. The Llygad y Ddraig was with us generations before the road toward evil was taken. It is a miracle we who follow the light have kept it secret within our own family for so long." He looked at her with immeasurable grief in his eyes. "Until now." He shook his head before continuing. "Like it or not it is inseparable from our family until the day it is returned to the rightful owner, and you have not forgotten why that is, have you? Or to whom it belongs?"

"That story is a dream or a fairy tale: only a fool would believe there is any truth in it," Eileen snapped viciously.

"Dreams may reflect reality; fairy tales are often based on fact: both can be instructive."

Relenting, Eileen placed the Llygad around her neck, more for her brother's sake than any desire to carry it. She would find a safe place for it later so Toby would not ask any questions. Her brother engulfed her in a desperate hug. It was time for him to leave. "I love you, Eileen. Remember that always."

"Drusus, my brother and best friend, I never doubted it. I love you too. Don't forget me."

"Never." He picked Severus up and prodded him in the chest. "You, Severus, you look like a wizard to me, one of considerable power. Be brave and be careful, little falcon." He kissed them both and placed Severus in his mother's arms. When Eileen looked up through her tears, the space he had occupied was empty. They would never see him again.

Toby clattered through the front door, ditching his tool bag and work boots as he strode into the sitting room. The house was quiet, as it usually was, even after Severus was born. The boy rarely made a sound, and when he did he was far from raucous.

Toby was pleased to see the fire had been lit. Rain and fog had drifted in during the early evening and, though it was summer, things were a touch raw outside. A scrap of something smouldering to one side of the grate caught his eye, and he fished it out carefully. It was not paper, or fabric, or any substance he knew of. There was writing on it, smudged by soot and ash, in a flowing ornate script that reminded him of the signage used to attract tourists to stay at pubs. Frowning, he read what was left of the words.

My uncle called me to him, there in the room where I sat with my mother. He was tall and golden-haired, a warrior and a son of the King. I walked to him bravely even though my heart trembled. His blue eyes were fixed on me with an expression that was not unkind, so different from the suspicious glances that I was used to receiving. I heard my grandfather speak aloud, saying that a child such as I, black-haired and black-eyed, so different from the rest of the family in form and nature, was surely a bastard whelp of the Devil. I gave no heed to his words and did not pause until I stood before my uncle, who asked of me my name.

"Myrddin," I answered, and boldly looked him in the eyes. "I am called Myrddin Emrys."

My uncle looked at me with interest. "Emrys? Child of the Light?"

"Yes sir, I am told that is what it means." I began to feel as though I had found an ally.

My uncle turned from me and spoke to my grandfather, saying that I bore an unusual name for one reputed to be the spawn of evil. He had sight of the truth when he mused that this supposed Devil was in fact a man: a Roman.

Toby's first reaction was to dismiss this as discarded rubbish, although he looked in the grate again to see if any other scraps were left. There were none. He was a little disappointed; it might have been a good read. He wondered if Eileen wrote it. While she never spoke of her family, she had mentioned once that her colouring was a strong family trait. Colouring like the boy in the remnant of a story. His son had his mother's hair and eyes. Was Severus the inspiration for this Myrddin lad? He snorted: things women do when they get fanciful! His eyes were drawn to one of the bricks lining the back of chimney; he could see the edges clean of soot. He would check it when the fire died down. Toby read the passage again before folding it carefully and tucking it into a hidden pocket on the inside of his belt. He did not even wonder why he did so.

Hogsmeade, May 1998

Chapter 2 of 32

Severus hears something he needed to know and receives some unexpected help.

A/N's: Canon characters are the property of J.K. Rowling, and I make no money from them. Thank you to Justice for plot discussions and associated beta-works.

Hermione stumbled back through the tunnel, anxiety and a dose of Invigoration Draught giving speed to her progress. Nearing the entrance to the Shrieking Shack, she extinguished her light and made her way by feel alone. She paused and listened. Hearing no sound, she whispered, "*Lumos*," and crept cautiously into the room where she had last seen Professor Snape.

Time had been irrelevant until Harry was whisked away to the hospital wing to be thoroughly examined by the ever-practical Madam Pomfrey and Ron joined his family to move Fred's body to the designated morgue. Hermione had chosen that moment to quietly slip into the background. She would fulfil the silent promise she had made on the way out of the Shack. *If I live, I will come back*

Between bouts of silent tears, his eyes nearly wild with remorse, Harry had told her a little of what he had seen in the silvery strands of memory Professor Snape had given him. Harry had not been merely goading Riddle he'd been telling the truth. Hermione clenched her teeth. If only she had listened to her intuition, maybe she could have let Professor Snape know not everyone in the world believed he was evil incarnate. Maybe he would have let someone help him and he wouldn't have...

"Please don't be dead," she whispered.

In the musty gloom, she spied a candle stub on a shelf clinging improbably to the wall. Lighting it, for light of any sort was a comfort, Hermione moved cautiously towards her former Potions master. She stooped to pick up his ebony wand, tucking it into her sleeve alongside her own. Kneeling by his side, she felt for a pulse, a breath, anything to give evidence he was still alive, but found nothing. Suddenly overwhelmed and completely at a loss as to what to do next, she sat cross legged on the floor, staring blankly into space. She was vaguely aware of her surroundings: the wind picking up outside, *wuthering* that was the only word for it against the decrepit walls of the Shack, making them groan softly in protest. It was the loneliest sound she had ever heard. That sound and the scent of dust, mould and drying blood would leave an impression on her soul she was sure would last forever.

A quick movement in the air had her on her feet and facing the source with the lightning speed only adrenalin can give. She gave a cry of amazement as a fiery form swooped into view.

"Fawkes?"

The phoenix approached in a rapid glide, slewing towards her with a graceful dip of one wing. The bird back-winged in several powerful strokes, hovered for a moment above the motionless wizard, and dropped lightly onto his chest.

"You are Fawkes, aren't you?"

The phoenix tilted his head and gazed at her. Hermione had the sensation of being minutely studied by someone who was slightly amused.

"Okay, I believe you, you are Fawkes. It's just that nobody has seen you since D..." Her words faltered as she remembered who Fawkes was sitting on. Perhaps it was not the best thing to mention. Fawkes ruffled his feathers importantly. "I haven't seen you since last year, I thought you'd gone for good, not that you ceased to exist or anything. Nobody knew where you'd gone. Where did you get to anyway?" *Wonderful*, she thought, *I'm babbling to a phoenix*.

Fawkes listened intently, though not to her. He moved further up the wizard's chest and tugged at the firmly buttoned collar. Fawkes looked up at her, making a small noise that sounded like a question.

"You want that out of the way, do you?" Hermione was sure this was what the phoenix meant, though she was not sure she actually wanted to do it.

Fawkes turned to face her and raised his head feathers a little. Bird body-language signifying mild annoyance.

"Alright! I'll get on with it." She applied herself to the task, gently peeling layers of fabric from the congealed blood. It did not seem respectful to be anything but careful. After what seemed an interminable time, she had the wound exposed. Fawkes nudged her out of the way and scrutinised the injury with all the gravity of a master Healer. Hermione hardly dared to breathe as the phoenix let two tears fall. Suddenly he straightened, smoothed his feathers, and began to sing.

Severus looked up at the ruinous archway and the tattered curtain hanging restlessly within it. He walked around the arch, examining it from all angles. He didn't like the look of the steps that led down and disappeared into bottomless shadows. They reminded him of the stairs to the dungeons, where he had spent most of his life. He'd been as good as a prisoner in the dungeons of Hogwarts. He wondered why he hadn't thought of it in that way before. He fidgeted where he stood; something was attached to him and he couldn't see what it was. It pulled a little, somewhere deep inside, giving a sharp tug if he went closer to the archway, as though warning him not to approach the crumbling structure. Severus listened. On the very edge of his awareness he could hear a faint whispering. He turned his head to locate the source. He took several steps towards the arch. He ignored the relentless tugging sensation and strained to hear the voices.

"I assure you, Lily, there was no other way."

"Oh, yes. Of course. I know absolutely nothing, do I? Using someone who is unwilling, deceived,*pr both*, Albus, is absolutely the best way to break a dark power." Lily's voice was dripping sarcasm.

"The dark will always challenge..." Albus began wearily.

"Probably because *some* who rise to the challenge *use methods like yours*"

Severus winced as these last words were shouted. He had seen Lily in a fighting rage before, and he did not envy Albus at all, nor did he feel sorry for him.

Lily hadn't finished yet. "I heard what you told Harry, 'that part didn't work out, poor Severus' *Poor Severus?* That's all you had to say about him? He risked his body, mind, and soul for you, and I *know* you taunted him about his feelings. Oh, don't look so beleaguered, Albus."

"Severus knew what he was getting into, Lily, from the moment he joined the Death Eaters to the moment he ~~willingly~~ agreed to spy for the Order. Severus *willingly* vowed to protect Harry, as well as he could in the circumstances. He had his own motivation, as you know, for desiring Riddle's defeat. To that end, he displayed remarkable single-mindedness. My intention was for him to take the Elder Wand..."

"You intended that *Harry* should kill him?" Lily interrupted in dangerously cold tones.

"Lily, think about it. Supposing that part of the plan had worked? Severus would not have killed Harry, his promise to your memory would not let him. Mind you, there would have had to be some minor skirmish for Harry to truly claim the Wand. I doubt very much Harry would have killed Severus, even if he thought he wanted to. Disarmed him, Stunned him, perhaps nothing a visit to the Infirmary couldn't fix. I cannot see your son using an Unforgivable if one was not used against him first. Remember, Lily, Harry had every reason to see Pettigrew dispatched, yet he persuaded Sirius to stay his hand."

"So, if that part of your plan had worked, Severus would still be alive? Albus, why didn't you tell him?" She sounded sorrowful now.

Severus stood up, realising he had been crouching before the shifting curtain with one hand on the cold stone of the arch. Was he dead? He didn't feel like he was. It was not as though he hadn't prepared himself, and he had been rather proud of his modifications to the anti-venin, even if it did make him feel horribly sick. He could discern shapes moving beyond the curtain. One of the shapes drifted closer to where he stood, and Severus clearly heard Albus' next words.

"Who says he's dead? He was forever assuring me he had a plan, though I would make bold to suggest ~~that~~*my* plan may have had a less painful outcome."

Severus narrowed his eyes, resisting the urge to reach through the arch and throttle the Albus-shape.

"Lily, may I ask you something?" Albus had that calculating tone even, evidently, in death. Severus could picture him leaning back in his chair, eyes half-closed, and fingers steeped.

"What is it, Albus?" Now it was Lily who sounded beleaguered.

"If Severus were to join our company, what would you say to him?" Albus asked.

Lily almost growled with irritation. "As if that is any of your business!" she snapped. A short silence followed, then a different voice joined the conversation.

"I know what I'd say."

Severus ground his teeth. *James Potter.*

James continued, "I know apologies won't undo what happened in school. What we did was unworthy of our House. I didn't live to regret it, neither did Sirius. We had to die before we got some perspective and some sense."

Severus watched as another shape moved closer to the gently fluttering curtain. *Lily?*

"I'd tell him... I'd say... I did accept his apology. I never told him. Calling me a Mudblood did not send me away; it was the company he chose to keep and the code he chose to live by." Lily raised her voice a little. "I couldn't follow you there, Sev. When you lashed out at me with that name, I took the easy way out. I used outrage at a puerile word as an excuse to walk away, when I should have told you honestly why I could not have anything more to do with you. I missed you, Sev; you were my best friend. When you set out on a path to darkness, it was like part of you had gone away, the very best part. I couldn't see *you* anymore. And my death was not your fault, you hear me? No more than it was Albus' fault for bringing Riddle to Hogwarts; though his demonstration of magic in the orphanage was just plain stupid! No more than it was Sybill's fault because she made the prophecy. Or Aberforth's fault for throwing you out of the pub. You did not know how Riddle would interpret the prophecy or what he would do. Riddle alone chose which family to murder, and he would not have stopped at one."

Severus dropped to his knees, head bowed. If he had not followed the Death Eaters, would Lily have ever chosen him over James Potter? He couldn't tell. It was pointless to speculate now; she stood on the other side of the arch with her husband by her side. He silently raged at his younger self's gullibility. Dark Magic was seductive and deceptive. It promised the fulfilment of any desire one wished to have, while leaching slow poison into the very roots of one's being. It silently destroyed, usurped, overruled and enslaved until there was nothing left but the will to serve its every whim. But it had not poisoned him completely. Severus had kept one space within himself hidden from all, protected and cherished. When he had agreed to spy for the light, he found it to be a source of strength, purpose and resolve in the most impossible circumstances. *A power of which the Dark Lord knows not*

He raised his head. The ragged curtain shifted with more energy than before, and there was a faint current of cold air sucking inward, drawing him in, drawing him through... *the Veil*. Panic flashed through him at the realisation. How had he not known what it was when he first saw it? He did not want to go through! *I'm not dead!* Severus tried to stand, his limbs froze and panic descended into abject fear.

A song rippled through the chamber: a song of light and warmth and life. Severus felt his body relax, and he turned his back to the Veil, stretching his hands out as though to warm them by a fire. The song gained volume, filling the deepest shadows with lilting melody. The notes vibrated in his blood, and he thought he would willingly cut his heart open to allow the song to go there as well. He felt a surge of courage and looked back at the Veil.

"Thank you, Lily," he murmured.

"I took long enough to tell you, didn't I? I'm sorry I was not there for you, not even with a kind word."

Severus could tell she meant it. He gave a half-smile as he pressed his hand to the left side of his chest. "In a way, Lily, you were always there."

Without hesitation, Severus followed the song of the phoenix away from the arch and the dais and out of the Death Chamber.

"Fawkes, that was the most beautiful thing I've ever heard." Hermione watched as the phoenix flew to the remains of an armchair and began to preen, softly chattering as he did so. Sighing, she turned to the still form beside her. A slight movement arrested her attention. "You're breathing," she whispered.

Hermione seized Professor Snape's hand and again probed his wrist for his pulse, hardly daring to believe what she felt. Slow, yes, but strong and steady. On an impulse, she brushed her fingers lightly over his face, jumping violently when he twitched and took a deep breath. The hand she held flexed and gripped hers as a shudder rippled through his frame. She looked back at his face in time to see him blink several times and focus on her. His expression became one of complete bewilderment. Hermione fought the urge to laugh, fearing a descent into hysterics, which would not bode well at all with this particular wizard. But seriously, had anyone ever associated bewilderment with the world's most formidable Potions master? Hands still clasped, they simply stared at each other.

Severus was the first to speak, his voice husky and uncertain. "Miss Granger?"

Hermione was momentarily speechless: she nodded mutely. "How do you feel?" She forced out the question, wondering what sort of sharp retort she would get.

"Thirsty." Severus gave his immediate concern his whole body screamed for water.

The simple statement immediately grounded Hermione; thirst was something she could deal with. Gently extracting her hand from his grip, she took a piece of shattered porcelain from the floor and transfigured it into a goblet, filling it with a softly spoken, "*Aguamenti*."

"Can you sit up?" she asked.

Severus carefully raised himself up on one elbow and reached for the goblet. He eyed her warily before taking a mouthful of water, then his body rebelled, and he quickly downed several long gulps before Hermione pulled his hand down.

"Slowly, Professor."

He coughed and blinked, wiping his mouth with his sleeve as he nodded assent.

"Miss Granger, if I may hear from you what has occurred since..." He abruptly clamped a hand to his neck as an image of Nagini, from a viewpoint he never wanted to see, slammed into his consciousness with all the impact of a psilocybin-induced hallucination. He shut his eyes against a wave of dizziness, forced the nightmare to the back of his mind and concentrated on breathing slowly. Focussing on the injury, Severus gingerly released his pressure hold, probing a raised roughness on his skin that felt like scar tissue. He frowned, puzzled. His adaptation of the anti-venin could slow the rate of blood loss and disable the anticoagulants, but he was sure it could not completely heal an open wound. He felt the rents in his collar where Nagini's fangs had pierced through to his flesh. Then he realised his clothing had been tampered with and his wand was nowhere in sight. He looked at Miss Granger questioningly.

"I thought you were dead," Hermione began. "You weren't breathing, I couldn't find a pulse. And you were cold. I thought you were dead. Then Fawkes came." She fell silent as he searched his robes and produced a bottle of Blood-Replenishing Potion, uncorked it, and swallowed the contents.

"Fawkes? You are sure?" he asked.

"Yes, sir. He's right over... he was over there," she finished lamely.

Professor Snape did not reply. He wore an expression that reminded Hermione of Rodin's statue, "The Thinker".

"Sir, when Fawkes came, he... wanted to see your wounds..."

"*Asked* you to do this, did he?" Severus pulled at his loosened collar. The last witch who tried handling his attire learned very quickly not to touch what wasn't hers.

Hermione ignored his sarcasm; she was really too tired for any nonsense. "Yes he did. Not in the Queen's English, but he did get his message across quite clearly. He looked at your wounds, he dropped two tears on them, then he began to sing. I don't know how long he sang for; it was so beautiful, I just listened. Then he sat on that chair over there. You woke up soon after. For your information, sir, Riddle was defeated at sunrise this morning; he died a little over two hours ago."

The only sounds were the wind outside and the creaking of the walls. The candle flickered in the feeble light. Again, the witch and wizard stared at each other.

Hermione broke the silence this time. "Looking at each other will not achieve anything." Speech roused her to action and she stood, offering her hand to help him up. "See if you can stand and walk: we can't stay here. Aurors and anyone else who's willing and able are seeking Riddle's supporters. If they find you, it won't be a courteous meeting. They'll probably kill you on sight. I think it best to get you to a safe place, then if you like we can discuss... recent events."

Severus immediately saw the sense in this, but he was loath to have someone assist him to stand, especially some bossy chit who seemed to think she knew what was best for everyone. He glanced up at her as she stood waiting for him. She was spectacularly dirty, bloodied, bruised, thin and exhausted to the bone, yet still capable of decisive action. She had come back here alone, Merlin knew why, and in what was still a very dangerous climate. Despite the rashness of her actions, credit was deserved. He surprised himself by revising his assessment of her: a courageous witch with the battle-scars to prove it. He accepted her hand and allowed her to take a very little of his weight. He got to his feet without difficulty, though he did flinch noticeably when he saw just how much of his blood stained the floor.

"*Scourgify!* I don't think either of us need to see that anymore," Hermione said grimly.

Hermione chewed her lower lip, considering her next words. When asked if he had organised any possible hiding places, Professor Snape had dryly stated his version of a best case scenario was to spend the rest of his life in hiding. He insisted this would suit him to the ground. He liked isolation. It was not infested with interfering busybodies, mindless dunderheads, or psychotic maniacs. Furthermore, not being dead, he was quite willing and able to walk out of the Shack and get on with it. No, he did not think the Room of Requirement was a good idea. As soon as the Hogwarts wards were restored he would be detected; assuming the house-elves, ghosts, gargoyles or portraits didn't spot him first. At that point he had demanded to know why she was so intent on seeing him safe, why she came back, and what did she want from him. Hermione fought to keep her voice steady. Then it all came out in a rush.

"I came back here because... because it wasn't fair, it wasn't right... you didn't deserve to die like that, or lie here for hours in pain if you were alive... and I didn't want someone else to find you because they'd kill you or send you to Azkaban. Yes, we left you here, but we didn't know for sure if you were ally or enemy. Harry told me what Dumbledore asked you to do. Professor, you did so much without anyone knowing and put up with so much crap and nobody ever thought... of what you might be..." Her voice broke as tears coursed unheeded down her face. "We wouldn't have stood a chance without you."

Nonplussed at this outburst, Severus noted she was trembling and used that observation to gather his wits. "Nobody was to know nobody could have known or else our whole advantage would have been lost along with a great many more lives. As to putting up with crap, as you so elegantly put it, I learned to ignore it long ago."

"I should have known better," she snapped, anger flashing in her eyes.

"How so?"

"I don't know! Everything that was said about you and the things I saw or found out for myself. I put all the pieces together over several years, and if they were two halves of an equation, I couldn't get them to balance. I analysed it to death, and it still didn't make sense. Like when you told Umbridge you didn't have any Veritaserum left because she used it all on Cho. Up until then we thought Cho was a traitor that she was weak and cracked under pressure. Then you show up and oh-so-neatly clear her name! Why would you do that? Why did you hold me back when I would have walked right into a werewolf's jaws? Your classroom could have been free of bushy-haired know-it-alls. Why would you send Gryffindors to Hagrid for detention, instead of leaving them to the Carrows?"

"There were so many incidents, Professor, that pushed the numbers in your favour. I wondered if I was biased because I'd always respected you. Then you'd go and do something petty and despicable, and I'd be right back where I started; with no clear answer."

She paused as she made an effort to calm herself. "To fully answer your question, sir, if I found you alive, what I wanted was to get you to a safe place while Harry tries to clear your name. He said he would, you know. I don't want anything *from* you; not everything depends on bargains."

Hermione gazed at the floor miserably, feeling as though she were about to leap into an abyss.

"Sir, I do have a place in mind where you will be safe. No one else knows of it; I had to keep it secret. It is a long way from here, and I do not want to discuss any details of the location." She looked at him furtively, and he nodded his understanding. "To take you there, you will have to trust me."

Severus considered her words. It was not often someone had the backbone to he borrowed a Muggle expression "let him have it both barrels." That she was one of the few students who did genuinely respect him had not escaped his attention. Logically, if she spoke truthfully about respect, why would she be untruthful about her reasons for being here, now, with him?

He recalled Phineas' account that Miss Granger had defended him several times against some behind-the-back insults from Potter and Weasley, rounding on them fiercely and saying in as many words that *Professor* Snape did not deserve such derision. Apparently it was all such a novelty, Phineas just had to mention it or burst. Such incidents kept the portraits entertained for days, and they even dared to precipitate a few themselves.

Whatever her motivation, it was not a new thing, though he did suspect she might regard him as some sort of project. Why else would she have been observing him? It made him a little uneasy. However, he had heard the opinions of his colleagues, and various other inmates of Hogwarts, on the character of Miss Granger. All of them thought her to be honest, trustworthy and loyal to the death. A witch who would never betray a confidence. Of the few paths he could take, the one she offered was most likely to be the safest. Severus folded his arms across his chest and realised he had been pacing the floor.

"Miss Granger, you observed that we cannot stay here?"

Hermione dried her eyes. "It would not be wise. Sir, this belongs to you." She drew his wand from her sleeve and presented it to him graciously. Aware this was an affirmation that *she* was prepared to trust *him*, Severus gave a polite half-bow before stowing his wand safely out of sight.

"I shall not use it except in life-threatening circumstances," he told her. "In the absence of my body, the Ministry will most likely put a trace out for me should I use any magic."

"If they haven't already. I don't think they are listing anyone as dead until they've been thoroughly checked for signs of life. Just as well I wasn't involved in that exercise," she added ruefully. She looked at him quizzically and fiddled with her wand.

"What is it, Miss Granger?"

"Sir, would you mind if I... well, you see... you're a mess."

Severus rolled his eyes. "I've been called worse. Very well, but use *Scourgify* at your peril!"

Hermione was thankful she had learned some of the less abrasive cleansing charms. Professor Snape looked a lot better without dried and clotted blood all over him. Not that he appeared to be appreciative. His sullen scowl indicated quite the opposite. Shaking her head, she took a slender black feather with a white tip from her pocket. She had collected the feather on a heavily forested and somewhat neglected property left to her by her grandmother. It had taken her weeks to transform the feather into a Portkey, with numerous close calls after curfew in the library and some blinding headaches after hours spent on Arithmantic equations. She had worked out how to "open end" the Portkey, so she could transport herself from any location back to the property, any number of times. With her parents still unaware of their "previous" lives, she was the only person who knew of the property's location. She had planned on using it, assuming she survived, as a bolthole in case Riddle's forces won the war. To this end the place was well stocked with medical supplies, both Muggle and magical, as well as food under stasis charms. Enough for a small number of fugitives. If Riddle had been defeated, it would have been a useful base to commence searching for her parents. Tom Riddle was dead and, in the most unexpected circumstances, she was looking at someone who needed to vanish for a while.

At that instant, several loud cracks not too far from the Shack announced the arrival of, most likely, a search party. Hermione extinguished the candle with a gesture as voices from outside spoke of spreading out, keeping eyes open, and wands ready. Severus dropped into a duelling stance, wand raised.

"Come *on!*" she hissed fiercely, grabbing his left wrist.

The voices outside exclaimed. Garbled arguments about a phoenix wanting them to follow it were heard over the blustering wind. The voices faded with the crunch of retreating footsteps as the party moved away.

"Thanks, Fawkes." Hermione sighed in relief as she held the Portkey out and soundlessly incanted the name of the bird it belonged to.

The familiar sensation of Portkey transport lasted longer than Severus anticipated. He was beginning to wonder just how far they were travelling when he felt a solid surface beneath his feet. Blinking, he looked around a large, well-lit room, equipped with what could be described as assorted oddments. Hermione gasped for breath, pale and evidently weak in the knees. As a matter of course, Severus put curiosity aside and attended her first, helping her to a chair.

"Is this a temporary ailment, Miss Granger?"

"Yes, thank you. Give me a moment and I'll be fine. Portkeys make me a bit queasy."

"You are aware that unauthorised Portkey creation is illegal?" He regarded her severely.

"Yes I am. And it goes against all that's Gryffindor that the first person I show it to is a Slytherin!"

Severus made a point of looking smug before examining his surroundings. The room they were in was more of a "general use" space with four doors leading from it two on his right, one to the rear, and one to the front, presumably the entrance. Deep shadows over the front windows told him of a shaded outdoor area extending beyond the front door. A long table with built-on benches occupied the centre of the room, flanked by four mismatched armchairs. To his left, a wood stove stood in an alcove, sharing the space with neatly split and stacked firewood. The rest of the left hand wall was taken up with a fridge, a sink, a workbench and several large cupboards. The whole structure was built from a steel frame, with some attempt at insulation which left the trusses exposed.

He let his senses run further, detecting an impressive array of wards. Looking out of a window, Severus read the angle of the sun *Mid afternoon*, he thought. Riddle's death had occurred at sunrise and Hermione had joined him about two hours afterwards. That made around nine hours difference between Scotland and their current location. They had Portkeyed to the other side of the world! A bird had been calling while he appraised his surroundings. Now he listened for it carefully. The bird called again. With some imagination the call formed words: *curra-wong, curra-wong, hey-you!* His mind supplied the identity automatically, along with a list of useful indigenous plants the bird was known to frequent.

"Miss Granger," he intoned gravely, "the Pied Currawong is native to eastern Australia. When you said you knew of a place a long distance away, you indulged in something of an understatement."

Hermione felt she should have the grace to look apologetic. However, a streak of boldness took her and she answered him, poker-faced, in a similar tone. "To call it 'something of an understatement', Professor Snape, is quite an exaggeration."

Suspicion and Sanctuary

Chapter 3 of 32

In the Department of Mysteries, something stirs in the vaults. Meanwhile, Severus explores new territory and encounters a mystery of his own.

A/Ns:

The "Seat of Ravens" (Carrifran) is the site of the Carrifran Wildwood project. Reference: *In Scotland's search for roots, A push to restore wild lands*. By Caroline Fraser, September 2010.

Marie was the great church bell in the north tower of Notre-Dame de Paris. She was destroyed in 1791 during the French Revolution. Emmanuel, the bourdon bell in the south tower, was spared.

Bonjour Good day

Oui/Non Yes/No

Pour quoi? Why?

Mon ami My friend

Mon Dieu My God

Disclaimer: Canon characters are the property of J. K. Rowling and I make no money from them.

Apologies to Victor Hugo: I have taken the liberty of using an "AU inspiration" for his masterpiece *The Hunchback of Notre-Dame*. The "AU inspiration" exists only in imagination and has no real-world link to Mr. Hugo or his work.

Many thanks to Justice for Beta work.

Oriens slid back into the shadows as his colleague emerged from the vaults for the third time in a week. Oriens always felt uneasy in Arawn's presence: a deep seated wariness with no obvious cause. At first, he had tried to reason his discomfort away. After all, Arawn had occupied the position of Chief Administrator of Dementors since 1981. The creatures could bring a chill to a summer's day, and Arawn spent a lot of time with them.

At least, he had until their defection to Voldemort nearly two years ago. Before the First Fall of Voldemort, Arawn had been Curator of Unidentified Antiquities: a position now classified as "floating", meaning no-one was available to fill it. This meant Arawn had every right to visit the vaults, whenever he pleased.

But Oriens' instincts would not listen to reason; they sounded an alarm whenever his fellow Unspeakable walked past. Therefore, Oriens had done as he always did when faced with the elusive and uncertain. He followed, he observed, and he waited. Only one other inhabitant of the sprawling Ministry complex knew of his suspicions. Sadly, the vast majority of wizards and witches would not regard Petrus as a living being, let alone give him credit for possessing intellect and wit. Not that any of them *knew* he existed as a sentient being. For anyone who saw him, Petrus was just another inanimate adornment.

Arawn reached the top of the staircase, paused to catch his breath, and scanned his surroundings with a sharp, cold eye. Not sharp enough to spot Oriens, but certainly cold enough to set him shivering. When the echo of Arawn's footsteps had faded into silence, Oriens detached himself from his gloomy observatory and began the long descent to the vaults.

He had made the silent pilgrimage many times in search of objects or manuscripts unused for centuries, their meaning and function lost in time, silence, and dust. Occasionally, a small clue would surface, and a revelation would occur. Oriens delighted in the thought of restored charms resonating with a living voice; or an artefact pulsing with long neglected power. He remembered the day he finally deciphered the ancient code of the Round Stones and gave them voice with his own body and breath. He had chanted softly for days in the Seat of Ravens, impervious to the driving sleet and bitter fog of southern Scotland. Deep in trance, he beheld shaggy forests of pine, birch, oak and juniper. In the forests, he saw boar and elk, lynx and beaver, bear and wolf. Finally, he heard the voices of Hippogriff and Centaur, Gnome and Imp their songs had been silenced for how long?

Oriens had seen the ancient chants express their power in unexpected ways. Among Muggles, "Caledonia! Stern and wild", became a call to action as they cleared bracken, planted trees, and culled the rampant herds of deer and goats. He would never have guessed Muggle hands would restore forests razed long ago. Maybe, one day, they would tend animals not seen in the landscape for hundreds of years. Then, perhaps, the Magical creatures would return.

Oriens' ruminations had brought him to a vast underground space, hollowed out by a subterranean river, millions of years before. Because he was alone, Oriens did not use his wand to summon light. His version of *Lumos* was the ball of light taking shape in his cupped hands. He willed the glowing sphere to precede him as he approached the featureless door of Vault Five. He placed his hand against the smooth stone, feeling a small vibration as the wards recognised him. A faint rumble, reminiscent of a far away avalanche, greeted him as he entered the circular chamber.

"Good afternoon, Petrus," he said as he extinguished his own light and activated those of the vault.

"Bonjour, Oriens. I have to say, I am most suspicious of your cold-eyed associate."

Oriens turned his attention to a stone figure. Some would call it a gargoyle. Others would insist it was a chimera. An adventurous few would say it represented a kind of troll, cross-bred with some other unknown creature. In truth, nobody really knew.

The lack of formal definition did not bother Petrus. He insisted he did not need to be categorised in order to exist. His defiance of established wisdom was, in part, the reason he had been deported from France and confined to the London vaults. Once there, he was conveniently forgotten for more than five hundred years.

Oriens watched as Petrus stretched and yawned, his dragon-like wings and muscular arms cast ghoulish shadows extending from floor to domed ceiling. With his lupine ears and taloned fingers, his shadow was the classical image of the Muggles' idea of Satan.

"I have counted three visits this week; were there any others?" Oriens bypassed the usual banter and book exchange, hoping Petrus would see this as a request for gravity.

Petrus shook his head and grimaced, involuntarily showing his teeth. As his features resembled those of a leopard, with decidedly leonine dentition, the overall effect was alarming to say the least. "Oui, I also counted three. The third not so long before you arrived. Every time, he examined the same object. This time, he spoke. He was angry, very angry. He said something about, how you say, a half-blood? Also, he mentioned... bah! I did not properly hear the word, or perhaps it was a name."

Oriens approached one of seven stone chests arranged around the perimeter of the vault. He held his hands above it, soundlessly incanting a combined Unlocking and Identification charm. Glowing silver bands appeared on the dull stone. He made an intricate gesture with his fingers, and the heavy lid opened without a sound.

"Mon ami, there it is!" Petrus pointed excitedly. "Have you found out what it is?"

"No, Petrus, I have not. I don't know what it is, or what it does. But Arawn must have some clue; else he would not trouble himself with frequent examinations." Oriens levitated the artefact, not daring to touch it. Petrus watched, fascinated, as the long silver chain uncoiled. The pale blue disc of crystal, flanked by two silver dragons, spun slowly in the light. "Though I suspect the events of this morning may have some connection."

"What has occurred?" Petrus' ears pricked at the prospect of news.

"Voldemort was defeated this morning. He was officially pronounced dead properly dead two hours after sunrise. His forces are scattered, and his power is no more."

"Ah!" Petrus clapped his hands in delight, looking as though he were transported to another time and place. Notre-Dame, 1427, to be precise. "If I were still roaming the towers, I could ring the bells. I spit on these laws that say I should not! Oriens, have you ever heard Emmanuel speak? Non? You have not lived!" Petrus retrieved a volume, *Notre-Dame de Paris: an illustrated history* from behind his plinth and brandished it like a weapon. "I will never forgive these Revolutionaries for the death of Marie! When she sang with Emmanuel, their voices would enchant all of Paris." He quietened as he sensed Oriens' mood. "Your people, and the other Magical ones, they have lost much in this war?"

"More than we know, I fear." Oriens walked around the suspended artefact. He turned and looked Petrus full in the face. "A half-blood wizard is missing, presumed dead. The reports are conflicting. On one hand, he was Voldemort's number one man. A Death Eater. On the other hand, Severus Snape was a member of the Order of the phoenix, and Dumbledore's trusted spy."

"Mon Dieu, what a mess! Severus. This was the name Arawn mentioned. I think he is most displeased with the Severe One." Petrus rubbed an ear as he thought for a moment. "This Monsieur Severus, he stood apart from each side, yet played a role in both?"

"More likely, he wove a tangled web between. I have to wait until the post-war hysteria settles before I enquire into the truth of the matter. If Snape turns out to be Voldemort's ally, or successor, we could be facing a serious threat."

"Pour quoi?"

Oriens counted the reasons on his fingers. "Snape is one of the most powerful wizards in Britain, assuming he is still alive. His whereabouts is not known. His true allegiance is arguable. The remaining Death Eaters have gone to ground. The Dementors are Merlin knows where. And your observations suggest 'the Severe One' is connected with this." Oriens pointed to the artefact, then added bitterly, "Arawn's interest in it is just icing on the cake."

"Longbottom?" Severus shook his head in a state of profound disbelief.

"I guess the Sorting Hat knew what it was doing," Hermione reflected. "Neville has always been brave, in his own quiet way. Not many people noticed that side of him. But I'd never have picked him as Nagini's nemesis."

Severus winced as he pictured the shy, fumbling student and his litany of cauldron-destroying disasters. To imagine the same boy brandishing Godric Gryffindor's sword, and competently dispatching Nagini, required some strenuous mental gymnastics. He leaned back in his

chair and closed his eyes, sorting through the mass of information she had given him, filling in the gaps between Nagini's attack and the death of the Dark Lord.

Dark Lord. Nobody's lord, now. Riddle, you always did hate your surname. May it be your epitaph

He tried to picture the ruin of the Great Hall, the faces of those now dead, and the incongruous image of knife-wielding house-elves charging into battle. Potter had survived, in a series of events even he had trouble comprehending, and his duty to Lily was done.

He knew had always known, if he were honest with himself Lily could never have followed him along the path he had chosen. He did not deny that he had wanted her, at any cost, and he fully understood Albus' disgust. He had felt disgusted with himself more times than he could remember. Even if she had been the sole survivor of that dreadful night, anything Lily could have felt for him, after the death of her husband and son, would have been hollow. An echo: empty and tainted with sorrow. Like the results of a Love Potion. Severus was thankful he had never stooped so low as to slip her a dose. He felt inside his robes and fingered a scrap of parchment and the torn edge of a photograph. He was mildly surprised at the absence of the suffocating grief he usually felt at the very thought of Lily, let alone a physical sign of her.

The sound of movement distracted him, and he opened his eyes to watch Hermione attend to the boiling kettle as she prepared a fresh pot of tea. The routine procedure was a comforting semblance of the familiar and normal, when the reality was exactly the opposite. Then there was the incident with Fawkes. Severus drifted back into his thoughts.

"Professor?" Hermione was in the process of handing him a mug of tea, which he accepted with murmured thanks.

"Miss Granger, I doubt very much I am still considered a teacher, let alone headmaster. I believe the title of professor may be redundant."

"Oh. As you wish. Mr. Snape, then? I refuse to address you by your surname alone, like we're a pair of sniping second-years."

Their eyes met for a moment. "Given that we are not exactly in a formal situation, neither of us are in second year and not, as yet, sniping at each other, you may use my given name."

Hermione stoked the fire, adding more wood before returning to her chair. "Severus."

"Yes, Miss Granger?"

"Hermione."

They watched the fire for a time as each adjusted to this new familiarity. Severus looked up at the sound of a frustrated sigh and raised an eyebrow in inquiry. Hermione massaged her temples, frowning. "I really thought you were dead. There was no breath, no pulse..."

"You said so before. How long did you spend looking for signs of life?"

"I suppose not long enough."

"Evidently. I wasn't dead, though it was a very near thing. It was not Nagini's bite that nearly sent me through the Veil."

"How did you if it wasn't Nagini... how?"

"A combination of preparedness, mixed luck, and a timely intervention by Fawkes."

"*This* from the man who demanded precise, thorough, and well-structured answers in both classroom and essay?"

Severus did not reply. To all appearances, he had retreated into his thoughts again.

Hermione rolled her eyes. "If you don't want to answer my question, please, just say so."

He roused himself. "In the weeks before my... final audience... Riddle was badly unhinged and steadily getting worse, growing more volatile by the day. I knew, for want of a better word, he was capable of killing anyone at any time." Severus paused and shifted uneasily. Hermione had the distinct impression he was not telling her everything. She didn't blame him.

"The existing anti-venin, the one given to Arthur Weasley, could only be administered after a bite. I explored the possibility of adapting the anti-venin so it could be taken before the event and disable the venom when it entered the bloodstream. The most insidious components in Nagini's venom were the compounds disrupting the blood clotting process. I took the research done for the Weasley case a little further and found two weak links in the venom. I developed a 'neutraliser', specifically designed to attack both links at once. When tested externally, the neutralised venom breaks down very quickly, losing all potency within two minutes. As I derived the equations to replicate the neutraliser's effects *in vivo*, I discovered that lowering one's body temperature and heart rate would allow the breakdown process to occur, while simultaneously minimising damage from any residual toxicity. Foxglove and Aristolochia seeds were obvious choices to achieve these physical effects."

"Hence the undetectable vital signs. Oh! I should have used a Detection charm; why didn't I think of it before?" Her annoyance gave way to intrigue. "It worked, didn't it? And it was *you* who left clues for the Healers to find when Mr. Weasley was bitten!"

Severus shrugged dismissively. "Yes, it worked, though I hadn't counted on a bite to a major blood vessel. I believe this is where mixed luck comes into it." He felt the side of his neck carefully. "I think she punctured one of the smaller branches of an exterior vein. I recall the blood was gushing rather than spurting."

Hermione acknowledged in the affirmative with a weak nod. "The Aristolochia would have reduced your blood pressure too; maybe that helped. Harry said you looked impossibly pale. He said it was a wonder you were actually standing."

"An unfortunate consequence of ingesting the potion. I've never felt so ill in my life."

"He said you kept staring at Nagini while Vol... Riddle... was questioning you."

"I had to convince that psychopath I feared death by Nagini more than anything else he could do, which would have been unavoidably fatal. When she went for the jugular, so to speak, I really thought that was the end of it."

"Thankfully, it wasn't," Hermione said, not noticing Severus' incredulity at her genuine relief. "Just as well you had Blood Replenishing Potion on hand."

"When dealing with Riddle, or Albus, for that matter, I found it prudent to *always* carry several vials of it." He folded his arms and frowned. "Though why Fawkes came to assist is a mystery to me."

"I couldn't believe it when he appeared. Out of nowhere. I wasn't convinced it was him at first. And I still insist he wanted me to loosen your collar. I saw the blood had clotted over your wounds, so I guess Fawkes just finished the healing process for you. Did you hear him sing?"

"I did. When I stood before the Veil." Severus helped himself to more tea and wrapped his hands around the mug. "I went too close to it. I didn't know what it was at the time. When I realised, I... it felt like it was pulling me through. I knew I wasn't dead, I didn't want to go through, but I couldn't move away. I heard Fawkes' song and I followed it."

"I've seen the Veil; well, you'd know about that." Hermione shivered. "How could you go close to it? It made my skin crawl just looking at it."

"As I said, at the time I didn't realise what it was. Even if I did, there were things I needed to know."

Hermione sensed he would not elaborate and changed the topic. "I wonder how Fawkes knew you needed help. Do you think Professor Dumbledore sent him?"

Severus shook his head. "Albus would not have had anything to do with sending Fawkes this time. He couldn't direct him from the other side of the Veil. I believe Fawkes was acting on his own."

"Like when Harry fought the Basilisk, perhaps. Professor Dumbledore said Fawkes had gone to Harry on his own accord because of Harry's loyalty. Fawkes knew where to find Harry, and he also knew what was needed. There's obviously more to a phoenix than we know about."

"Definitely." Severus revised what he knew about the fiery creatures. "Their interaction with anyone is based on displays of loyalty and devotion; it seems to be what they respond to. One can ask a phoenix to take action, but ultimately it is up to the bird as to whether or not anything gets done. Albus did have a very close bond with Fawkes, undeniably, but the bond did not prevent Fawkes from acting independently. As to the magical capabilities of a phoenix, I suspect the corrected, edited, and collated sum of every book ever written on the subject would describe and account for only a small fraction of their ability."

There was an academic silence as two minds contemplated phoenix lore. Only when the silence deepened did Severus look up. Hermione was sound asleep. He stood and stretched, then wandered into the other rooms for a preliminary investigation of their contents. Finding a pile of blankets in the first room, he selected one and carried it to the sleeping witch, draping it over her so deftly she did not even stir. The next room was similar in size, containing wall shelves half-filled with books, in addition to several large trunks and some cardboard boxes. Coming back into the main room, he spied a narrow door to the rear. Hermione had said it led into a bathroom, which he found to be basically equipped but serviceable, and here he stopped. A full length mirror stood against one wall. Severus stared back at himself. Thankfully, it was not an enchanted mirror. He could examine his physical state without having to endure snide comments.

Quietly, he closed the door and removed his coat. Steeling himself, he removed his waistcoat and shirt. He scanned his upper body, noting some bruising around his arms, before turning his attention to the rest of Nagini's work.

He couldn't miss where the snake's magically grafted venom fangs had sunk deep into his neck. The scars were roughly ridged and deep red. They would mark him for the rest of his life. Her unmodified teeth had left less dramatic marks, having barely broken the skin. Twin trails resembling crude Muggle stitches tracked from the fang scars to his collarbone. Fortunately, Nagini could not close her mouth with any real force when her venom fangs were extruded. Apart from a slight cut on his chest, her lower jaw had not inflicted any damage at all.

Severus rubbed his eyes and ran his left hand through his tangled hair. Slowly, hardly believing what he had glimpsed in the mirror, he examined his left forearm. The Mark had faded into oblivion along with its creator. All that remained was a small round scar where Riddle's wand had poured the evil charm into his skin.

Suddenly light-headed and desperately tired, Severus pulled on his shirt and went into the room with the blankets. With a sigh worthy of Hagrid, he stretched out on an old steel-frame bed. He was asleep the moment he closed his eyes.

Some hours later, Hermione blinked into consciousness, and frowned. The dream again. It had begun on the night of the Yule Ball. Its occurrence thereafter was sporadic, so she chose not to give it much attention. Curiously, it ceased altogether when Ron saddled himself with Lavender. On the very night Ron admitted he loved her, it returned with startling clarity and disturbing regularity.

She had tried Dreamless Sleep, occasionally, and found it made no difference at all. The dream should have delighted her, considering her affections. But it unnerved her very deeply, and not just because of the uncannily precise repetition. It showed a scene in the distant future, where nobody seemed to have learned anything. The friends she loved, her acquaintances, and herself all seemed so docile, half-asleep. *Mundane.* House rivalries and prejudices between Gryffindor and Slytherin were still there, from the Gryffindor side anyway. Surely, after all they had been through, they should have grown out of such idiocy? And as for her own part in the dreamscape, Hermione could only regard it with disbelief. Was that really herself, dull and passive, with nothing much to say? So lacking in spirit... *no aura... so mundane.* It was only a dream. It had to be. Harry had referred to Severus in the past tense. Of *course* he would. If Severus chose a life of anonymity after the War, Harry would not know he was alive. A dream, and yet...

Her pacing took her past the front room, the door stood slightly ajar. Looking in, she felt her frustrations give way to a nudge of affection. Severus had done her a small kindness in covering her with a blanket. Leaning against the door-frame, she watched him sleeping and allowed her thoughts to wander. *Nothing past tense about him at all. Ridiculous dream! I can almost hear Professor Trelawney cooing over it. 'Such portents! You are in grave danger.'* Ugh! What a load of twaddle. She roughly pushed any thought of Divination out of her mind. *Severus, are you aware you look rather nice when you're asleep? Now where did that come from, Hermione? I dare you to tell him! Oops. Never dare a Gryffindor.*

Brusquely restraining her mental wanderings and arming herself with purpose, she applied her knowledge of charms to make things a little easier for Severus while he stayed. After all, he might be here for some time, knowing the average speed of the Ministry. When she was done, she knelt beside him and deliberated on how best to wake him. Touching him was not advisable. His defensive responses were likely to be on hair-trigger. After some consideration, she softly spoke his name until he stirred and laboriously pushed himself up on his elbows.

"I keep waking up next to you," he mumbled. Hermione hid a smile; evidently he wasn't quite corpus mentis yet. She waited until his sleep-induced grogginess gave way to a more responsive state.

"I have to head back shortly; people will be wondering where I've got to. I've set all of the wards to recognise you, so you can come and go wherever and whenever you like. That includes the property boundaries if you feel the need to leave. You're no prisoner here. Just leave me a message if you do decide to go, but you are more than welcome to stay as long as you want. There are stasis charms on the food stores; all you have to do is touch the item to release them. I'm afraid it's very basic fare, stuff that will keep a long time, you know? You're familiar with Muggle appliances?"

Severus followed her into the main room. "The ones I see are familiar to me. I spent part of my childhood in a Muggle home. My father did not allow the use of magic."

Hermione accepted this surprisingly personal statement in silence before continuing. "If you look in the brown trunk in the back room you'll find some spare clothes. I transfigured them and added a size duplication charm so they should fit you. There's a map of the property on the table so you can find your way around, but I suspect some of the trails may be overgrown. The solar panels on the roof provide electricity and hot water; the control box is out on the veranda. Everything else is common sense really. If I could work it out, I'm sure you can."

Severus produced a small leather object from his pocket. "I had to miniaturise them," he explained as he dropped it on the table. "Would you mind?"

She obliged, and he took several Galleons from the un-miniaturised satchel and silently offered them to her.

"Oh, no, I couldn't. I don't need..."

"You may not feel the need to accept them, Hermione, but it is a matter of no small importance to me that you do."

Hermione gave in and accepted the money, recalling her mother's opinion of men who would not even offer to pay their own way: "Ne'er-do-well louts with no sense of pride or honour," she had said. Severus was definitely not in *that* category. She took out her Portkey and made ready to leave. "Severus, you will be all right, not using your magic?"

"I assure you, I can manage," he drawled, with a fleeting shadow of irritation. He paused and looked down, his hair masking his eyes. "Thank you," he muttered.

Hermione realised this was not a sentiment he was used to expressing. "You're welcome. I'll come back whenever I can. I just don't know what to expect when I return to Hogwarts; things will be chaotic for a while. I estimate you have enough supplies here for about a month, though I won't be that long. I'll send my Patronus before I do come so I don't catch you by surprise. It's an otter." She took the Portkey from her pocket. "Well, I guess I'll see you soon."

Then she was gone.

Severus spent some time staring out of a window into the darkness. He listened to the sound of rain drumming steadily on the tin roof until his stomach growled. He counted two days since he had eaten. A quick foray into the extremely well organised food cupboard solved that problem, and he forced himself to eat slowly while perusing Hermione's magically drawn map of the property. A Muggle topographical map of the general locality showed he was ensconced on the eastern side of a low, rambling mountain range. According to the scale, a small town was located some ten miles away "as the crow flies" in the middle of a broad valley. Satisfied that he now had adequate orientation on his whereabouts, and was comfortably full, he eyed the bathroom with anticipation. Cleansing charms were useful, but a week's worth of them left one longing for a thorough scrubbing. Without further delay, he set off to do battle with soap and water.

He wandered through the ruins of the Great Hall. A row of bodies caught his eye. Death Eaters. He examined his erstwhile comrades without emotion. Only two stirred any reaction within him: the corpses of Voldemort and Bellatrix Lestrange. He felt a deep sense of gratitude to whichever deity had allowed justice to be served.

Startled into wakefulness by the sound of maniacal laughter, Severus eased his wand into his hand, every sense on full alert. From somewhere outside, a low, rolling chuckle echoed through the cold pre-dawn air, followed by peal after peal of hysterical cackling. He let out a growling sigh as he collapsed back on his pillow. Kookaburras. Not Bellatrix. He would not have to watch his back for "Mad Bella" ever again.

"Just be thankful I'm withholding hexes, you overgrown kingfishers," he grumbled. "For now." He spent the next hour or so indulging in the luxury of dozing, then ventured out to have a proper look at what lay beyond the walls. The sun had barely risen and sent low rays of deep gold through the varied greens and greys of many hundred freshly washed Eucalypts. Severus breathed deeply, filling his lungs with the scented air. Every tree and shrub held drops of water left over from the rain; these caught the sun's rays and sparkled in all the colours of the spectrum. Tiny rainbows of dancing light. Severus stood entranced, wondering if there was something he should remember, until a thought occurred to him. He checked his left forearm again to make sure. A small celebration of Good Riddance was in order, and a medicinal-strength pot of English Breakfast would be an entirely appropriate toasting beverage.

By noon, Severus had nearly completed a thorough exploration of "The Place", as Hermione labelled it on her map, and the area immediately surrounding it. In addition to three huge tanks full to overflowing with rainwater, an empty chicken run, a vegetable garden in dire need of weeding, and a separate garden with a healthy growth of herbs where he detected the use of magic, there were three outbuildings.

The first was fitted out as, to his surprise, a very rudimentary potions lab. Hermione had anticipated the need to brew the odd medicinal or healing potion, as confirmed by the species in the herb garden. He couldn't help feeling a little pleased at this practical incarnation of his lesson plans, and would overlook the jars and bottles he recognised as having been pilfered from the Potions Store.

The second outbuilding contained metal racks full of cut wood, dried and ready for splitting. Severus picked up an axe from where it had been carelessly dropped on the floor, and tested the edge with his thumb. *It wouldn't cut butter*, he thought, smirking as he wondered if Hermione had ever tried to use it.

The third outbuilding looked far older and more neglected than the other two. When he opened the mightily protesting door, he felt like he had wandered into a scene from *Great Expectations*. From what he could see, this was a workshop, though the benches and shelves were thick with dust and cobwebs. *Not Hermione's favourite haunt, I wonder why?* Severus browsed carefully among the shelves. Under the evidence of undisturbed years, every tool was positioned and stored with great care and attention. Most were devices he had never seen before. After a cursory examination, he concluded they had something to do with woodworking. The other tools were of the engineering variety.

Memories surfaced of watching his father strip down and rebuild small engines in the tiny lean-to adjoining the house at Spinner's End. Neighbours often brought mechanical devices to his father, affirming to each other: "If Toby can't mend it, it'll go for scrap." A weight settled in his chest. That was before his magic began to manifest itself in more forceful ways than could be disguised or explained away. Before the mill closed. Before the dole, the drink, the empty stomach, the endless fighting, and the bruises.

Seeking solace, he turned his thoughts to his friendship with Lily. Her parents actually encouraged their daughter in her use of magic, and they valued it as something remarkable. To his astonishment, they also accepted him as her best friend.

He recalled an expedition with Lily's father to the Salford Docks. Mr. Evans worked as a welder in the repair yards and took the children on an outing there one day during school holidays. Petunia had stayed home. She said it was not normal, or nice, for girls to be mucking about where men work. Allowed free rein, Severus and Lily "captured" a small cargo ship in dry-dock, safely guiding it to safe harbour through force ten gales, while fighting off dozens of sea-serpents. As they clambered "ashore", Mr. Evans stopped to talk with one of the shipwrights. Severus had not intended to listen in, but the topic had relevance to him, and he absorbed every word.

"I read it's gettin' worse all started wid t' mills shuttin' t' gates five year ago, now it's everywhere." Old Norton brushed wood shavings off his burly arms and pointed to a discarded newspaper. "We're takin' on no more 'prentices in any of t' workshops. All t' young lads wid naught t' do but get into trouble. Even Gray's over in Hartlepool is facin' liquidation. Did my 'prenticeship there, I did. Ne'er guessed I'd see t' place go down."

Mr. Evans looked worried. "I heard on the wireless, Scotland too. Places along the Clyde are foldin' one after the other. Hundreds of men linin' up for one or two jobs."

"An' them what 'as work is guardin' it wid angle iron an' steel cap boots. God 'elp any daft bugger as goes lookin' in Liverpool or London." Norton retrieved the newspaper and spread it out on a grimy bench. "Tha's not t' only evil. I seen more women an' young-uns wid bruises in t' pas' year that I 'ave in me entire life. When I were lad, t' only time yer ever saw a man on t' street was when 'e were goin' t' work, comin' 'ome, and mebbe goin' t' church. Now t' only reason yer don' see 'em on t' street is 'cause they're in t' flamin' pub. Men wid sod all t' do but drink an' fight, an' it's gonna get a lot worse."

Mr. Evans leafed through the newspaper, his expression of worry becoming one of alarm. "This is it, then. We're seein' the end of an era."

"We are." At Norton's gruff reply a sense of finality settled over the workshop, and Severus knew the Muggle world was going to become even harder to live in. He took it as a warning to be ready, if not armed. His thoughts turned to the book he had found, hidden in the roof space above the attic. It contained some useful hexes if he could conquer his fear and work out how to command them. Especially the ones written in blood.

"There's options, though," Norton took a short black pipe out of his pocket and began packing the bowl with tobacco, "for them as wants t' take 'em. Lor' knows, if I were young, I'd be lookin' at it." Norton turned to the back pages of the newspaper. "'Ere, there's Gdansk in Poland if yer fancy freezin' yer bits off. South Africa, they're askin' for workers jus' don' run foul o' the law else ye'll ne'er be seen again. Australia's sayin' they'll take anyone who can 'old a spanner, an' even pay 'em t' come over. If yer like sheep an' flies. An' it's hot as Hell's hearthstones."

Mr. Evans laughed. "Wasted talents, Norton. You should've been in the Civil Service, international spokesman. Not for me; I'll see it out here."

Mr. Evans had spoken with the children afterwards, telling them they both had a very special gift and to use it wisely. A gift that would see them safely away from the dole queues and the turmoil of an entire society in collapse. He told them they had the opportunity to make something of their lives, rather than seeing themselves thrown on the scrap heap before they even left school. *Good advice, Mr. Evans. At least Lily listened to you. I stuffed it up completely. Think of every synonym for "thoughtless" and "idiot", and you might come close. Maybe Lily told you. We're friends again, by the way, after all these years. "Bout time too", you'd say.* His mood somewhat purged, he picked up an oil can. A few drops on the hinges would stop them screaming like uprooted Mandrakes every time he opened the door.

As the sun began to angle westwards, Severus set out along a trail following a long-neglected fence line. As he walked through the open woodland, he made mental notes of the plants he could see and their uses, stopping only once to give way to a startled whip snake as it crossed the trail and vanished into a clump of long grass. At length, the woodland gave way to a grassy clearing, beyond which he could see the northern fence and the entry gate.

According to Hermione's map, the gravel road passing the gate joined a bitumen road a half-mile away. From there, it wound down the range in a series of broad loops to the valley floor. Severus was not interested in exploring beyond the boundary fences. He sat on a log and contemplated his surroundings.

After some minutes of enjoying the near perfect silence, he heard the distant sound of footfalls on gravel and a voice calling what sounded like encouragements. Interest piqued, Severus slid behind the log, positioning himself so as to have a clear view of the road. The sound of crunching gravel grew steadily louder; two sets of four heavy hooves and the rumble of wheels. The voice could be heard clearly now, and under the slow drawl characteristic of rural Australia, Severus detected the inflexions of a Manchester dialect.

"Not far now, Carbine. Keep it up lad! Carlton! Pick yer feet up!"

Two Clydesdales laboured into view, chestnut flanks dark with sweat, hauling a simple flat cart stacked with timber. Though their harness was drab and well-worn, not even a wizard could deny they were a magnificent sight as they poured heart and soul into their work.

"Ease up, lads. Well done!" The horses' human companion appeared as they huffed and snorted to a halt on a level section of road just beyond the gate. The man had been walking beside the cart, directing the horses by voice alone.

Out of habit, Severus assessed him carefully. He was about as tall as himself, with a rangy build. His Muggle clothing was as work-worn as the horses' harness. He moved with a loose-jointed gait, suggestive of wiry strength and quick reflexes. As he walked around the horses, patting their necks and inspecting their hooves, Severus heard occasional phrases as man addressed animal: "good rub-down", "extra molasses", "downhill from now on", and "one more run up 'ere next Sat'day should do it."

Severus strained for a look at the man's face without success. The subject wore an ancient felt hat which shaded his eyes, and he faced the horses most of the time. At that moment, Severus felt a prickling in his fingertips, and the hair on his arms stood on end. He could have sworn the man was a Muggle, yet he was detecting the unmistakable sign of magic.

He watched as the man tested the ropes holding the load of timber in place, loosening one of them before re-tying it in a complicated hitch. If a wizard used ropes at all, he would most certainly use magic to re-tension them. Unless he had reasons for not using magic.

Severus scowled, thwarted in his attempted deductions. His current circumstances aside, he had been in many situations where the use of magic was not advantageous. However, he could not see any volatile substances, skittish magical creatures, or carnivorous plants of irritable disposition.

"Now then, lads." The call was a command, and the horses leaned forward as the cart's brake was released. "Walk on!"

Severus waited until they were well out of range before emerging. He probed Hermione's wards with his mind, finding them completely undisturbed. Cautiously approaching the gate, he scanned the spot where the horses had pulled up, sensing no trace of magic at all. Resorting to practicality, he shelved the mystery for now. He would ask Hermione about the man and the Clydesdales whenever she came back.

He unfolded Hermione's map and examined it again, choosing to follow a trail marked "to Fig Trees." As Hermione had warned him, it was indeed overgrown. He took his

time, choosing his way carefully around tangled thickets, fallen trees, and the occasional writhing tendril of Dragon's Spur with its inch-long spines. Abruptly, the ground fell away into a steep decline littered with smooth, mossy boulders. The air grew cool and moist as Severus descended into a deep gully. Reaching the bottom, he looked around with raised eyebrows and unrestrained approval. Massive fig trees stood in almost orderly lines along each side of the gully floor, their buttress roots snaking between worn and tumbled rock. Overhead, their leafy branches met and merged, forming a dense vaulted canopy through which the afternoon sun filtered, bathing the entire space in a luminous green light. There was no undergrowth to speak of, only scattered bracken and a few small trees making use of occasional patches of light. One of these caught his eye. "Duboisea," he whispered, as his mind raced with inspiration. He approached the tree and pressed its spongy bark, then crushed a few leaves, catching the scent of the ingredient he sought. "I know exactly what to do with you," he said.

Dead Muggle Walking

Chapter 4 of 32

Minerva decides to meet with an Unspeakable. On the other side of the world, someone thought to be in his grave is very much alive.

A/N's

Blue heeler generic name for the Australian Cattle Dog (registered breed)

Any resemblance between fictional Muggles and real ones, living or deceased, is purely coincidental.

Canon characters are the property of J.K. Rowling and I make no money from them.

Big "thank you's" to beta Justice.

"Not now, Albus." Minerva wearily rose from her chair and gathered a shawl about her shoulders. Almost mechanically, she moved towards the door leading out of the Headmaster's office. Except it was the Headmistress' office now, according to the Ministry. A week had passed since Voldemort's fall, and it was the first time she had been able to stomach the idea of entering her new rooms. She had not been down to the dungeons at all, nor had she been to inspect the library where Madam Pince methodically fussed over recent additions from Severus' quarters. As Headmistress, Minerva knew she would have to face these duties eventually.

When I am good and ready, she thought. She glanced back at the ever-growing pile of parchments on the desk, the latest bearing the seal of the Department of Mysteries. Her eyes narrowed at the thought of yet more demands. As far as she was concerned, the Unspeakable could join the queue as well. Although, she considered, this particular Unspeakable's missive had been the most polite correspondence she had received all week. Minerva felt herself relent, just a little. She decided to send a reply in the morning. A meeting with him would be a chance for her to put in a good word for Severus the subject of the Unspeakable's enquiry. She felt a lump come to her throat as she thought of the solitary wizard and his secret, unacknowledged endeavours. She wished she had put in a good word for him a long time ago. Hindsight was proving to be a merciless reminder.

"Minerva, wait." Albus' portrait form was as close to pleading as he ever came. "His body has not been found..."

Minerva turned in a swirl of tartan, eyes flashing fire as she wrenched the door open. "This tells me nothing conclusive, Albus. I would thank you not to try placating me with circumstantial reasons for hoping Severus is still alive. It has not escaped my notice that you are completely unrepentant of the way you *used* him."

"Severus agreed to..."

Albus' words were cut short as Minerva left the office and slammed the door behind her. Feeling a need for exercise, she took an extended route to the destination she held in mind. During a short committee meeting the day before, Minerva had requested suggestions for the on-going restoration. The window through which Severus had made his escape from Hogwarts was the last item on the list. After a short, uncomfortable silence, someone suggested a stained glass replacement depicting a giant bat. The resulting outburst of laughter was suddenly silenced as Headmistress McGonagall shot to her feet, bristling with wrath. "I will make this clear to all of you once and once only," she said quietly. "I will not have the name of Severus Snape, or his memory, turned into a subject of mirth and ridicule. I shall look after this project personally. Good day." With that, she left the table, nodding to Filius as he hastened to open a door for her.

The moon had reached its highest point in the night sky when she arrived at the window. She was pleased to see the Repair and Restoration team had replaced the glass according to her exact specifications. She had scorned the ornate and colourful in favour of clear glass and a simple design. A large pane cut in the shape of a gothic arch held place in the centre, flanked by sixteen small panes cut to fit to the surrounding stone. All were bevelled at the edges and held in black frames inlaid with silver. Minerva looked out across a landscape softened by moonlight, utterly still and solemnly beautiful. A scene the finest glazier could not capture, no matter what charms were used to bring life and colour to glass. "It was the best I could think of, Severus," she whispered. "I even think you might approve, though you would never say so."

She turned to one side and saw a suit of armour standing at ease a few feet away, its newly mended and polished breastplate gleaming softly in the blue-grey light. Minerva's eyes stung and watered as she remembered the last time she saw Severus. She had attacked him with undisguised ferocity and, while he had many opportunities to hit back in the chaos of the fighting, he did not retaliate in the way she knew he could. She did not want to recall the last words she had screamed at him. With a flick of her wand, the armour clattered to attention, sword presented in salute.

Severus occupied a sunny spot on the lowest of the front steps, armed with a circular whetstone and a bottle of honing oil, applying his blade-sharpening skills to the now functional axe. He flipped the stone over in his hand to the finer grain of the finishing side and gave the blade some final strokes. Alerted by a soft *pop* in the room behind him, he turned just in time to get out of the way as a silver otter streaked down the stairs and skidded to a stop in front of him, staring up with anxiety in its liquid eyes. Severus turned back to the door at the sound of a muffled thud. Not letting go of his instinctive caution, he ignored the otter and listened intently before entering the room. Hermione sat on the floor, looking very green.

"Hello, Severus, sorry I took so long," she said shakily, as he divested her of a Beaded Bag and all but carried her to an armchair.

"It's only been a week," he said, filling the kettle. He eyed her critically as he selected one of two labelled jars in the cupboard. Hermione leaned back with her eyes closed, breathing deeply for several minutes as the worst of her symptoms subsided.

"Is everything all right, I mean, you haven't had any difficulty here?" she asked, paling again as she tried to sit up.

"No, should I have? Though I do have some questions for you when you have recovered."

Hermione smiled queasily. "I wondered how you were getting along without magic."

Severus shrugged. "I'm used to it. During my Potions apprenticeship I was often out on fieldwork for weeks at a time. As you are aware, some specimens need to be collected without the use of magic, so being able to rough it Muggle-fashion came with the training. Thanks to your thorough preparations, I'm having a very easy time of it. Now, drink this." He handed her a mug of steaming liquid.

Hermione did as she was told, surreptitiously studying him between cautious sips. His tone had been almost conversational. He was almost sociable, at least, as far as his demeanour of aloof dignity would allow. The prospect of a sociable Severus was a fascinating conundrum.

She sneaked another look. He still wore his black trousers and boots, though in response to a warmer climate, he had dispensed with his outer layers of heavy clothing in favour of his shirtsleeves. *Maybe less formal equals more affable* she mused. Evidently, he had spent some time outdoors. He also sported a sable dusting of surprisingly fine facial hair. In sharp contrast to his appearance at Hogwarts, he looked healthy and rested. Hermione decided this was the most likely reason for the sudden display of niceties. She called herself to order; whatever he had given her was doing an amazing job. The nausea and dizziness subsided with a comforting sensation of warmth in her stomach. She could taste ginger, honey, a hint of cinnamon, something not unlike cloves probably Tulsi, and a trace of something else she could not identify. She looked up to find herself the object of evaluative study.

"Your colour has returned to normal. I trust you're feeling better?"

"Yes, thank you, absolutely. This is seriously good." Hermione tasted the brew again, puzzling over the unidentified ingredient.

Severus answered her unasked question. "You have a fine specimen of Duboisia in the gully with the fig trees. Muggles cultivate it as a ready source of compounds used in remedies for motion sickness, among other things. Though, in my opinion, the cultivars are never as potent as their wild-growing counterparts."

Hermione held the china mug as though it were the Holy Grail. "Motion sickness? I've never been car sick in my life." She considered this for a moment. "Though I have been seasick occasionally, only when the sea was rough."

Severus began to pace slowly, brows knitted in concentration. After a moment of hesitation and to Hermione's astonished delight he explained the theory behind the remedy she reverently held in her hands. "Magical travel options nearly always involve three rotational motions." He illustrated with hand movements. "Roll, pitch and yaw. I worked on the assumption your inner ear is not compensating quickly enough. It is therefore not synchronised with your visual perception, particularly when motional changes are sudden and unpredictable: as occurs in Portkey travel, for example. In Muggle car travel, the rotational movements are not as extreme and are predictable if you can see where you are going. No doubt you have read about Flying Ointments?"

Hermione nodded, responding to his lecture mode immediately. "They were not used very often as they had to be applied to the entire skin surface. In addition, they gave maybe two hours relief at best; their effectiveness was variable, and the Henbane often resulted in nasty side-effects."

"Correct, Miss Granger. Tedious to prepare, inconvenient to use, and more often than not, dangerous. Flying Ointments were never improved upon, as motion sickness is too rare an occurrence in Mediwizardry to be regarded as an important project. Finding the Duboisia prompted an idea for a different solution: one that may be taken orally and will last approximately six hours."

He went on to describe, in meticulous detail, the harvesting and preparation procedures. He stressed the importance of using the indigenous people's tradition of cold water extraction, improved upon by using a precise stirring method best conducted in the cooler hours before sunrise. The extract could then be stabilised in honey, after which it could be exposed to heat, but not direct sunlight. Finally, he described the sequence in which the other ingredients should be added, the best way to combine them, how long the potion should be allowed to reduce, and to let it rest in a dark place for one hour before use.

Hermione watched him as he lectured. *If only he had taught like this at Hogwarts* she thought, recalling the annotations in his old textbook with mixed admiration and envy. *The Half-Blood Prince himself, talking through one of his ideas. This is pure gold! Hermione, he's staring at you. How long has he been doing that? Say something!* I always thought it was something to do with vertigo."

"Perhaps vertigo is merely a result of your affliction, not a cause." He handed her a jar filled with orange-brown syrup, instructions for use detailed on a label taped around it. "If you take one spoonful in hot water before Portkeying or flying, it should prevent your symptoms from occurring. I'd be interested to know if it works. Keep it with you; there is another in the cupboard."

Hermione read the label carefully, noting he had printed the instructions. He had anticipated the chance someone might see her preparing a dose. Anyone familiar with his cursive script might recognise it and ask questions. Hermione could not recall ever seeing Severus write in print. It was a fair assumption nobody else had either.

Severus ceased his pacing and straddled one of the benches at the table. "Obviously, I made use of your facilities. They were adequate for the task."

"Ah. Yes. About the... er..."

"The items so kindly donated by the Hogwarts Potions Store?"

Hermione blushed and stifled a groan. She knew he would have found the contraband sooner or later. Risking a quick glance, she took courage from a hastily removed smirk and sidestepped the uncomfortable issue. "You said you had some questions for me?"

Without preamble, Severus related his observations of the previous Sunday, missing no detail in his description of the man and the horses. He voiced his conclusions the man was either a wizard in hiding, or a Muggle in possession of a powerful magical object.

Hermione leaned back in her chair, perplexed. "I surveyed the immediate area when I first came here and whenever I could after that. I'm sure there are no other wizards or witches around. There's not many Muggles either, perhaps three hundred in town. I haven't detected any sign of magic anywhere. No wards either, apart from my own. The gravel road leads down the other side of the range. There is a Clydesdale stud where the flat land begins, owned by one Douglas Fardon. He does not match the description of your man, though. Mr. Fardon is like a smaller version of Hagrid, with blond hair.

"I have seen the horses in working harness before, during a gathering of the Medieval Re-enactment Society. They use Mr. Fardon's paddocks every year, I was told. He doesn't charge them anything for it." Hermione smiled at the memory of horse paddocks sprouting a medieval village overnight. "The entire population of Hogsmeade could have blended in with the crowd easily: robes, owls, and all. But I know you could have shown their alchemist a thing or two. I digress, I'm sorry. On the few occasions I have seen the Clydesdales, there was nobody with them who could be the man you saw last week." She stood up and wandered around the room. "You said you heard him talking about coming back up here?"

"Yes. I heard him say 'one more run up here next Saturday'. He was talking to the horses," Severus added, disdainfully.

"Why shouldn't he talk to horses? Most people do. Merlin, that's today! He showed up around three in the afternoon? Good! It's barely nine o'clock; we have time! Accio broom! I'll place a Tell on the road leading up here," she explained to an open-mouthed Severus.

"You're not going to try that *now*?" he exclaimed in alarm, as he followed her out to the veranda.

Hermione pounded down the stairs, broom in tow. She turned and grinned cheekily at him. "Of course I am. You said you wanted to know if your latest creation would work."

"Not like this!" Severus charged after her, too late to stop her as she took off in a recklessly steep climb. "I thought you'd at least...", he shouted, wincing as she made a swooping turn and disappeared through, rather than over, the tree tops. "Practise. First."

Severus spent a good five minutes anxiously shifting his weight from one foot to the other, quietly cursing all things Gryffindor. After ten minutes, he was beginning to worry. As soon as he decided to collect the medical kit and go searching for her, a shriek and a laugh caused him to look skyward with an oath of relief, just in time to see Hermione career to ground level and pull up way too hard. The broom shuddered to an instant vertical stop and dropped her neatly on her back.

"I really have to work on my stops," she gasped, as he hurried over to give assistance. "That was better than the last one! The broom stopped, but I kept going," she explained, turning her hands palm-upwards to reveal gravel-filled gouges and grazed forearms. She began to laugh again, falling back onto the grass and looking at him with delight. "That was amazing! I've never flown without feeling sick before! You, sir, are incredible!"

Severus took in the scene before him. A wild-haired, bright-eyed, poppy-cheeked witch, sprawled on the grass, robes askew, covered in leaves and twigs breathless, smiling, and telling him he was incredible. He really did not know what to say, what to do, or where to look. After an awkward moment of complete helplessness, he slid the toe of his boot under the broom and flicked it up into his hand. "Come on," he said, indicating to the indoors. "Unless you're waiting for Fawkes to come and help you."

Hermione cringed a little as her cleansing charm swept tiny pieces of gravel out of her left hand. Severus watched with reserved interest as she switched wand hands and repeated the procedure for the injuries to her right hand. "It took a while to master left-handed wand waving," she said. "I can only do the more simple movements and some hexes." Her expression darkened as she recalled the Battle of Hogwarts.

"A skill that has saved your life, I gather. A useful one to have, particularly if your assailant does not know you have it." Severus searched the contents of the medical kit. Hermione reached for her Beaded Bag and fished out a small bottle of Dittany.

"I had this with me when we were... on the quest of the Horcruxes. Even this amount proved difficult to get."

"That's what I was looking for," he murmured as he took the bottle from her. He picked up a wad of cotton and sat opposite her. Without a word, he firmly grasped her right hand and inspected her injuries.

"I feel like I'm having my fortune told," she commented after a moment, as he carefully treated the cuts on her palm.

He snorted. "I haven't said anything. Even if I did come up with something, I wouldn't trust it. Divination was not my subject. I heard it was not yours either, courtesy of the staff meeting-become-gossip-session. Hermione? Are you unwell?" Severus paused in his ministrations as the colour left her face. Her eyes betrayed both distress and a very deep sadness.

"No, I'm fine, really. It's... it's something I need to sort out for myself. I just haven't decided how to do it yet." She blushed deeply before blurting out, "It's something Professor Trelawney said, before I walked out of her class."

Severus raised an eyebrow. "Something Trelawney *said* prompted you to flounce out of her classroom in high dudgeon?" He regarded her coolly. "How on earth did you manage to keep to your seat in Potions?" Not waiting for a response, Severus resumed his application of Dittany, working his way along the grazes to her forearm. "Occasionally," he muttered resentfully, "Trelawney would come up with something worth taking notice of. Such occasions were exceptionally rare and never the result of conscious effort on her part. Most of her consciousness was, after all, permanently stewed in cheap sherry. Because of her often diminished state of mind, she was rarely taken seriously. If Trelawney has indeed presented you with a quandary worth pursuing, I am sure you will reach a thoroughly researched solution." He reached for her left hand. "Now, is there a reason you do not frequent the workshop?"

Hermione blinked at the sudden change of subject. Caught off guard, she dithered while she ordered her thoughts. Severus did not take his dark gaze off his self-appointed task.

"I... well... I don't know what most of the tools are for, or how to use them. I don't have any reason to go in there." She chewed her lower lip. "I find it such a sad place. It was Grandad's workshop. He was a cabinet maker by trade, and he could make the most wonderful wooden toys. He used to make them for me and send them over to England. The rocking horse was the best it had a real saddle and everything. We only visited here a few times. I was seven when we last came over, but we kept in touch with letters. He had a stroke eight years ago and never touched his tools again. Grandma said it was like he had forgotten what they were. He died two years later, I never got to see him... to say goodbye."

"The tyranny of distance," Severus commented, meeting her eyes at last. "For Muggles at any rate. Why did they choose to live here? It is somewhat isolated."

"Grandad took it on after he came back from service in Papua New Guinea, at the end of World War II. The government had a land grant scheme for ex-servicemen. He chose this property because his uncle came from the district and is listed on the war memorial in town: Private A. F. Granger. He fell at Pozières in 1916. The workshop is all that's left of the original buildings. The rest were destroyed in a bushfire twenty years ago. As you can see, the rebuilding was never fully completed." A thought suddenly occurred to her. "Severus, have you been to this continent before?"

"Where do you think the crocodile hearts came from?" he asked, stoppering the Dittany. "The beasts are farmed for meat and hides in the northern tropics. It was much easier, and less parchment-work, to source organs for educational purposes from the crocodile farms. It also provided the opportunity to collect reagents available nowhere else in the world: platypus venom, Wollemi cones, and fruit of the Blue Quandong tree, to name a few."

"Blue Quandong? What do you use the fruits for?"

"Anti-rheumatic Draught." Severus gazed out of a window. "Argus found it to be very effective."

Hermione examined her hands. He had done a very thorough job. "Thanks for this," she said. "I don't think I'd have got all of them."

Severus gave what might have been the beginning of a smile. "You're welcome."

Severus eyed the Beaded Bag with curiosity. Hermione had used it to bring a veritable feast, among other useful things. While he bridled at the thought of saying so, he was quietly impressed at her imaginative use of an Extension Charm. Undetectable, no less. He looked around the room, considering everything Hermione had done to prepare for whatever the outcome of the War may have been. Secretly, he thought her efforts were both outstanding and remarkable. He idly pushed a chicken bone around his plate.

Hogwarts had become an unofficial half-way house for house-elves who found themselves without families, houses, or both. With the restoration in full swing and swarms of sightseers from all over the Wizarding world, they were as busy as they could desire to be. They were only too pleased to provide Hermione with edible bounty at any time, under any circumstance, no questions asked. Hermione eyed the last pork pie, resplendent with gelatine and brown pickle, and decided she really could not accommodate it. She nudged the plate towards Severus, who shook his head and drained his pint of Hogwarts Midnight.

"Albus was really fond of this," he said, nudging the wooden keg at his elbow. "Though how he could drink it immediately after lemon drops was beyond me. How did you know I'm partial to it?"

"I once heard Professor Dumbledore plying you with 'a keg of double stout and a game of chess', as we left the Great Hall after dinner. I've had the run of the castle, lately, including the cellars."

"Minerva's favourite cub! So you stole one, concealed it in your Beaded Bag, and fled the country with it."

"Shall I return it?"

"No."

The next hour or so was spent debating how long it would take for some normality to return to Wizarding Britain. Severus was of the opinion too many had died and too much had been lost for things to ever be truly normal again. Hermione was optimistic that people and places would eventually recover, with significant improvements from which all would benefit. Eventually agreeing to disagree, Hermione had just begun to describe Harry's attempts to make an appointment with the Wizengamot administrators when she sat up with an exclamation.

"The Tell, someone's coming! We have enough time to walk down; I put the Tell where the road begins to slope upwards."

They walked in silence though the afternoon sunshine, both a little anxious about who, or what, they might discover. When they reached the north boundary, Hermione suggested concealing themselves closer to the road for a better view, pointing out a dense thicket of pavetta with a healthy tangle of invading vines. Severus reluctantly agreed, but only after she had cast a Disillusionment Charm on them both.

As before, Severus heard man and horses approach steadily along the gravel road. The scene was almost identical to his previous observation: the same horses pulling the same cart, loaded with the same timber. The man called the animals to a halt and proceeded with his evidently routine checks. Severus glanced at Hermione, who slightly shook her head; she had never seen him before. Her eyes widened as she flexed her fingers, a faint tingling in the pads of her fingertips told of *something* magical. Evidently, Severus was more sensitive to it. He had rolled up his sleeves to the elbow, and she could see the hairs on his forearms bristling.

A distant drone warned of a vehicle approaching from the opposite direction. The man straightened and tilted his head as he listened, then expertly manoeuvred the horses a little further off the road. He walked to the side of the cart and leaned against it, folding his arms across his chest. If Hermione had thought the posture was familiar, she nearly gasped when the man took his hat off to run a hand through his shaggy thatch of iron-grey hair. In profile, his prominent nose and the set of his brows were as good as identical to those of the wizard beside her. She noticed, with a twinge of fear, Severus was tense to the point of holding his breath. He buried his fingers in the grass, gripping until his knuckles were bloodless.

A mud-spattered four-wheel-drive utility rumbled into sight, a blue heeler prancing happily in the cargo tray, and pulled up at a reasonable distance from the horses. Not sure if she was taking a foolish risk, Hermione covered Severus' hand with her own, giving a gentle squeeze. Thankfully, he didn't jump or speak. She looked him intently in the eyes, then indicated the dog with a slight movement of her head. In response, Severus became more still and silent than she would have thought possible for someone with life and breath. The driver cut the engine and heaved himself out of his seat, slamming the door shut with exaggerated ire.

"There ya are, ya miserable old bastard! Bin lookin' for ya everywhere!"

The miserable old bastard hung his hat on the brake lever. "Reckon you found me," he growled, by way of greeting.

"What's this get-up for? Christ, mate, ya look like yev walked outta the eighteenth century."

Hermione winced. Eddie, for such was the newcomer's name, was used to making himself heard over a stockyard full of angry, half-wild steers. She had spoken with him in town several times, distracting herself from the ringing in her ears by focusing on the badge adorning the front of his hat: "Danger, falling hair", it read. She had soon deduced that even a discreet *Muffliato* was out of the question. Anything less than one hundred and thirty decibels out of Eddie, and the whole country would want to know what was amiss. She bit her lip as the cattle dog snuffed the air, whined, and looked right at them, tail waving proudly.

"Diesel! What's with ya?" Eddie shoved his hands in his pockets and regarded his dog with a frown, his eyes following the dog's line of sight. "Nothin' there, mate. Lie down."

The concealed witch and wizard mentally sighed with relief as Diesel obediently dropped to the floor of the cargo tray. After a moment, he raised his head and rested his muzzle on the side-panel, ears pricked, brown eyes trained on them.

"Fox, prob'ly," Eddie's taciturn companion offered.

"Those feral bloody... nah, he'd get his back up if it was. Dunno, mate, he usually does ~~that~~ when it's people. Ya know, I never seen anyone in there, not since old Granger died, poor bugger. His missus shot through to the U.K. soon after. Their granddaughter owns the place now. I seen her a few times, but she don't live here. Me mind's goin', I reckon can't recall a bloody thing about her." Eddie nodded towards the gate. "Wonder what she'll do with the place, if anythin'. I'm not gonna check it out, though. Could be some squatter in there waitin' with a twelve-bore. Me 'phone doesn't work 'round here neither. Bloody thing's fine everywhere else." Eddie approached the horses and gave their ears a rough scratch. "G'day Carbine, Carlton. Not workin' yez too hard, is he?"

"They're up to it, Eddie. I'm gettin' 'em fit for a job in the National Park next weekend."

"Ya kept that quiet!" Eddie shrewdly eyed the load of timber. "Is it for the viewin' platform? The one to stop half-wits fallin' off the cliffs?"

"Yeah, that'd be it. The rangers' quad bikes can't take the materials up there. Trucks are too 'eavy. They'd carve up the trails. Clydesdales are the perfect solution. I reckon if they can pull a load up 'ere, the Park job should be easy for 'em."

Eddie nodded sagely. "Speakin' of weekends, are ya free the one after next? The Ipswich mob finished the boiler for the wool scour, trucked it in yesterday. The Heritage crowd wants to set up the whole shebang in Daley's shearin' shed, over the other side of the valley. If we can fit it in with the rest of his bloody steam engines. Can't fault him though, it's a bit of a money-spinner. Anyway, we could use yer know-how to get the mongrel thing workin'."

"Sounds good. It's a while since I worked on anythin' big. Yeah, I'll be there."

"Good on ya, Toby! I'll let the others know. Best let ya go, then. Don't wanna keep 'em standin' too long," Eddie said, scrutinising the horses.

With a parting bark from Diesel, the utility trundled away. Toby scanned the front fence for a short time. His grey eyes passed over Severus and Hermione's vantage point without pause. Frowning, he returned to the horses. His commands were given in a quieter voice as he released the brake and directed them on their way.

Severus stood uncertainly, his breathing ragged. Hermione watched him anxiously, knowing something momentous had happened and it was not altogether good. Unsure of what to say, she waited for Severus to speak first.

"He's dead." Severus was very pale, and he spoke in little more than a whisper.

Hermione racked her brains: and then she remembered. When she had searched for the identity of the Half Blood Prince, she had not only found out who he was, but also the names of his parents. The physical resemblance, the name, and Severus' obvious discomfort, were more than mere coincidence.

"I stood in front of the graves, I saw the names on the stones, and I read about it in the Muggle news. He's supposed to be dead." Severus rubbed his eyes as he spoke.

"How did you find out... about...?"

"I was still a student at Hogwarts. Lucius took me to the Room of Requirement and told me. He got permission from Dumbledore for us to go to Malfoy Manor that evening. He... he said the Dark Lord... Riddle... had dealt with them the same way he had dealt with his own... parents. The traitor witch and the filthy Muggle, he called them. The... Riddle, had ordered the execution to show everyone I was in his favour. They made it look like a murder-suicide. I took the Mark not long afterwards."

"Favour? By murdering your parents?" Hermione stared at him with disbelief and horror.

"Not all parents are worthy of the title," he snarled, advancing on her. As though suddenly disembodied, he saw Hermione back away, her hands held up in supplication.

He saw himself, barely contained rage seething in every movement eyes cold and expressionless, like black ice. The stream of invective he was about to release lodged somewhere between his chest and his throat as a memory flashed through his mind. A small part of history threatening to repeat itself. *I pushed Lily away, and regretted it ever after*, he thought. *I will not make that mistake again* He stood still and took several deep breaths, hands fisted by his sides. "I apologise," he mumbled stiffly, not looking directly at Hermione. He sat down with his back against a tree. Absently, he gathered up a handful of fallen leaves and began ripping them into pieces. After a moment of trepidation, Hermione sat next to him.

"If you never want to mention it again, I promise I will not breathe a word of it," she told him.

Severus stared at the small pile of leafy fragments in his hand. "Riddle knew I wanted nothing to do with them ever again. He knew how much I detested them. He also knew that I, when the mood took me, wanted retribution."

Hermione suppressed a shiver. A soon-to-be Death Eater wanting retribution was not a pleasant thought. She almost jumped when he spoke again.

"As much as I'd like to let sleeping dragons lie, I'm afraid that option is not available. Regardless of his identity, there is still the matter of the magical object. Something so powerful should not be in the hands of a Muggle."

Hermione frowned. "Are you sure it is an object?"

"Absolutely sure. Believe me, if it really is him, he does not have a magical cell in his body."

"Would he have got it from your mother?"

Severus glared in the direction of the gate. "He probably took it by force, to pawn it for drinking money. She was too pathetic to defend herself. Or anyone else."

Hermione drew a long breath. This was going to be difficult. She chose to do as she had always done in challenging circumstances. She summoned up a generous helping of logic. "We need more information then, if he is to be tracked and the object recovered."

"We, Miss Granger?"

"I was sitting there looking at him too, *Severus*. It will be much easier for me to do some research. Unless you like the idea of wandering into town and asking questions of people who've never seen you before."

"Have some standing there, do you, *Hermione*?"

"As a matter of fact, I do. I have a forbear on the memorial. And Diesel likes me. He has a sixth sense about people. I hear he's never been wrong. In this community, those two things carry a lot of clout."

Severus rolled his eyes. "This community, where people converse with horses and value the judgement of dogs." He sighed in resignation. "How do you propose to acquire the information?"

"O Master spy," Hermione intoned with a theatrical flourish. "In any small country town where are the best places to listen to, and participate in, local gossip?"

"In order of usefulness: the pub, the hardware store, and the butcher," he replied promptly.

"Very good, Mr. Snape. Five points to Slytherin. I hope you like beef. In large quantities." She took heart as he huffed impatiently, raising an eyebrow at the mention of meat. He was down, but not out, and recovering quickly. "Well," she continued, "it's not the wisest thing for an unattended female to walk into a public bar. Not in places like this, anyway. It would attract too much attention. As I don't need any hardware, the butcher will have to do. I'm sure I'll get more than a few leads from him. That is, if I have your permission to make enquiries?"

Severus thought for a moment in silence, his features alternately clouded with anger and bewilderment. Appearing to have made a decision, he got to his feet and, to Hermione's surprise, offered his arm. "May I escort an unattended female back to the house?" he enquired smoothly. They were nearly at the front door when she released his arm, and he quietly said, "Find out as much as you can."

Gossip and Guesswork

Chapter 5 of 32

Arawn considers new developments concerning a certain artefact, Oriens reaches a conclusion on the loyalties of Severus Snape, Hermione makes the front page of the Prophet, and Severus reluctantly digests new information.

A/Ns:

Bush telegraph: an inclusive term for all forms of communication in remote areas.

Dinkum: shortened form of "Fair dinkum". In the context of this chapter, it translates to "I'm telling you the truth."

Jackeroo: male farm worker usually involved with cattle, horses or sheep.

D'accord: OK/agreed

Évidemment: of course

La question est the question is

Thanks again to Justice for beta-work.

Canon characters are the property of J.K. Rowling. I do not make a single cent from them.

Arawn prowled restlessly in his study. Across his desk lay untidy piles of parchment and scrolls. He knew the contents of every document by heart and could recite them word for word if he put his mind to it. He had searched them over and over again, trying to find the smallest clue as to the artefact's purpose. Again, he had found nothing he didn't already know. Sighing, he stood motionless as he remembered the day it first passed through his hands. Its beauty, the sensation of its antiquity, and the aura of power it exuded immediately captivated and intrigued him.

The artefact had been found on the body of a Death Eater, identified as Alroy Crevan, who was fatally wounded in a short skirmish with Aurors not long after the murders of James and Lily Potter. Interestingly, Crevan did not wear the artefact. He carried it in a small box of black iron, secured in his pocket with a Sticking charm. The box was embossed with the Skull and Serpent, and it took all of Arawn's skill to open it.

To Arawn, these observations meant three things: Voldemort placed great value on the artefact, the high-ranking Crevan was entrusted to be its bearer, and it was not in use. As to *why* it was not in use, Arawn could only wonder. Perhaps Voldemort did not know what it was or how to use it. With ancient magical artefacts this was not an uncommon situation. Maybe Voldemort *did* know but was not *ready* to use it.

There was a third possibility. Sometimes magical objects would only work properly for a specific wizard or witch, a connection often passed on through familial inheritance. Voldemort may have been waiting for a specific person to come to him, or to be proved loyal, if the person in question had already taken his Mark.

Arawn had made numerous attempts to extract the artefact's secrets, but the protective charms and wards had a power he had never encountered before. Like a mental labyrinth, they led him down one false path after another, contemptuously spitting him out at the very point where he had started. He felt drained and ill after every attempt. No other Unspeakable dared try an investigation. Even Oriens, fearless when it came to explorations into the unknown, refused to tamper with it. Oriens had good reason for renitence. He was the one who had found Arawn sprawled on his back, artefact in clenched hand, catatonic with exhaustion and incapable of speech.

To his chagrin, Arawn did not get the chance to investigate further. Amid a chaotic reorganisation of departments after the First Wizarding War, he was removed from the position of Curator of Unidentified Antiquities. The artefact itself was consigned to the vaults, joining countless other objects no-one alive had any claim to. He took up his new position as Chief Administrator of Dementors reluctantly, though he was determined to make the best of it. While his new charges could not, in any sense, be described as winsome creatures, he soon found himself fascinated with their brooding ways. Once he had learned to shield his body and mind from the effects of their presence, the Dementors followed his instructions with detached compliance.

An unexpected insight into the artefact arrived in the form of a heavily chained and guarded Augustus Rookwood. The ex-Unspeakable and Death Eater joined the inmates of Azkaban nearly a year after the Potter murders and Voldemort's unexpected demise. Arawn stood as witness to the interrogation, a Dementor silently hovering beside him. During the questioning, Arawn merely observed, as he had been instructed to do, until he heard a name mentioned. The name was connected with the artefact, which still hung, like a crystalline ghost, in the back of his mind. Augustus, in a desperate attempt to plea-bargain, had bitterly vilified a fellow Death Eater: *"Voldemort's favourite! That's who I'm talking about. The smirking, skulking, spawn of a Muggle dog! If it weren't for Malfoy and that grave-robber, Crevan, we'd have done part of your job for you long ago! Dumbledore vouches for him? Faugh! Snape has you all fooled, then, hasn't he?"*

For an organisation with a vehement hatred of anyone lacking the correct blood status, it was strange to hear of a half-blood being recruited, let alone finding favour with Voldemort. True, Voldemort himself was a half-blood – a fact conveniently overlooked by his Death Eaters. However, as Augustus bluntly stated, some in the organisation resented Snape's presence. So, Arawn thought, *Snape had minders? Crevan and Malfoy, evidently. It has to be Lucius Malfoy. Abraxas passed through the Veil years ago* Arawn was distracted by the Dementor's restless shifting. Without thinking, he mentally told the creature to be patient. He barely managed to contain his fright when a voice slid into his mind. The voice fell, deadweight, into his consciousness. Arawn imagined it was the sound rotting bones might make as they crumbled under their own weight. A sensation uncomfortably suggestive of cold skeletal fingertips spider-walked up his spine.

"Hungry," the voice said, and Arawn's heavily shielded fear slowly gave way to exhilaration. Dementors could communicate!

Bringing himself back to the present, Arawn summoned the Azkaban prisoner lists. Even four weeks after Voldemort's second demise, he could not believe his luck. Rookwood had been stunned by Aberforth Dumbledore during the Battle of Hogwarts and now resided in Azkaban for a third time. Lucius Malfoy, apprehended in the Great Hall, graced a cell on the same floor as Rookwood.

Arawn's familiarity with the prison layout would prove most useful. He had not been able to privately question either wizard during their previous terms of incarceration. Things were very different now. When the Dementors defected to Voldemort, Arawn engineered his way into the senior ranks of the Azkaban prison staff – Interrogations Section.

If only Snape had been found. Snape's death was a distinct possibility; there had been no trace of him physically or magically. Arawn shook himself out of a sudden rush of anger. He had no definite proof Snape was linked to the artefact – why waste his energies in temper? As for questioning Rookwood and Malfoy, he could bide his time. He was sure more productive uses would be soon found for the large contingent of guards currently attending both wizards. He checked his wards and shields, cast a Silencing charm on his entire study, and sent a summons. He settled down to wait. Even if it did cross the English Channel by slip-streaming above the Eurotunnel Shuttle, the swiftest of Dementors could take some time.

If he was an Animagus, as well as an Unspeakable, Minerva was sure he would take the form of a goat. Or something goat-like. She caught herself, more than once, looking for a set of horns in his mane of loose dark curls. Or trying to catch a glimpse of his ears – surely they were pointed? His pale gold eyes unnerved her – and not simply because his coffee-brown skin accentuated them in startling contrast. Several times, she thought she had seen the pupils as horizontal slits. She adjusted her spectacles and looked again. His pupils were round and entirely normal.

"I am sure you understand," she said, "aside from what I have just spoken of, I cannot give you any more factual information regarding Professor Snape. However, I will reiterate, he was working for the light. The whole time." Minerva's voice shook. "And we all treated him shamefully."

Oriens sat forward in his chair, bracing his hands on his knees as he straightened his arms. "From everything I have heard he didn't cultivate anyone's good regard. Every ex-student I have spoken to marks him as a vicious-tempered, points-deducting bully. Even those from Slytherin House were wary of him. Though I must admit his competence as a teacher speaks for itself. The best healing potions are invariably produced by his former students."

Minerva discreetly dabbed her eyes with a handkerchief. "There could be any number of reasons for his unapproachable nature. Some, I think, I may know. Others are mere conjecture, perhaps wishful thinking for his sake. Have you spoken to Mr. Potter?"

"Not yet. Mr. Potter's information is classified at the highest level. Until he is heard before the Wizengamot, Mr. Potter is not to be approached on the subject of Professor Snape's loyalties. He and Miss Granger have been most adroit in badgering the Ministry. They make a formidable team when they have a cause to fight for. I note young Mr. Weasley does not share their enthusiasm."

Minerva gave a rueful smile. "I don't think Mr. Weasley is willing to change his opinion of Professor Snape. It was a surprise to everyone when Mr. Potter insisted his words during the Battle of Hogwarts were true. We all thought he was being very clever and baiting Voldemort into acting rashly. I have never seen a young man so dismayed, and he would not be consoled. He said he never even tried to keep a civil tongue in his head when dealing with Professor Snape. Mind you, Professor Snape never did anything to win Mr. Potter's goodwill. To all evidence, they absolutely detested each other." Minerva gazed at a rack of ink bottles, untouched since Severus had last used them. "It must have been unbearably hard for him," she said as she glanced pointedly at Albus' empty portrait, "seeing the eyes of his beloved friend in a face so like his most hated enemy's."

Oriens waited until the Headmistress emerged from her reverie before asking his next question. "Did Mr. Weasley follow his friend's example in lack of civility?"

Minerva Levitated a tiny spider away from the ink bottles, depositing the creature in a shaded corner of a window ledge. "Not with quite the same intensity. He was never as reckless when it came to insubordination. In staff meetings, Professor Snape did not rail against him nearly as much as he did Mr. Potter."

"And Miss Granger?"

"Miss Granger always treated Professor Snape, and the subject he taught, with respect. She is one of the very few students who never engaged in backbiting him. Her Potions marks were consistently good, and he rarely took points from her. Oh, he would grumble about her occasionally, but nothing serious by *his* standards. I think she tested Professor Snape's patience with her zeal to be first to answer every question. Admittedly, she could get a little overenthusiastic."

Oriens looked thoughtful. "Would it be possible to speak with Miss Granger? I understand she has taken a room in Gryffindor Tower while she prepares for her N.E.W.T.s year."

Minerva's brows knitted as she removed her spectacles and sighed deeply. "I shall make bold to use my position as Headmistress and refuse permission at this point in time. Miss Granger has recently been through a very personal upset, which is one reason she is residing here, rather than Grimmauld Place. If you have seen the *Prophet's* latest cover story, I think you are able to gauge the delicate nature of her situation."

Oriens nodded soberly. Intrigue, as always, was quick to fly. In spite of the current oversupply of newsworthy topics, the *Prophet* still favoured juicy sensationalism.

Severus pushed back from the table as he ordered his thoughts yet again. He had known Hermione had something personal to deal with, but had not tried to guess at its nature. It was simply none of his business. Looking at the front page of the *Prophet*, he was relieved it was none of his business.

Unavoidably, he had seen students' relationships begin and end during his years of teaching more times than he had cared enough to notice. He never involved himself in the fallout. It was the duty of Head Girls, Head Boys, Minerva, or Poppy, to pick up the teary, jinx-throwing pieces and administer generous amounts of comfort and common sense. Neither of which he was able he curled his lip in distaste or willing to dispense.

Hermione, however, did not fit the stereotype to which he had become accustomed. At least not in *his* presence. Arriving in the early afternoon, preceded by a mournful otter, Hermione handed him the most recent copy of the *Prophet*, directing him to page three. After a discreet glance at the front page and an equally discreet assessment of Hermione, Severus congratulated himself on having the presence of mind to provide her with sustenance. She looked a little less waif-like after a roast beef sandwich and a strong cup of tea. Her eyes were red and swollen, and her demeanour listless, yet she carried herself with quiet dignity. *Like a queen*, he caught himself thinking. After a brief verbal exchange of information, she solemnly presented him with a bundle of carefully collated and cross-referenced parchments, then excused herself to return to her room in the Gryffindor Tower.

Severus leafed through the *Prophet* again. Page three carried the news of the Wizengamot hearing to be conducted on the 19th of July, with the entirely predictable dribble about why Harry Potter might want to clear the name of "Dumbledore's Man or was he?" To his consternation, Severus found himself skimming the article of most relevance to himself in favour of thoroughly scrutinising pages one and two.

He scowled irritably as he examined the three photographs displayed there. The first showed Hermione and Weasley caught in an affectionate embrace before they turned away, laughing and embarrassed, from the camera. "Childhood sweethearts", the caption read, in sickly pink lettering with far too many flowers.

The second photograph showed an obviously distraught Ronald Weasley on the verge of hexing the photographer before being led away by his mother and sister. "Hermione Granger dumps her War Hero after the tragic death of his brother!" the caption flickered angrily in red.

Severus ground his teeth as he looked at the third photograph Hermione with her arms around Potter before the first challenge of the Triwizard Cup. How the Skeeter pest could dig *that* up again and couch it in her latest mound of Thestral dung beggared all belief. Skeeter's diatribe completely filled page two. She suggested an unrequited love affair with Potter as the reason for Hermione's *capricious* behaviour, and then busily painted Hermione as some sort of shallow, self-absorbed, wizard-using hanger-on.

Severus longed to strafe the page and Skeeter with some creative variations of *Incendio*. Hermione was not capricious or shallow, and he had seen her selfless generosity for himself. "Wizard-using hanger-on," he growled. "There's the Basilisk calling the Ashwinder venomous." A protective feeling washed over him, priming his muscles with blood in readiness for a duel. Savouring the moment, he let his magic build as it would. Only when it threatened to spark from his fingertips did he gently restrain it. His power was definitely growing stronger; now his physical energies were close to fully restored. A few short weeks of uncomplicated living, with decadent amounts of sleep, and he had shaken off years of fatigue as easily as a Unicorn shakes off loose hair.

He stared balefully at the collated notes Hermione had written up for him, then meandered aimlessly around the room in search of a diversion. Hermione had so much going on in her own life. Her parents, Weasley, N.E.W.T.s, and harbouring a wanted fugitive not to mention the cumulative effects of the War. Even so, she had insisted on collecting information about the Muggle now positively identified as Toby Snape.

He muttered a quiet oath and turned back to the table. The least he could do would be to examine the results of her efforts, instead of procrastinating his way around the subject as if it were a lurking Boggart. Hermione had been right about the butcher; his information proved reliable and useful. While he could not provide all of Toby's expatriate history, one lead had given rise to another, and Hermione had faithfully followed them all. Severus supposed she could, if asked inconvenient questions, account for her visits to some truly remote places as attempts to locate her own parents. The trail of Obliviated, Confunded, and no-doubt-befuddled Muggles might be a little harder to justify.

He ruthlessly pulled himself together. After all, on Riddle's order, he had endured the presence of Wormtail at Spinner's End without losing self-control and killing him for his role in Lily's murder. If he could handle that situation, then surely reading a few notes about his... father... was not beyond him. He smirked in satisfaction as he sat down. He had made Wormtail's life hell with some insidiously painful and *entirely* accidental hexes. Revenge is a dish best eaten cold, he had heard. Severus disagreed. Sometimes, revenge could be savoured warm. Preferably terrified and struggling.

After a tedious hour of reading and thinking, he sorted the parchments into their original order. Feeling a need for fresh air, he relocated to the veranda. The shock of cold air surprised him. He read the thermometer hanging beside the door. Zero centigrade was nothing by Scottish standards, but in Scotland he never ventured outside wearing less than two layers of clothing, let alone barefoot.

He wandered out into the open and turned his contemplations skyward. The night was clear and moonless: the constellations blazed diamond-bright against an infinite depth of black velvet. Severus traced the upside-down forms of Orion and Pegasus. With a few strokes of mental geometry, the Southern Cross and Pointers faithfully marked the direction of the South Pole. He tracked a Muggle satellite, a faint pinprick of light, as it followed a lonely path within the prison of its orbit. A meteor arced across the sky as a brief trail of blood-red luminescence. A *red dragon*, Severus thought, recalling any number of fanciful explanations for such phenomena. Having cleared his head, he reflected on Hermione's findings.

Under an assisted migration program, Toby Snape left Britain by sea on the *S. Australis*. Arriving in Sydney with twenty pounds in his pocket and a bag of tools slung over his back, he found work immediately as a greaser in a small engineering factory. An instinctive knack with all things mechanical, including large-scale industrial machinery, soon marked him as a candidate for more salubrious employment. With his skills, he could go anywhere in Australia and pick up work for the asking.

Evidently, that was exactly what he did. Mining, locomotive maintenance, mechanic for a trucking company, then driving trucks himself. For three years he hauled general freight across the most inhospitable parts of the country between Adelaide and Darwin, Perth and Melbourne. A short stint with the Newcastle steelworks preceded a move back into rural areas and sporadic reports of itinerant labour on cattle stations, farms, and orchards.

At this point, Toby had made an unexpected addition to his list of occupations: horse training. It started while Toby was at work on a remote cattle station and the jackeroos decided to "blood" their new chum with an infamously vicious mare. The horse could not be approached without a fight, let alone be ridden. As Toby had never handled a horse before, the other men placed sure bets on what would happen. They handed Toby a rope and a halter and bundled him into the mare's yard. As expected, the horse

reared and screamed, bluff-charging and lashing out with her forefeet.

Instead of trying to approach the mare, or run from her, Toby stood quite still and stared at her for a moment. Then, to his audience's amazement, he dropped the rope and halter and sat on a hay bale.

Hermione had written the grazier's account verbatim: *"The Pom, 'e looked real down in the mouth, like 'e was fairly gutted. Like the world 'ad ended, or somethin'. Dinkum, 'e jus' sat there, doin' nothin'. We sung out to 'im, but 'e never budged. After a bit, the mare settled down an' stopped 'er fidgetin'. Then she went closer to 'im. Guess she got curious; Fury 'ad ever seen a bloke who jus' sat still. Anyway, she kept comin' closer, then backin' off, then she'd get close again. Then she come right up an' checked 'im out good an' proper. Soon she 'ad 'im covered in slobber, but 'e still didn't shift. Y' could've knocked the lot of us down with a feather for what 'appened next. 'E jus' reached out an' gave 'er nose a rub. Fury didn't back off, or bite, or kick, nothin'. The pair of 'em were thick as thieves inside of a week. When 'e learned to ride on 'er, well, it was on the bush telegraph for a month solid."*

Severus shivered as the cold began to bite and retreated indoors. The fire in the woodstove had dwindled to a few glowing coals. He took a handful of dry leaves and twigs from the kindling box and coaxed the flames back into life. Methodically adding wood, he paused when he felt heat warming his chest.

To Severus, his father's next claim to local fame was decidedly eccentric. While rehabilitating a young stock horse rescued from a deplorable state of neglect and subsequently adopted by Fardon, Toby met a group of people devoted to things medieval. Appropriately enough, they called themselves the Medieval Re-enactment Society. Most of them came from the city. Not many country people had the time or inclination to forge armour, study the art of swordsmanship, sew quilted velvet doublets, or play at championing damsels in flowing robes.

Just how it came about was unclear, but after a remarkably short period of instruction, Toby demonstrated another natural ability: archery. With the English longbow, the man could strike a bull's-eye from two hundred yards. On horseback, nobody came close to his scores with the Saracen bow. He was not a formal member of the Society; indeed, there was no hint of him belonging to any social group. Last year's gathering was the only one he had missed. He had been busy restoring a vintage tractor, it was said.

By all accounts, Toby was not wealthy, but neither was he destitute. Labour was his first choice of currency, and surprisingly, he had not touched liquor since leaving Britain. He had a well defined, roughly annual circuit of towns, hamlets, and rural properties. This in itself was enough information for an Auror to track him down.

None of this shed any light on the source of the magic. In the catalogue of Toby's doings, there was no hint of what it might be. Evidently, he had wits enough to keep his mouth shut. It was very rare for Muggles to encounter, not to mention acquire, magical items. Therefore, Severus was certain Eileen was the original owner of whatever it was. If Toby had taken it from her, why had he not disposed of it? Severus was sure it would have gone to the nearest pawn shop. Obviously, he was wrong. He snorted at the thought of sentimental value. He doubted his father even knew what "sentimental" meant.

Modest income and very little outlay, so he may not be keeping it for ready cash, Severus pondered. *But for a Muggle, he's not young. He'd have to be close to sixty by now. Perhaps he's keeping it as an investment? Circe, if he's nearly sixty, my mother would be close to seventy. If she were alive. If he's walking the Earth, who is in the grave bearing his name? What was he 'gutted' about when he faced the mare? And how, in the name of Seven Hells, did he survive Riddle's attack?* He took some deep breaths as his mind gravitated to the possibility Eileen might also be somewhere in the world of the living. He shook his head; it would be too much to believe.

Severus had not actually seen his parents' bodies, but he knew Death Eaters did not lie when reporting executions. He had wanted to frighten, intimidate, and physically hurt his father, letting him know what it was like to be on the receiving end of his drunken aggression. While he resented his mother for neglecting him, even when he was very young he sensed there was more to her apathetic melancholy than he could ever understand. She seemed to be punishing herself for something, and Severus was content enough to leave her to the mercies of her own demons. Actually killing either of them had never crossed his mind.

Voldemort himself expanded on the details of the executions, all the while probing the edges of Severus' mind in search of weakness. For the first of countless times, Severus' Occlumency held firm against the most powerful Legilimens in history. Hiding a sense of creeping horror in a situation that had gone far beyond the limits he had anticipated, Severus was careful to show Riddle scenes of shouting and tears, of bruised limbs and a cut lip, of watching neighbours go in to dinner while his stomach cramped with hunger, of nights when he was too cold to sleep and despaired of ever feeling warm again. In that moment, Severus realised he had gone too far into the Death Eater's circle and to turn away was to sign his own death warrant. If walking away was not possible, he would learn as much as he could from the Dark Lord and use it to further his own ambitions. At the time, he desired power and presence, and a place where he would be safe and strong. At the time, he thought of winning Lily back...

Severus stood up, suddenly wanting something else to occupy his mind. He padded into the bathroom and took up an old cut-throat razor he had found in the workshop. Trying not to lose any blood during the weekly shave would keep him focussed.

After dinner, Minerva made her way to the upper levels of the Gryffindor Tower. Not long after breakfast, Hermione had sent an owl with a note explaining she would prefer to take meals in her room for at least the next week. The Headmistress understood entirely. Even if ninety-nine percent of the Wizarding population dismissed the *Daily Prophet* as an indulgence in all things mindless, the fuss had to hurt. Why Hermione insisted on taking a copy of the paper to her room was a mystery to Minerva. Perhaps she wanted to hex it to pieces in private with a few choice words nobody else should hear.

Minerva knocked lightly on Hermione's door, in case the room's occupant had opted for an early night. The door swung open slowly, revealing a room which could have passed for an extension to the library, and a very weary young witch. As Minerva entered the room, the door closed softly behind her. She exchanged a polite slow-blink with an investigative Crookshanks before addressing Hermione.

"My, you have wandless magic down pat, haven't you?" Wandless and wordless Minerva was impressed.

"It comes in handy," Hermione answered with a small smile. She slowly pushed herself up to a sitting position from where she had been lying on her bed, perusing a book of advanced charms.

Minerva decided to be brief and to the point. "Hermione, I had a meeting with an Unspeakable this morning. He was asking questions about Severus' loyalties, and you, among others, came into the discussion. He asked if he could meet with you. I refused permission for the moment, given your current circumstances."

Hermione stifled a yawn. "Why does he want to talk to me? Can't he wait until after the hearing?"

"I told him you always treated Severus with respect, even when he was not physically present. Among the students of Hogwarts, this is a rarity, and it is no secret you are working with Harry to win a pardon for Severus. I suppose Oriens believes this is significant to his investigations and would like to talk to you as soon as you are able." Minerva sat in a vacant chair and smoothed her skirts. "Unspeakables are inscrutable at the best of times; they cannot openly state their business. From his questions and perhaps what he allowed me to see I could glean a little of his directive. Under the assumption he is still alive, I believe there are some in the Ministry who fear Severus may be Voldemort's successor. They may have sent Oriens to try and clear the issue rather than sit and speculate on a possible renewal of hostilities."

"That's ridiculous! Professor Snape was loyal to the light; he would not..." Hermione pulled herself up short, fearing she might say too much.

"I know it now," Minerva said softly. "I just wish I had some idea before... Never mind. By the way, Albus says he will testify on Severus' behalf. I shall ensure a portrait link is available for the hearing."

"Very bloody big of him," muttered Hermione.

"Respect, if you please, Miss Granger. Though," she added conspiratorially, "I told him the same thing in much stronger language than that!"

Serves him right, thought Hermione. "The Unspeakable, Oriens what is he like?"

"A very unusual wizard; I think most Unspeakables are. Oriens comes from the Office of Magi-Ecology and Habitat Restoration. *What* that office has to do with potential Death Eater attacks is anybody's guess. Perhaps the Ministry is short staffed at the moment and is using anyone who is available."

Hermione frowned. "Unusual in what way?"

"I'm afraid it's rather silly, but he reminded me of a character in a book I read to my niece, a long time ago. Have you read *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe*?"

"Yes, many times."

"Then you will remember the first creature young Miss Pevensie encountered when she stepped into Narnia?"

"Tumnus the faun. An Unspeakable reminded you of a *faun*?" In spite of her dispirited state, Hermione began to laugh.

"Indeed he did," said Minerva, smiling. "I quite had my work cut out not to accidentally call him Tumnus. He looks human enough and is refreshingly formal in his manners. Such a welcome change from dealing with obsessive news reporters, over-anxious parents, and careless sightseers. Now, whether you choose to speak with him or not, he has offered any assistance he is able to give. I think we may be able to make use of him."

"What sort of assistance? Make use of him? Headmistress, are you the new Head of Slytherin?" Hermione feigned shock.

"Not at all! I was thinking of your parents."

Hermione felt herself turn pale and looked away to hide it. To have an Unspeakable methodically searching Australia for Monica and Wendell Wilkins might put Severus at risk. "What did you have in mind?" she asked cautiously.

"I would not presume to initiate any search for your parents without your permission that would not do at all. But you must understand, the longer your parents remain without their memories, the harder it will be to restore them. Oriens has top level international security clearances and authorisations I can only imagine. If anyone can bring resources together to find your parents quickly, it would be him."

"Well," Hermione said slowly, "could I have some time to think about it?"

"Of course." Minerva regarded her shrewdly. "I would advise you to sleep on it first, then think to your heart's content."

"I suppose I'd have to meet him, if I choose to accept his assistance," she mused as she opened her book again.

Minerva plucked the book from Hermione's hands. "Sleep first, Hermione. Or shall I send to the Infirmary for a dose of Dreamless Sleep?"

Hermione slid under the bedcovers in tired obedience, watching as the Headmistress scooped an unresisting Crookshanks off his chair and deposited him at the foot of the bed.

"Keep an eye on her and do not let her near any books," Minerva ordered the half-Kneazle, extinguishing the wall sconces as she left the room.

Petrus paced the floor slowly as he digested many hours worth of animated discussion, the tip of his long tail held precisely one inch above the floor. He carefully avoided the vicinity of the door in case he activated his invisible shackles. They burned like a whole-body lightning strike if he wandered too close.

"So," he said, turning to face Oriens, "if I hold in one hand the numerous certainties Monsieur Severus was for the Dark, and I hold in my other hand the very few testimonies he was for the light, do they balance?"

Oriens looked at Petrus' outstretched hands. "Headmistress McGonagall had suspicions about Snape long before the apparent murder of Headmaster Dumbledore, and she did not try to disguise her opinion of him before Mr. Potter's revelations during the Battle of Hogwarts. Now her outlook is completely different. To have such a fierce and, at the time, justified dislike turned into remorse and belated compassion..." Oriens left the statement hanging as he got up from the stone chest he had been sitting on and joined Petrus in his wanderings. "If Headmistress McGonagall had a grudge against anyone, I sense she would need a mighty reason indeed to erase it.

"Add to this Mr. Potter's intentions with the Wizengamot. For Mr. Potter's entire candidature at Hogwarts, he and Snape were sworn enemies. With Miss Granger's unflagging support, he now seeks to clear Snape of all charges. His long-held opinion of Snape has been turned on a Knut. It would take some incontestable evidence to cause such a change. Unfortunately, I could not meet with Miss Granger today. However, my investigations suggest she has a history of being able to see beyond the immediately obvious. Whether she was aware of it or not, I think she knew there was more to Snape than what was apparent. To finally answer your question, I believe the balance favours the light."

Petrus nodded and folded his arms. "*D'accord*. If Monsieur Severus is alive, would Madame la Headmistress, Monsieur Potter, or Mademoiselle Granger consider him a threat?"

Oriens hid a smile. Petrus had taken a liking to Snape's given name, pronouncing it with the gravitas normally reserved for sacred Latin chants. "No, they would not consider him a threat."

"Then your concerns are reduced to the whereabouts of the Dementors and the Death Eaters and, *évidemment*, the nature of the object so mysterious. If Monsieur Severus is connected with the beautiful artefact, as Arawn's displeasure suggests, what is the nature of the connection?"

Oriens grinned openly. He often found Petrus to be a helpful sounding board or stone, considering his physical constitution when seeking to untangle convoluted research problems. In many ways, Petrus embodied the Taoist principle of "The Uncarved Block", which encompassed the ability to perceive without prejudice or preconception. Petrus could single out an important point with astonishing ease, at times without actually knowing he had done so.

"If Snape is really on the side of the light, Death Eaters and Dementors are an entirely separate issue and one I would gladly leave to the Aurors. Snape's connection to the artefact would be a familial one; it's usually the way these things work.

"The artefact is, as much as anyone can tell, ancient. Just how old it is, Arawn could not determine. In his file notes, he says it bears some of the most powerful protection charms and wards he had ever encountered. It took him close to a week to recover from his last attempted investigation. I do not like to speculate, however, I shall do so now. If we go with "ancient" as being one thousand years, give or take a few hundred, and the idea of familial connection, we can draw a fancifully long bow. Snape's mother was one of the Prince family. Their bloodline could be traced back to the same period. This in itself is no great distinction; such extensive lineage is found in several wizarding families. The point of the contention is that Arawn only ever mentioned *Severus* when he examined the artefact."

Petrus shrugged. "Perhaps the bow is not so long." He stood still as he thought for a moment. *Could* be traced back to the same period? Is the entire family deceased?"

"Severus Tobias Snape was the last known surviving member."

"And a half-blood. Oriens, *mon ami*, Monsieur Severus was valuable to the Dark Lord as a spy, *non*?"

"True."

"But he was not always the spy. You said Monsieur Severus was recruited *before* these abilities were manifest. He was given the Mark by the same Dark Lord who favoured only those of the pure blood. *La question est*, what was it about *half* of Monsieur Severus' blood that brought to him such distinction?"

What, indeed? Oriens felt a peculiar tingle ripple over his skin a familiar and sure sign he was suddenly on the right track. Arawn's notes implied the artefact was highly valued by Voldemort. If one discounted reports of Snape's last days as an aberration arising from Voldemort's rapidly deteriorating mental state, the half-blood wizard consistently held a high position among the Death Eaters.

The connection between the artefact and Snape himself, while tenuous, was not beyond probability. Oriens sighed quietly. He knew he should raise the matter with Minister Shackbolt, but he had no evidence with which to support his concerns. As with his suspicions of Arawn himself, all Oriens had to go on was instinct and inference. *Little better than gossip and guesswork*, he thought wryly.

The God and the Dragon

Chapter 6 of 32

Summary: Augustus Rookwood's memories provide Arawn with some vital clues. Severus and Hermione combine their intellects to prevent Oriens from discovering Severus' hiding place, and Severus devises a small plan to drag Hermione out of a glum patch. A pine marten unwittingly helps uncover something of great significance.

A/Ns:

References to Merlin are consistent with Mary Stewart's depiction of his character in her books *The Crystal Cave* (1970), *The Hollow Hills* (1973), and *The Last Enchantment* (1979). In keeping with Ms Stewart's work, I have not elaborated on descriptions of "the god" or a certain heraldic symbol. Please note that familiarity with the above publications is not essential; things will be explained in the fullness of time.

No crows or pine martens were injured as a consequence of writing this fic.

Thanks to Justice for beta-work, and special thanks to bleddyn for checking the authenticity of my description of the Welsh countryside a place I have only 'visited' courtesy of Google Earth!

Canon characters are the property of J.K. Rowling. I do not claim any income from them.

Arawn carefully dispensed Augustus' memories into a specially designed crystal sphere. He cast *Incendio* on a detailed drawing of the artefact. Having used it to trigger Augustus' memory, he had no further use for it. He watched as the parchment crumbled to a dusting of white ash. Vanishing the ash, he addressed the whimpering Death Eater huddled in the corner.

"I told you to cooperate, Augustus. As you can see, no warder has come to your rescue. Nobody heard you scream." He turned to the Dementor waiting silently beside the door. "Well done," he said out loud. "It is so much better when you savour your food, don't you think? You even have some left for another day."

Augustus cringed and raised his eyes, shutting them again as the Dementor shifted to hover in front of him, one cadaverous hand extending in his direction. While he could have faced death, even by a Dementor's kiss, the more terrifying presence in his cell was Arawn. Augustus had defiantly looked the Unspeakable in the eyes and seen a truly horrifying emptiness. If someone had told Augustus Death itself had taken Arawn's soul and now walked about in the Unspeakable's body, he would have believed it without question. All of his bravado had vanished in an instant.

He heard the Unspeakable approach and come to a halt in front of him. He knew he would not be permitted to remember Arawn's visit, especially since he had seen how the Unspeakable smuggled the Dementor into his cell. The softly spoken *Obliviate* was actually welcome.

Returning to his office, Arawn dismissed the Dementor and watched until it vanished into a disused Floo connection. There were certain advantages to having two fireplaces. He placed a stone Pensieve on his desk and emptied the sphere, watching as the memories gently unwound into a shifting grey mist. Settling himself, he looked into the Pensieve, observing minutely as the first memory began to take shape...

"So, Eileen, how do you think your Muggle toy-boy will take it when he learns you are his evolutionary superior?" Abraxas Malfoy looked around the small sitting room with evident disgust. "Haven't you even told him you are ten years his senior? Gracious! Such dishonesty."

Eileen did not answer. She stood with her arms tightly folded, her thin features set in a scowl of intense dislike. Abraxas sauntered closer to her. "Surely slumming with a Muggle loses whatever distorted appeal it had after, what is it now, nearly six years? You could come back; in fact it would be wise if you did. We might even accommodate that stringy whelp of yours. After all, he did do us a favour in leading us here. Didn't think of that, did you Eileen? As soon as he took his first breath, the records and circumstances of his birth appeared in the Registers. There had never been a Snape in any of the lists before. Fortuitously, we have a contact in the Birth Registry Division who was most vigilant in spotting the discrepancy and deemed it worthy of investigation. Eileen Snape, Spinner's End. Formerly Eileen Prince, presumed dead a very clever ruse last of the Prince bloodline."

Augustus sneered. "The *pure* bloodline."

"Perhaps she never intended to breed. It would have been better if she had not." Abraxas narrowed his eyes. "Another abomination, another stain on the integrity of our kind. Blood traitor! And yet, the Dark Lord graciously extends you an offer. A position of prestige and trust. The Dark Lord asks if you will be the bearer of the Llygad y Ddraig."

"I will not serve your Dark Lord." Eileen stared Abraxas down with consummate ease.

"But you have dabbled in the Arts, haven't you?" Abraxas was not about to give up. "Think about it, Eileen. Your brother is dead. You are the last of a long and noble line." As Eileen blinked back tears, he affected a tone of unctuous sympathy. "Be consoled; the Dark Lord was deeply moved by his valour. Drusus' bravery was a credit to his proud lineage. Such a shame he would not join our ranks.

"Do you remember your great uncle Atilius? He was kind enough to arrange a marriage for you, was he not? You could have stood proudly among the Carrows if you had not given in to a stupid flight of fancy." Abraxas laughed softly. "If the Dark Lord favoured poets, he would have Atilius immortalised for trying to bring the two sides of your

family together after centuries of discord. Not to mention divining the presence of the Llygad, held by your brother, no less. Atilius deceived you all for the glory of our cause and was instrumental in *eliminating* any opposition. It was his duty to carry the Llygad, until he managed to drink himself stuporous and fall foul of a Kelpie. Take heart, Eileen, the Llygad was not lost. The Kelpies were soon persuaded to return it. Crevan carries it now, safely sealed in black iron. Goodness, I almost forgot; it was Crevan who sent brave Drusus through the Veil."

Eileen stood firm as her voice shook. "I will not carry it."

Augustus lingered before the fireplace and examined it minutely, as if it were a most unusual construction. Feeling Eileen's eyes upon him, he turned to address her. "You would be wise to accept the Dark Lord's offer. With us you would have power, identity, pride, and protection: all of the things you so wrongly deny yourself now."

Eileen's black eyes flashed angrily. "Yes, *gentlemen*, I will admit I have seen a little of your Arts. Enough to sicken me enough to see them for what they are, and more than enough to know the truth of what you offer me. Power distorted, identity usurped, as much pride as a grovelling slave, and protection until I am no longer of use. Why do you come to me now, when Atilius is nothing more than food for grave worms?

"I wonder. Would it be because your Dark Lord believes the Llygad will not respond to anyone who is not of our blood? Is this why you did not kill me as soon as my location was disclosed? Of course! I was, and remain, mere insurance."

Abraxas gave an almost kindly smile. "Atilius told the Dark Lord all he knew. A pretty little legend, too. Embellished, no doubt, after being re-told over so many generations." He took a dramatic stance. "The Llygad will not wake until it rests in the hand of its true owner." He laughed. "Of course, this cannot be taken literally. Merlin is ages dead and will never walk the earth again. And it must not be separated from your family. Interesting. Why is that, Eileen? Would it be because the 'true owner' is one of your own lineage? Any witch or wizard of the Prince line, perhaps? The Dark Lord believes so." Abraxas gathered his cloak and cane, looking imperiously around the room once more. "Come, Augustus, we shall leave her to consider her decision."

The memories shifted and re-formed. Hidden behind a wall of soot-blackened stone, Abraxas and Augustus watched the house at Spinner's End.

"Do you think she will try to contact the Aurors?" Abraxas asked.

Augustus shook his head. "She wants to, but does not dare. She is fully aware of the consequences if she speaks to anyone about our visit."

Abraxas sighed wearily. "Nor will she bend knee before the Dark Lord. He suspected this would happen and instructed me on the next course of action." Abraxas produced a book from within his robes. "A comprehensive guide to hexes and curses, one of my favourites when I was a boy. In fact, I was the same age her brat is now." He handed the book to Augustus. "Use your skills to hide this in the hovel. Do not concern yourself that it may be too well hidden. There is a summoning charm bound into the book, keyed specifically to him with a strand of his hair. It will call to the miserable creature as soon as he has his first truly dark thought. If Eileen will not see reason, her son will."

"Supposing he does not?"

Abraxas eyed his companion knowingly. "His father has recently found himself out of work, if one can apply such a description to any sort of squalid Muggle enterprise. I have been observing him and others of his kind. It is quite entertaining to see what happens when these low-brow Muggle males are in their cups even more so when they have nothing else to do. Snape senior is no different. Already, he lingers in the pub for more than his usual pint. He will follow the same path to drunken ruin as the rest of his primitive cohort. If he does not do so voluntarily, I have several ways of ensuring he does. Once he is dependent on inebriating himself out of his worthless existence, he will do the rest of our work for us.

"I shall watch over the whelp from then on, to make sure the Muggle doesn't go as far as killing his own spawn. By the time Eileen's little half-blood Prince is ready for Hogwarts, he will also be ready for recruitment. Once secure within the Castle walls, Lucius will provide example and direction. You see, Augustus, our Lord has invested much thought into his strategies. Failure is not an option."

"Surely she will try to protect her son? She may even consider another disappearance."

"She will find every avenue blocked, every contact severed, not that she keeps many and none of them are worthwhile. She will be alone, defenceless, isolated. I have her wand, thanks to your subtle diversion by the fireplace." Abraxas held it up for Augustus to see. "From now on, she will find her life to be a burden and a trial. She has chosen not to bend, so now she must break."

Arawn exited the memories with his mind in chaos. The implications were incredible and unbelievable. The artefact now had a name, it had a place in history, and it was indeed connected with Snape.

He flung himself into a chair, shaking and breathless. *Merlin? Surely not*, he thought. This would have to be an embellishment, as Abraxas had observed, brought into being during centuries of storytelling. Arawn had seen the same thing happen with many ancient tales and some not so ancient. He laughed out loud as he wondered how the Battle of Hogwarts would be told one hundred years from now.

Severus glanced at Hermione, who sat dismally across the table from him. Between them lay a fortress of books, parchment, scrolls, and periodicals.

Hermione had ransacked numerous libraries for everything she could find on the subject of memory alterations. With Minerva's constant insistence on the subject, it did not look as though Hermione could forestall a meeting with Oriens for much longer. An enquiry about her parents was a certainty. She knew she would need to draw the Unspeakable's attention away from Severus' location and give him good reason to search elsewhere. Running purely on instinct, she was sure there was something in the accumulated literature that would point to a suitable strategy.

When his assistance was requested, Severus immersed himself in the project with quiet purpose. Aside from the lure of a challenge and an interest in his own safety, he was aware of the implications for Hermione. War heroine or not, knowingly concealing a wanted fugitive would be regarded as a serious offense. He set aside the research notes Hermione had made. These detailed all of the processes, assumptions, and Arithmantic proofs she had used to construct the memory alteration procedures ultimately used on her parents. While memory charms were not within Severus' area of interest or expertise, he could recognise some of the equations. Curiously, they were similar to the equations used in the formulation of a specific class of potions.

"Regardless of the perceived risk to me, you should put your parents' welfare first. I can look after myself," he said.

Hermione started at the sudden interruption of her reverie, her glazed expression fading for a moment. "But your hearing is only four weeks away, on a Sunday too. It's the special dispensation of all special dispensations to hold *anything* on a Sunday outside of Quidditch. I could never forgive myself if I put you in danger when you are so close..." Hermione shook her head. She knew as well as Severus did there was no guarantee of a full pardon. "By the way, I never assumed you couldn't manage on your own. I just thought... No, it doesn't matter." She looked away, miserable and self-conscious.

Severus waited until she met his eyes again. "I have not regretted accepting your assistance."

"Really?"

"Really."

Hermione gave a watery smile and shuffled through some parchments. "I'm missing something here, I'm sure of it," she complained. "It has something to do with those... What are they called... indelible memories?"

Severus' posture straightened as her words triggered a cascade of recollections. Riddle had often ordered him to make mind-altering potions, some of which affected humans in ways only hard-core Death Eaters would find amusing. Suppressing a wave of distaste, he delved into his considerable experience.

Almost a decade ago, he had secretly developed antidotes and suppressants for these same potions. Albus had negotiated access to St Mungo's on Severus' behalf, to enable a practical application of his research. Reading the Healers' reports on patient recovery patterns, he had noticed certain parts of the mind remained completely unaffected by the mind-altering potions. The same was true for Muggles on the rare occasions he was able to administer an antidote. Muggles were often brutally dispatched with no chance of conveniently being "left for dead". The parts of the patients' minds left intact were related to the storage and retrieval of highly significant memories. He surveyed the reference material in front of him, selecting several items which documented a similar observation in the efficacy of memory charms.

With fleeting concern, he noticed Hermione had sunk into a pensive silence. *It has been approximately three Weasley-less weeks...* He curbed his thoughts before they began catalogue the many reasons why Hermione should not regard Weasley as any great loss. After all, his own experience in the Art of Moving On could best be described as very recent. *Nevertheless*, he conceded, *I have to do something to shake her out of her doldrums* He quickly devised a plan.

"From what you have told me, with reference to our lengthy literature review, there is potential to refine the search area," he announced.

Hermione physically snapped to attention. "Search area? What? Severus, what are you getting at?"

With a benevolent smirk, Severus picked up a slim volume and opened it at a page Hermione had marked with a numbered scrap of parchment. "Listen carefully. 'Sensory cues often precede the formation and recall of memories. The memories, and their attendant cues, are sorted and stored in definable classes. There is a class of memories referred to as *indelible memories*. Typically, they warn of potentially life-threatening situations, such as recognition of predators or poisonous substances. Because they enhance an individual's chances of survival at an instinctive level, they are highly resistant to erasure.'"

Hermione frowned and leafed through a small pile of periodicals. Her eyes brightened as she found the one she searched for. Quill in hand, she jotted notes as she read. "The results of our research suggest indelible memories may be shared between people; especially if they are in a long-term, close relationship. We propose sensory cues experienced by both people at the same time may strengthen the significance of shared memories to the point where they are subconsciously interpreted as being important for survival. The degree to which this occurs is thought to be directly proportional to the strength of the bond between the individuals."

Severus caught her with a piercing stare. "Your parents share such a closeness?" At Hermione's excited nod, he pushed a much larger tome across the table, already open at the text he now quoted. "Where two people have shared a close and common bond for an extended period of time, the storage of significant events, interests, knowledge, and *locations* as indelible memories enhances the integrity of the bond between the persons involved."

"From what you describe of your methods, I believe your parents may retain some of their previous identities through shared indelible memories. Aside from their occasional visits here, where did your parents like to spend the summer? Did any specific location capture their attention?"

Hermione thought for a moment, still a little bemused. "The Mediterranean they loved everything about the Mediterranean. Especially southern Spain and Italy."

"What attracted them to the region?"

"They always raved about the climate. Mum told me they had some wonderful times there when they were young." Hermione stalled before adding coyly, "Dad proposed to her in Vasto, Italy. Does any of that help?"

"Possibly." Severus disappeared into the back room, emerging a few minutes later with an atlas. He opened it to a map of Australia, coloured according to climatic type. "Assuming your parents have retained their shared attraction to a Mediterranean climate, and the memory is enhanced by the significant event of a marriage proposal, the place to begin a search would be here, or here." He tapped the page and pushed it towards Hermione so she could see properly.

"Perth or Adelaide." Hermione felt a small glimmer of hope.

"Perth has milder winters than Adelaide and is safely on the other side of the continent, I might add. Though Adelaide has more in the way of museums and theatres."

Hermione gathered her notes together. "I think Mum and Dad would prefer scenic areas near the coast. So, if I meet with Oriens and agree to let him help find my parents, I could suggest he start in Perth."

Severus pinched the bridge of his nose. "He is an Unspeakable, Hermione, he can read between lines of invisible ink while wearing a blindfold and looking the other way. Do not *suggest* anything to him. *Convince* him you have already done the bulk of the required research. If your findings and assumptions are organised in a logical fashion, Perth will be the obvious place for him to start searching."

Hermione fingered the atlas dubiously. "This was the result of *your* reasoning..."

"I believe it was a joint effort. Make it your own. Three feet of parchment. You have two hours."

"Three..."

He silenced her with The Potions Master's Glare. "Get on with it, Miss Granger; it will not happen by itself," he snapped.

Hermione put down her quill and stretched. She had no idea how long she had been concentrating and writing. The feeling of disorientation she was experiencing suggested several hours at least. A scattering of crumpled drafts littered the floor under her chair. The room was beginning to darken. There was no sign of Severus. She could not even remember when he had last been in the room. Gingerly easing the cramps out of her hands and shoulders, she went outside, blinking owlishly in the late afternoon sun.

She spotted Severus at the far end of the veranda, reclining languidly on a saw-log bench, absorbed in a book. Hermione recognised the cover immediately: *To Kill a Mockingbird*. She hoped she had not written any of her more unusual ideas on the numerous notepapers marking her favourite passages. She wondered what Severus would make of her postulated parallels between the treatment of house-elves and the history of human social inequities.

"Hey," she said, forcing her voice into an approximation of the Alabama accent.

"Hey yourself," Severus answered in kind, striking the correct inflexions with insouciance. He put the book aside. "I assume you have finished a first draft?"

"First draft? I should think it is quite complete!"

Severus shot her an artful look as he stood in one lithe motion. "Do we have any red ink?"

"If there was any, I'm sure *you* would have found it," Hermione replied crisply. "Or made some from crow's blood, at midnight during the dark of the moon," she muttered under her breath, only half-hoping he didn't hear.

Severus tucked something behind her ear as she preceded him through the door. Sweeping it free with reflexes honed by years of subjection to the pranks of juvenile wizards, she held the glossy black crow feather in her hand before glaring at him accusingly.

"No, I have not dispatched any wildlife," he stated with affronted dignity. He pointed to a large black bird loitering in the upper branches of an ironbark. "The insatiable

stickybeak patrols the garden when he or she thinks no-one is watching."

Seating himself on the edge of the table, Severus appropriated the four-and-a-half feet of parchment, reading Hermione's work twice while she waited anxiously. At last, he took up her quill and relocated to one of the benches, gesturing to Hermione to sit next to him.

"Firstly, welcome back, Hermione."

"I... I beg your pardon?"

Severus ventured into untried territory, albeit with a small ulterior motive. He was pleased his plan had been successful and couldn't resist making a point of it. "A significant intellectual challenge appears to have brought you back to the land of the fully conscious. I watched you for a while as you worked. It is the first time since the *Prophet's* detestable exposé that you have been without your cloak of despondency."

Hermione felt her cheeks grow warm. "Well, I must admit I enjoyed the work. I do feel a lot better."

He gave her a small smile, then turned his attention to the parchment with an evaluative scowl. "I'd give this an E as it is," he stated. "To bring it to O standard, we need to make the following edits..."

Before he could begin, Hermione tapped the ink pot with her wand. Severus looked askance as the ink turned bright red. "Tradition, I suppose," she shrugged.

Overall, it was a fine piece of work. As Severus expected, Hermione had disguised her investigation into the doings of Toby Snape as part of her attempts to find her own parents. With a few adjustments, he made her somewhat random spatial wanderings appear as a perfectly reasonable course of action.

Of Toby himself, she made no mention. After some minor bickering, they agreed to keep quiet about him until after the hearing. It all came down to what was more important, the retrieval of an object or Severus' safety. Hermione triumphed, not by winning Severus around to her point of view, but by stubbornly refusing to give ground on the fact that *he* was more important than some Ministerial edicts concerning *things*.

Severus did not begrudge her the victory, even if she had completely ignored the potential dangers associated with powerful magical items in the hands of Muggles. He was too busy analysing a curious sensation of warmth and contentment.

By the end of the editing session, Hermione's respect for Severus had reached new heights. The document she would present to Oriens was faultless. Every trail that could have led to Severus' location was effectively obscured, and all of Hermione's actions since the Second Fall of Voldemort inarguably accounted for.

With the parchment and library material safely tucked away in her beaded bag, Hermione made tea and cut generous wedges of dark fruit cake. Severus occupied himself with building a fire in the woodstove, watching intently as the flames took hold. Satisfied with his efforts, he sat on the floor, leaning against the front of an armchair with his legs stretched out in front of him.

Being well schooled by Crookshanks, Hermione could recognise when a male of any species would not be willingly dislodged from a comfortable position *If you can't shift him, join him*, she thought. She transfigured the armchair into a sofa, eliciting a startled yelp from the normally unflappable wizard. Placing the food and drink between them, she followed his example, resting against the seat cushions with a prolonged sigh.

"Weighty thoughts?" Severus asked, his attention somewhere between Hermione and the largest wedge of cake.

"Not really, all things considered." She shook her head as she selected a small piece, thereby allowing Severus to claim the large one without any breach of etiquette. "You know this year's seventh-year students have the option of graduating without sitting N.E.W.T.s?"

"Thanks to your regular news updates, I am aware of the arrangement. You have elected to repeat seventh year in its entirety?"

"That was my intention. Now there is another option for students wishing to repeat. Students who have already done part of the seventh-year syllabus and performed consistently well in previous exams can tutor themselves in the theoretical side of their subjects. Group classes will be arranged for practical components. Exams may be taken whenever the student is deemed ready.

"Minerva is encouraging me to do it. By 'encouraging', I mean she will not take no for an answer. She says the Ministry and the Governing Board are supporting it to get fully graduated wizards and witches out into the workforce as quickly as possible. They believe it will help with rebuilding and recovery now the War is over. Neville wasn't going to sit his N.E.W.T.s at all because he'd been offered a Herbology apprenticeship, but this new plan gives him the opportunity to do both. Oh, you should know, Draco is being home-schooled with a Ministry-approved tutor. I hear the tutor is a retired Auror."

"Thereby keeping my favourite godson out of trouble?" Severus asked dryly.

"Thereby keeping him safe," Hermione grinned. Suddenly serious, she frowned.

"You would rather share a classroom with him?" Severus teased.

"No! No, I mean, it's not anything to do with Draco. I keep thinking of how much I would like just one *normal* school year where I could stick to schedule and routine without the interruption of one disaster after another. A year where I could, for once in my life, experience the *ordinary*," she complained in frustration. "Somehow I doubt I ever will." She pulled a whole brazil nut out of her cake and tossed it onto the plate. "I'm coming to terms with it, slowly, but it's not easy. Have you ever wanted anything like that?"

Severus regarded her, perplexed. "As a witch born among Muggles, you could hardly expect your early childhood to be unremarkable. The events during your time at Hogwarts were beyond anyone's control. Normality, as you put it, was out of the question. As for experiencing the ordinary, I ask what would you rather *experience* in your grades? Acceptable? Exceeds Expectations? Outstanding? There! The mere word 'Outstanding' captures your attention.

"As for myself, I have not experienced 'normal' or 'ordinary', and from observation of those who consistently have, I would not waste time in seeking to attain them," he intoned loftily. "Besides, I wonder if you would soon find *normal* and *ordinary* both mundane and dispiriting."

He studied her carefully. Her expression was similar to the one she had worn when she admitted Trelawney had said something to upset her. "You recoiled at my use of the word 'mundane'; is it part of what Trelawney said to you?"

Hermione gathered her shell-shocked wits. "Look, I'm sorry I've been Ms Glum for the past few weeks."

"You were the one affected by it, not I." Severus took the discarded brazil nut and consumed it along with another piece of cake.

Hermione poured herself a second cup of tea. "You're right, you know."

"What about *this* time?"

"About what Professor Trelawney said. And she did present me with a quandary. She said I was lacking in spirit, had no aura and... I was... mundane. At the time, I didn't give a toss for what she said, or for her farce of a subject until... until..."

"Some event led you to re-evaluate her words?" Severus offered.

"Yes." Hermione covered her face with her hands. "This is so stupid. If I tell you, you'll never want to talk to me again."

Severus shifted his position so he could look at her without having to turn his head. Apparently, she valued the prospect of future conversations with him. *I have no intention of dissuading her.* "Try me," he challenged.

Hermione took a deep breath and steadied herself. "Have you heard of recurring dreams? Well, it was one of those." She waited for a snort of derision and a cutting word. None came. Bracing herself, she glanced at Severus, fully expecting a sneer fit to bore through tungsten.

Severus was obviously schooling his expression, though one eyebrow had escaped the imposed discipline and clearly betrayed his curiosity. "Go on," he said, so softly she very nearly didn't hear him.

Haltingly, she began to describe what she had seen in her dream. She warmed to the re-telling as she described the vision of lessons unlearned and that everyone seemed to exist in a bubble of vapid complacency. She railed against the prejudice perpetuated by Hogwarts' sorting system and quoted Thomas Jefferson on the price of freedom. Incensed at the idea of brave people dying for nothing, she suggested that if her dream did carry any truth, Mad-Eye Moody would be stirring in his grave, wherever it was.

She faltered when she told Severus he had been either missing or dead. With a heartfelt burst of energy, she informed him she didn't want him to be in either of those states. She finished with an account of her dream-self: herself without the aura of fiery conviction she quietly prided herself on, lacking in spirit, mundane. Just as Professor Trelawney had said.

Feeling purged and tired, she stared into the fire. "That was why I broke up with Ron. I threw him away because of a stupid dream. But it scared me when I saw myself like that. It was like a warning. It told me all the things I thought I wanted most would quietly rob me of myself. A small part of me still wants those things. Silly, isn't it?"

Severus waved away her question. "I know someone who pursued the normal and the ordinary to the point where she became incurably mundane."

"Who was it?" she asked cautiously.

"She turned into Potter's Aunt Petunia."

"Oh, dear." Hermione considered Harry's description of his Aunt. "I guess that example should steer me towards the extraordinary for the rest of my life. I just wish I knew if I'd done the right thing. It feels as though I have, oddly enough. I scorned Professor Trelawney from here to kingdom come; now it seems I am turning into her protégée."

Severus grunted softly, "Nothing like."

"You don't think so?"

"I wouldn't be sitting here with you if I did." Severus shifted to face the woodstove and drew his knees up to his chest. Hermione saw him shiver as he spoke. "Recurring dreams can be a manifestation of intuitive knowledge and are worth paying attention to. At least, that is what Firenze told me." He could feel Hermione's astonished gaze and decided to go out on a limb. "There was no way I would have discussed recurring dreams with Trelawney. I didn't tell Firenze any details. Once he had given me enough theory, I worked the rest out for myself."

Hermione watched him as he wrapped his arms around his knees. "Nagini?" she asked.

Severus nodded once. "That was why I furthered the research for the antivenin. I didn't see all of what would happen. The dream always ended with Riddle telling Nagini to kill."

"I always thought Divination was a complete farce." Hermione laughed ruefully. "Although I wouldn't have dared tell *Firenze* that."

"Nor I. He regards it as another expression of magical power and perfectly valid in its own right. I wished him luck in revising the curriculum. In passing, he told me Miss Patil was making remarkable progress with her second sight under his tutelage."

"She was Professor Trelawney's darling for it. I thought Parvati was putting it on; she never seemed to be able to harness her gift in a reliable or constructive fashion," Hermione muttered.

Severus examined his fingernails. "I am unsure if the sight is something amenable to harnessing. Merlin himself had the gift and, from what we know, could not always dictate when it would manifest or what it would show. And he had a tutor of the highest calibre."

"Galapas?"

"Very good, Miss Granger. If Miss Patil had been introduced to Divination under a competent teacher, perhaps her skills with the sight may have been more useful."

Hermione huffed dismissively, missing Severus' quick grin as she did so.

"How would you have performed in Transfiguration if Minerva was half-smashed on Ogdens every lesson?" he inquired.

Hermione laughed as she imagined the scene. "I, and a great many other things, would have been in a very strange shape indeed."

Arawn held a steady course, following the Tywi River north-east from Carmarthen. He had taken a day to explore the area around Bryn Myrddin to satisfy his curiosity. As expected, he found nothing out of the ordinary. Nobody ever did. The place had been thoroughly combed numerous times for any evidence of the wizarding world's most celebrated identity without uncovering anything worthy of note. Arawn half-suspected the whole story connecting Bryn Myrddin with Merlin himself was a decoy.

He examined his notes again. The title deeds of the Prince estates went back as far as 755 A.D., assuming the records were accurate. The deeds ended with the purchase of a property not far from Dinas Powys, near the Severn Estuary Eileen Prince's childhood home.

Arawn had decided to begin his investigations at the first known family residence, as the beginning, if known, was always a good place to start. It was described as a villa in the Roman style and of considerable size. Well-to-do wizarding families of the time usually incorporated architectural or decorative features boasting of family distinctions. As old as the ruins were, they might yet provide confirmative clues. Arawn struggled to maintain his objectivity. To walk into a place abandoned since 1,100 A.D. and find physical evidence linking Snape with the Llygad, Merlin, or both, was a ludicrous expectation.

The villa was reportedly located in the upper Tywi Valley. Arawn needed to find a place where the river made a short deviation from its southern course to run south-west. Amid thick forest, a steep escarpment forced the flow into a sharp bend to the south-east, after which the river again turned due south.

Arawn consulted his map. A symbol marked a proposed Muggle-administered nature reserve near the same locality. Therefore, while the forest would not have the same extent as it had over eight hundred years ago, some standing vegetation might be visible from the air. If he reached the Llyn Brianne Reservoir, he would know he had overshot his destination. He stood aside to let a small group of birdwatchers pass by. With his Nordic looks, Arawn blended in easily with the few Muggles ambling along the river banks. Just another tow-headed European tourist with a backpack and a walking staff. He waited patiently. It was coming to the hour when Muggles turned to establishments offering pints of local ale, hot dinners, and comfortable beds. Soon, he would have the place essentially to himself.

Once the landscape had emptied of Muggles, Arawn cast a Disillusionment charm over himself. At a word, his staff returned to its original form. He checked his bearings once more before taking to the air. Travelling by broom, while not as interesting as fossicking at ground level, was much quicker. Arawn was in no mood to delay his

investigations any more than necessary.

From high above, the river glinted silver in the waning light as Arawn matched its ground course with the one held in his memory. Landmarks appeared: a farm house here, a chapel there. Low hills and a change of course. Shallow rapids showed as frothing sheets of white water, interspersed with deep, calm pools. Round green hills topped with wind-blasted stones, the brooding bones of fortified settlements. Bridges, fords, grazing land where sheep huddled together as they warily watched farm dogs respond to a piercing whistle. A galloping horse, unencumbered by rider or tack, shied at an imagined obstacle. Arawn adjusted his altitude to compensate for the rising level of the land. Clouds scudded low, tearing themselves to shreds on jutting brows of bare rock.

He swerved suddenly as a peregrine falcon swooped, crying its outrage in a shrill warning. The bird wheeled and turned, lining up for another attack, but did not engage in pursuit as Arawn quickly left the falcon's territory. He was mildly thankful to leave the bird behind. All falcons were thought to have an agreement with the ancient powers of wind and sky. Their displeasure was not to be taken lightly.

At last, he found what he was looking for. If not for the bends in the river, he was sure he would have missed the faint outline of walls nearly hidden by heavily shadowed woodland. He circled the site slowly, piecing together a plan of the villa. He then dropped lightly to the ground in what he assumed was a central courtyard. He waited until the rising moon cleared the treetops and flooded the ruins with light. For Arawn, moonlight examinations were a standard tactic, enabling the high acuity component of his vision to function at its best. His timing was perfect. The faintly blue-tinted moonlight called forth the most worn details in sharp relief.

He passed between crumbling walls, noting the villa had been a two-story construction. Cavities in the walls marked where heavy wooden joists had supported the second floor. There was no longer any trace of a roof, though piles of shattered moss-covered slate told Arawn what it had been made of. Beyond a low, round archway, faded tiles and sunken pools marked a once opulent bath-house. Now the only things making use of the baths were robust tangles of straggling plants, clinging to thin soil deposits lodged among debris. Arawn found his way to a vast emptiness and drew a breath at the outline of what had been a high-ceilinged hall. The floor was still remarkably level, covered in heavy flags of blue-grey stone. One wall held a fireplace of gigantic proportions. At either end, doors led away from the main villa into corridors now bared to the sky, ending in a thorny wilderness littered with the remains of stone benches and ovens: all that was left of the kitchens and scullery. Arawn made his way back to what he now concluded was a feasting hall. He passed through a wide doorway leading to the last unexplored wing.

Arawn picked his way delicately between mounds of nondescript wreckage, pausing every now and then to listen. On the threshold of his hearing, the sound of trickling water whispered faintly. He followed the sound, eventually finding a thin ribbon of wet seeping from under broken flagstones, presumably where a drainage channel had collapsed and filled with detritus. Arawn crumbled a dry leaf in his fingers and sprinkled it over the water, studying the movement of the particles. As he suspected, the flow did indeed come from somewhere within the villa. Water sourced from within a dwelling would once have been a source of great pride to the residents, a rarity and a mark of distinction for the household. Now it supported an unruly mess of bracken, blackberries, and other sundry weeds. He followed it, for no other reason than to find the source, which might be of interest in itself. The intermittent wet patches led him to a narrow door, partially sealed by fallen masonry. Above it, the stone lintel was adorned with carvings too eroded to be recognisable.

He levitated the fallen stones away from the door, revealing a dark, dank passage smelling of bats and fungi. "*Lumos maxima*," he commanded, and the space leapt with light. Arawn blinked in surprise. What he had taken to be a corridor was actually a small room, three times as long as its width, the latter being little more than the span of the doorway. At the far end, water dripped steadily from a stone lip built into the wall. From the lip, the water fell a short distance into a wide stone bowl, mounted on a carved pedestal. The bowl was nearly full of crystallised minerals and sludge. The overflow system still functioned, channelling the excess water into a culvert through which it made its egress from the room.

Arawn's attention locked onto an alcove immediately above the lip. Within stood a stone figure some three feet high, nearly featureless with the pockmarks of age and decay. One of the ancient gods. Arawn's heart began to pound as he ran his fingers over the figure's contours, touch seeking what sight could not distinguish. His mouth went dry as his questing hands formed a portrait of the god. He stepped back and looked again. To one side of the statue, part of a corroded metal ring protruded from the wall. The ring would have once held a cup to pour an oblation of water. Arawn frowned, bewildered. This particular god did not belong entombed in a small dark room. Myrddin was usually located outside, high up, between rock and sky. There was another deviation from the standard depictions of the god: the statue had been carved with the left hand held slightly out, as though to accept an offering.

He backed away, coming up hard against a slimy wall. The scenes he had watched in his Pensieve played in his mind as he recalled Abraxas Malfoy's words: "*The Llygad will not wake until it rests in the hand of its true owner. Of course, this cannot be taken literally. Merlin is ages dead...*" The words seared his mind like a burning brand. *Merlin may be ages dead, but what if the 'true owner' is a representation of the god himself?* he wondered. He was unwilling to consider this particular representation as the owner of the Llygad, but the more he weighed the pieces, the better they seemed to fit together. He stood in the first known home of the Prince family, where a hidden statue of Myrddin waited with an open hand. Abraxas' taunting tones slid between his racing thoughts: "*Any witch or wizard of the Prince line, perhaps? The Dark Lord believes so.*" Arawn's excitement faltered. The secrets of the Llygad might yet depend entirely on Snape. Was he alive? If so, where was he hiding?

Exiting the room, Arawn replaced the stones as he had found them and stalked back to the feasting hall. His mind feverishly detailed a list of actions. Trying the Llygad for himself was a highly dangerous venture and would be a last resort. The first thing he needed to do was to wait for the outcome of Snape's hearing. If Snape was granted a pardon, he just might come out of hiding. If he was alive. Even then, he might choose to stay hidden. Arawn swore quietly; he was sorely tempted to use the Dementors again. For that to happen, he would need some help.

He petulantly kicked at a stone. Lucius Malfoy had been a mentor, of sorts, to Snape. He might be able to provide the necessary tool—a memory of Snape in an emotionally charged state, the darker the better. When extracted from the observer and fed to a Dementor, such a memory acted as a homing beacon, enabling the usually indiscriminate creatures to distinguish the subject of the memory from other people. Arawn fumed. That fool Umbridge had almost let the Kneazle out of the bag when she blabbed about ordering the attack on Potter. Arawn shook his head incredulously. Sending Dementors into Little Whinging to silence the Potter boy was a brazen act of incomprehensible stupidity. Arawn had curtailed his research in response to the reckless breach, though now he was confident an inquiry was not forthcoming. The whole concept had been wiped from public memory by the events of the War.

He ground his teeth. *Damn you, Snape. If you are alive, I will find you...* His increasingly irate train of thought erupted into physical action as he cast a powerful blasting hex at the wall above the fireplace. With a snarl of disgust, he snatched up his broom and Disapparated.

As soon as he was sure the intruder had really gone, a pine marten swarmed down from his lookout tree. He did not know that in Wales he represented a rare and protected species and the mere sight of him would cause jubilant delight among both Muggle and Wizarding naturalists. He only knew his evening routine had been delayed.

Flicking his tail in annoyance, he cleaned his face and climbed to the top of the ancient wall, following the route he regularly marked as his own. High above the structure a human would recognize as a fireplace, the marten froze. His path was not supposed to move, yet he felt a tiny tremor through his front paws. His whiskers curved forward and his nose twitched. The trail did not smell right—and there was a gap to one side which had never been there before.

He jumped as sharp cracking noises echoed hollowly off bare stone. The sound was similar to the noises coincident with ducks falling dead from the sky. The marten cocked his head... delicious, freshly killed ducks... if he was very quick, he could steal one. He tentatively extended a paw and rested his weight upon it. His fur bristled as his path moved again and emitted a long, howling groan. With a sharp yip of fright, he turned tail and fled, sinuously bounding to safety in his cove of trees as masonry and mortar slithered to the floor in a roaring cloud of dust.

For a time, only the gentle evening breezes wandered through the open spaces of the villa. The soft movement stirred the fine dust lingering in the air, creating ragged, wandering columns. Made luminous by the moonlight, these could have easily been mistaken for ghosts. A passing Muggle would have made a sign against evil and given the place a wide berth. But there were no passing Muggles.

Only the moon stared down, lighting the wall above the fireplace, which, by some miracle, still stood. Covered in dust and remnants of mortar, its colours dulled by time and a cloak of silvery light, the mosaic was still magnificent: a stone and timber castle on high ground, heavily fortified and defended, held one side of the design. The other

side depicted a steep hill clad in green forest a wild place a place shadowed with mystery and dappled with secrets.

Caught in frozen motion and filling the upper quarter of the mosaic entirely, a heraldic symbol presided over both castle and hill: a red dragon on a field of gold.

Muggle Trouble

Chapter 7 of 32

Summary: Severus receives some good news and considers his future. Hermione receives some welcome news, too, though it turns out to be bittersweet. Lucius Malfoy engineers a deception, Minerva gets a chance to make amends, and Trainee Auror Potter is too big for his boots. A slight misunderstanding has Severus knocking on the portrait door. A walk in the grounds works out rather well, even if it does end with an urgent message.

A/N's

The painting Severus examines in the Ravenclaw Room is a magically animated version of *Creation of the Birds*, by Remedios Varo, 1957. I assume the animated version was created with the full cooperation of the artist.

Heinrich Heine (1797-1856) a German critic and poet

Readers familiar with the BBC productions, *Yes, Minister* and *Yes, Prime Minister*, will recognise a small salute to Sir Humphrey Appleby as portrayed by Sir Nigel Hawthorne.

Australian Slang

- Boss cocky: an overseer or supervisor; the boss
- Drongo: a remarkably stupid person
- Eastern brown: one of several common names for the highly venomous snake *Pseudonaja textilis*
- Ratbag: a troublemaker; someone not to be trusted

Many moons ago, Justice beta-read this chapter for me and helped make it better than it was. In these modern times, I salute and thank TeaOli for beta-reading and giving it new life and fun.

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In spite of his plans to keep busy and occupy his mind, Severus was having little success. A cold ball of anxiety had obstinately settled in the pit of his stomach and ignored every attempt to be thawed. He consulted his pocket watch. Nearly two in the morning. He quickly calculated the time in London. Surely the hearing was over by now? Unable to stand waiting indoors any longer, he shrugged into his coat, took himself outside, and prowled impatiently between the house and the tree-line.

He froze in his tracks at the *pop* of an arriving Patronus. Hermione's otter streaked towards him and circled him at dizzying speed, performing various acrobatics as it did so. In spite of the otter's exuberance, Severus was seriously alarmed. Hermione's Patronus had faded to a vague outline. As far as he knew, this could only mean she was in some sort of trouble. Discounting any risk to himself, Severus ran to the stairs and took them three at a time. Bursting through the door, he barely had time to register her presence before Hermione launched herself at him, seizing him in an embrace worthy of a lioness intent on wrestling her prey to the ground.

"You did it!" she yelled in his ear. "*We* did it! You're free! They've exonerated you!"

"Are you all right?" he gasped through the onslaught, managing to hold her back for a moment as he assessed her appearance.

"They've cleared you of *everything*! Of course I am!" She paused in her outpouring of good news when she saw the concern written in his eyes. "Severus, what's wrong?"

"Your Patronus... look." He pointed to the silver otter, now little more substantial than a fading skein of cloud.

Hermione gazed at it wistfully. "I know; I thought it looked a little dull three weeks ago. This is as pale as I've ever seen it. I believe my Patronus is changing. I found several accounts in the library which describe the stages of a Patronus change." She blushed as she added, "Including the reasons *why* they change. My otter appears to be a textbook example."

"I thought you may have been injured or ill." Severus hesitantly draped an arm over her shoulder, wrung out with sheer relief. "Is the change due to anything unfavourable?" he asked, releasing her.

Hermione's arms tightened around his waist. "You didn't hear a word I said, did you?"

"Hardly surprising. Things did take a turn for the cacophonous."

"You, Severus Snape, are a free man. Minister Shacklebolt had your official pardon formally drawn up and signed by *everyone* who needs to sign it, to wit, the entire Wizengamot." She stood back to prod him in the chest. "Furthermore, he has made it incontestable. For all time."

Severus stared at her, completely speechless.

"And that's not all," she added with burgeoning excitement. "He has put out a statement saying if you are alive, he would like to discuss terms for your future occupation. I think he wants you in the Ministry."

Severus could think of only one reason Shacklebolt might want him safely secured within the Ministry structure. "No doubt so as many eyes as possible can be kept on me," he muttered.

Hermione sighed at the ceiling with martyred patience. "He didn't say anything specific, but *can* tell you the Ministry is going through some really big changes. They are creating a new department, specifically to coordinate training methods in defence against Dark Magic." Hermione's eyes sparkled mischievously. "What's the bet he'd like *you* to direct it?"

Severus sat at the table to consider her words. While the Aurors and certain sections of the Department of Mysteries had their own defensive capabilities, the return of Voldemort had proved these capabilities to be both haphazard and outdated. At first, Severus had assumed the ineptitude was due to the Ministry tripping over its own feet. Internal bureaucratic process was, after all, a proven way to *not* get things done.

As he observed events unfolding, he soon realised this was not entirely the case. Due to Voldemort's systematic extermination campaigns, there were noticeable breaches in knowledge and practice, perpetuated by the fact that Hogwarts had not turned out a high N.E.W.T-level in Defence Against the Dark Arts for years.

There could be some truth to the development Hermione reported, and he had to admit, it sparked his interest. He rubbed the seemingly ever-present stubble on his jaw. It would be good to use magic again; he hated Muggle shaving methods. Even so, he would keep his power restrained until he left Hermione's property. If the traces were still active, they would point not only to him, but to Hermione as well.

"Severus?" Hermione watched him with an expression halfway between anxious and sad. "Whatever you decide to do, you will write to me, won't you?"

"Of course," he replied, wondering if she wanted written correspondence to be the limit of their future interaction. "I had entertained the thought of going back to Britain in the event of success with the Wizengamot. I will defer any decision for a week or so. If I choose to return, I would prefer to have some idea of the public response to the Wizengamot's decision; that is, if I may impose upon you for a little longer?"

"You may impose as long as you like. I said so when you first came here, and I haven't changed my mind." Hermione approached him and stopped just short of arm's length. She fidgeted, unsure of what to do next. "It would be good if you could visit Hogwarts. Minerva is giving herself hexes over what happened on the night you escaped. She told me about it on a miserable afternoon when it was pelting rain and I found her wandering the portrait galleries like a restless ghost."

Severus scowled at the floor. Seconds ticked by before he gave Hermione a sidelong glance. "Oh, very well," he growled, bracing himself as she took his acquiescence as an invitation to assail him with another fierce embrace. Giving in to mild amusement, he stood and lightly returned the gesture noting it was not at all a disagreeable experience. All too soon, in his stealthily growing opinion, she let go and looked at him wonderingly. Before he could think of anything to say or do, she reached up and gently touched his face.

"You," she whispered, regarding him as though he were a rare and extraordinary magical creature.

"Me, what?" he managed, warring with an unexpected attack of conflicting emotions.

At that moment, a Patronus materialised with a *pop*, making them both jump. It was unlike any Patronus Hermione had ever seen before. Somewhere between a goat and an antelope, it sported a prominent, bristling mane and short, curved horns. As if drawn to elevated places, it immediately occupied the highest spot in the room. She did, however, recognise the voice delivering the message. "Oriens," she said, nudging a wary Severus.

The Patronus shook its mane as it delivered a message: "Miss Granger, your parents are safe and well. I have performed some physical and mental diagnostics from a distance, and the readings are clear. The detailed diagnostics and charm reversals will need to happen in the Muggle Quarantine ward at St. Mungo's. I don't expect there will be any complications. You were right with your Perth hypothesis; that was a brilliant piece of reasoning!

"Your parents are currently watching an outdoor film at the Somerville Auditorium. You should visit it some day; it is like being in a cathedral made of living trees. Give me another two hours, then report to St. Mungo's. Ask for Healer Rosemary; she will be expecting you. She is very interested in your ideas on indelible memories, so be ready for a lengthy discussion." As soon as Oriens' message ended, the Patronus abruptly vanished.

"Oh, my goodness." Hermione dazedly found her way to a chair and sat down. "It never rains, but it pours, as the saying goes. What was that Patronus animal anyway?"

Severus couldn't help it, he gave the first real laugh in he couldn't recall how long.

"I apologize," he said as he composed himself and massaged a cramp out of his abdominal muscles. "You show up with history-making news, you hear something of extreme personal importance, and you *still* manage to succumb to curiosity and ask a question." He dropped gracelessly into an armchair, scrubbing one hand over his eyes as the sudden absence of nervous tension unstrung every tendon and muscle in his body. "It was a Sumatran Serow," he informed the flabbergasted witch, "native to the highlands of Sumatra, Indonesia."

Hermione seized the factual information with relief. She had seen Severus smile quite a few times in the past few weeks. Apart from making her feel warm all over, the visual evidence suggested he was also capable of laughter. But actually seeing him do it was a sight worth remembering. She wanted to see him laugh again, many times. "Well, that explains it." She toyed with a crow-feather quill. "I could not work out what part of the world Oriens comes from. I've never met anyone from the Indonesian archipelago before."

"Not many South East Asian wizards reside in the British Isles. The climate does not agree with them, I assume." Severus watched her carefully as he added to his statement. "Your Unspeakable friend was probably schooled at Borobudur, on the island of Java."

"Gods, Severus, I wouldn't call him my friend! I've only met him once. I'd no idea Indonesia has its own school. I always thought Borobudur was a ruined temple."

"Borobudur has been there for centuries, perhaps longer than is recorded. I have not visited that school, but I hear the illusion of abandonment is particularly spectacular."

"But why didn't we hear of it at Hogwarts?"

"I don't know for sure," Severus admitted. "Perhaps it is because the teaching methods of the East are rather different to our own. Think, if you will, on the training of Buddhist monks. I am led to believe similar rigours in self-discipline and renunciation are implicit in Eastern methods of magical instruction." He sat forward to emphasise his next point. "I would advise you not to mention any of our assumptions to Oriens should your paths cross again. If they happen to be true, he might Obliviate you." After a pensive silence, he roused himself and filled the kettle.

Hermione smiled as he folded his arms and frowned at the inoffensive appliance. "A watched kettle never boils," she commented, giving the biscuit tin an experimental shake.

"I am sure it will," he retorted. "In just enough time for me to come up with a plan. I assume you are willing to participate?"

"I wouldn't miss it for worlds," Hermione answered as she arranged chocolate-chip biscuits on a plate.

If there was one trait Lucius Malfoy was very proud of, it was his elusiveness. Even Voldemort had referred to him as "slippery". Lucius had no hesitation in providing the Unspeakable with memories of missing Death Eaters. Nearly losing Draco, as payment for decades of loyalty, had buried any sense of camaraderie with his former associates.

Providing a memory featuring *Severus* was another matter altogether. When Lucius asked Severus to be Draco's godfather, he presumed his half-blood friend did not even know what a godfather was supposed to do. To his eternal gratitude, Lucius was proved wrong. Whether Severus intended to or not, he performed a godfather's duty to the highest degree, safeguarding Draco's soul at mortal risk to himself.

"Patience, please," he told the Unspeakable. "It was rare for Snape to display the kind of emotion you describe. Finding a memory of him in that state is proving difficult."

Lucius patrolled his cell, putting on a show of finding one memory after another, then discarding each as simply not good enough for the Unspeakable's purposes. What those purposes were, Lucius had no idea. He could not begin to imagine how the kind of memories he was being asked to provide would assist in tracking down rogue Death Eaters. However, he could recognise an opportunity to "garner an ace or two" when it presented itself.

While he was forced to reconcile himself to the fact he would most likely be in Azkaban for the rest of his life, Lucius Malfoy had plans. If he was going to live in prison, he would do it in style. There was scope to flex his ambition; he just needed to find ways of making the system work for him. A few aces up his sleeve were exactly what he needed. Conjugal visits were foremost in his mind. Once assured of Draco's safety and continuing education, Lucius realised he missed Narcissa terribly. He was allowed letters after they had been carefully screened by the Azkaban Communications Office but it was not the same as seeing her. At least he was sure Narcissa still wanted him. He shook his head, disguising the gesture as an elegant dismissal of yet another unsuitable memory. Why had it taken so long for him to realise how much he valued her companionship?

Considering how the smallest grain of truth could give credibility to the most outrageous deception, Lucius deployed all of his guile and creativity to produce a memory that would satisfy the Unspeakable without betraying Severus. Having concocted something presentable, he re-played it several times, looking for any flaws. It had a couple of disjointed sequences, but these could be explained as distractions experienced during the intensity of the moment. Pushing the "memory" to the front of his mind, he signalled his readiness to the Unspeakable. As with the memories of the other Death Eaters, the extraction was quick and painless. After placing the memory in a crystal sphere, the Unspeakable left without further conversation.

Lucius breathed a sigh of relief and skirted around the spot where the Unspeakable had stood. There had been something very unusual about his shadow. Lucius thought he had seen it shift on its own, albeit slightly. While supposedly searching for memories, he noticed the shadow did not fall true to the position of the light shed by the candles. The Unspeakable's real shadow had shown as expected and it was separate from the other shadow.

Lucius bit his thumbnail. While negotiating with the Unspeakable, he had seen a soulless look to the man's eyes. The same thing he had seen in the eyes of *Dolores Umbridge*. He stood straight with a quiet gasp. Dolores Umbridge had a small reputation with Dementors. Could this account for her reputedly missing soul, or was she just born that way? He felt his blood chill as he contemplated the faux shadow. If his Unspeakable visitor acquired his cold aura from Dementors as well, it could explain why he wanted specifically detailed memories. He intended to feed them to the former guards of Azkaban. Lucius was not sure how feeding memories to Dementors would help find fugitives, but it seemed uncanny enough to be probable. Equally uncanny was Lucius' guess as to what the faux shadow actually was.

Lucius quietly congratulated himself. He had wormed his way out of pain and Obliviation with a display of cooperative, self-serving ambition. He had re-cast a memory of Voldemort in a fine fit of homicidal temper and grafted it with one of Severus duelling with Mulciber. Mulciber had earned the thrashing he received. The annoying little toad's sadistic sense of humour had gone just a bit too far at Severus' expense.

Fortuitously, the false memory incorporating the dead Voldemort *should* lead the Dementor on a wild Thestral chase. He evaluated the Dementor-Umbridge connection again. At one point, some wag had put about a story that a *Dementor* would die if it kissed *her*. Lucius shuddered. The thought of *anything* kissing Umbridge was unbearably gruesome.

"Are you sure it is him?" While Minerva would not normally doubt Hermione's candour, caution was certainly called for. Especially as Hermione insisted Minerva *alone* should accompany her on this late night excursion. *Why would Severus contact Hermione Granger, of all people? Now that is suspicious... oh... Of all people, she was the only one prepared to give him the benefit of the doubt. Perhaps he knew it. He must have; else he would not have contacted her. Severus, I'm so sorry...*

"Come and see for yourself." Hermione's words seemed to come from a distance as she took the older witch firmly by the hand and led her out of the portrait-less room she had insisted upon using to deliver her news. Navigating by wand-light, Hermione slowed her pace a little so Minerva would not have to rush. After a few corridors and stairwells, the Headmistress guessed at their destination and could not disguise her reluctance.

"Hermione, I do not think this is a good idea."

Hermione gave the Headmistress' hand an encouraging tug. "Come on. It's fine; you'll see."

Sighing, Minerva allowed herself to be ushered around one more corner, whereupon her hands flew to her mouth as she shrieked in alarm.

Severus interrupted his contemplation of the nightscape through the clear glass window. Stepping away from it, he gave the suit of armour a suspicious glance and bowed to the gaping Headmistress. "Minerva."

Confused and disbelieving, Minerva looked from Hermione to Severus and back again. "Is this... really... Hermione, are you sure? Have you checked for Polyjuice?"

Hermione quickly positioned herself between the Headmistress and Severus, just in case Minerva decided to duel first and believe later.

A loud yowl interrupted the scene as Crookshanks emerged from an unseen hiding place and padded purposefully towards Severus, his tail held upright with the tip curled over in a hook-of-confidence. He sat at the wizard's feet, looking very important and purring loudly.

"Crooks! Ugh! Where *have* you been?" Hermione took in Crookshanks' disgraceful appearance and decided she did not want to know. His ginger fur was liberally smudged with dust and his whiskers festooned with dirty cobwebs. He looked as though he had recently crawled, backwards, through a long-neglected ventilation shaft. Something suspiciously like a flattened, mummified mouse clung to his chest.

Minerva's hands shook as she rubbed her eyes, her trepidation waning. "Well... if Crookshanks is convinced, then I suppose I cannot argue." She drew a deep breath, shook her head, frowned, and placed her hands firmly on her hips.

Severus knew the sum of these gestures by heart. He stood by the window and waited. *Three, two, one...*

"You!"

Severus raised his eyebrows, doing his best to look unconcernedly innocent.

"Great Merlin, Severus! You could have let *somebody* know you had survived!"

"I did," he protested smoothly. "I informed Miss Granger over an hour ago."

"But how did you...? Where did you...?" Minerva Summoned a chair and sat down heavily. After a moment of stunned silence, she began to laugh. Then she cried, and laughed, and cried again. At last, she dried her eyes and searched her skirt pockets. Producing a small hip-flask, she took a hearty swig and allowed the fiery beverage to work its own kind of magic. A small curl of blue flame escaped her lips as she exhaled and sat bolt upright.

"Old Ogdens Extremely Restricted Reserve," Severus commented from his vantage point. "I do hope you have not made a habit of it, Minerva."

"No, Severus, I have not. I keep it for overwhelming occasions." Minerva put away her liquid fortification and assured an attentive Hermione she was well enough to stand. "Severus, what I said to you... I had no right to. I..."

Severus held up one hand to interrupt her. "May I suggest we let those particular bones lie in peace? I, for one, would rather not examine them." After a short silence to

allow Minerva to process his statement, he indicated her restoration efforts with an approving glance at the window behind him. "A vast improvement on what *was* there."

"The same could be said for yourself," Minerva answered. "You do look well, I must say. Have you been over on the continent?"

"In a manner of speaking." Severus watched as Hermione appraised Crookshanks with extreme displeasure while picking bits of who-knew-what out of his fur. She stood up and gathered the squirming animal in her arms.

"If you don't mind, I'll leave you both some privacy; unless there is anything else you need, Headmistress?"

"No, Miss Granger. I believe the situation is under control." Minerva gave Hermione a friendly pat on the shoulder as the young witch excused herself. She did not notice Severus' subtle hand movement as he bade Miss Granger good night.

Hidden in the gloom of a corridor, Hermione smiled to herself and hugged Crookshanks a little tighter. *I'll see you later*, Severus had signed. She knew he would be true to his word. So far, their plan had worked exactly as anticipated. "But you," she whispered in Crookshanks' ear, "were supposed to wait with Severus not run off and play dress-ups!" Hermione grimaced, as she suspected her furry familiar might have a store of mummified mice, dismembered lizards, and desiccated frogs. Not to mention an entomological collection worthy of a museum.

It took a combined arctic glare from Severus and Minerva to convince Albus to vacate to another portrait. Minerva quietly seethed as she recalled Albus' genial acknowledgement of Severus' presence. *'Severus, my boy!', indeed. I should put his damned portrait outside if he has a mind to taunt thunderstorms* Taking note of her former colleague's studious silence, Minerva rightly guessed Severus would not tell her anything related to where he had been or how he had survived.

"Oh, keep your secrets, if you must. I really do not have the energy to attempt to pry," she huffed.

"*Attempting* to pry never got you anywhere before." As Minerva pretended not to bristle, Severus surveyed the chaotic condition of the office. "I understand you are Headmistress of this fine institution?"

"I never asked to be, and I certainly do not want to be, not at this time in my life. You were never formally dismissed from the position of Headmaster; I don't suppose you would be interested...?"

Severus shook his head vehemently. "Thank you, no. I would prefer to leave my teaching career well behind me. It was not a voluntary choice to begin with."

"Of course. I understand." Minerva was suddenly anxious. "Have you been back to Spinner's End?"

"I assumed the place would be under surveillance, not all of it friendly. Therefore, I have not. Why do you ask?"

Minerva wrung her hands. "All of your books. When the Aurors searched the house the day after the Battle, they did not find a single one. They said it was odd because it was alleged you had a most impressive library." Minerva wondered at how disinterestedly he took the news of the loss of a lifetime's valuable collection. She could only conclude he had done something to safeguard them. Severus Snape *always* had a plan or two up his sleeve. "The Aurors searched your rooms here, too. Irma went with them and defended your reference library like a dragon would its hoard, insisting the books belonged to Hogwarts." She stifled a laugh. "The Aurors hardly dared to touch anything with a binding and pages.

"As for the rest of your property, they went through everything meticulously, but left empty-handed. Nothing was damaged in the process. Of course, the same rooms are still available if you need a place to stay. Or perhaps you might prefer one of the guest rooms?" she continued as the shadow of a scowl crossed Severus' features at the mention of his former quarters.

Severus stationed himself at the desk and picked up a random bundle of parchments. Leafing through them, he found the situation was more dire than Hermione had suspected. Minerva was *really* having trouble keeping the parchment-work up to date and the students had not yet returned to add to the load. "Perhaps we could come to an arrangement. I estimate it would take three months to help you get this lot sorted out," he gestured at the overburdened desk.

"Make it six months and we have a deal. Are you aware of Minister Shacklebolt's request for an audience?"

"I am."

"Well, you *have* been keeping your finger on the pulse. I imagine you are in no hurry to visit the Ministry buildings. Perhaps Hogwarts could provide neutral ground? At any rate, I think you will be pleasantly surprised." She smiled as Severus grumbled something unintelligible and rolled his eyes.

"There is something you should consider, Minerva, before we seal an agreement. My presence here may cause you certain problems with those who feel they have an axe to grind."

Minerva removed her spectacles. "Severus. At present, I have on staff a centaur, a ghost, and a half-giant. Given the involvement of giants in the Battle of Hogwarts, some parents and Ministry officials have already worked themselves into a foaming frenzy. Some display a dislike of centaurs simply because they are centaurs, regardless of their timely assistance during the Battle. Nobody has said anything against Cuthbert; perhaps they cannot recall their grievances without falling asleep. Believe it or not, there are even some who disapprove of Filius because of his physical stature. Mind you, none of them would have the balls to spout their nonsense while facing him on the duelling strip." She stopped to examine Severus' rare expression of astonishment. "Yes, Severus, *I said 'balls'*. Transfigure something into a bridge and get over it."

Exasperated, she threw her hands in the air. "It is not as though new staff members are easy to find at the best of times, let alone now. A lot of us are getting to a point where the prospect of retirement has a very strong appeal. Not that Irma would ever admit she is getting more than just a little slow. Seriously, I would consider employing a... oh, I don't know... a *gargoyle* as an assistant librarian. I would give the Giant Squid a job interview for the simple pleasure of ticking everybody off.

"If your presence in these hallowed halls causes a small outbreak of apoplexy, then so be it. You have been pardoned, and I will not let any naysayers forget it!"

After a formal handshake, a Firewhisky, and a visit to a store-room to retrieve some domestic possessions, Severus followed a house-elf by the name of Caddy through a maze of corridors to the guest wing. Last used during the Triwizard Cup, the guest wing was one of the oldest parts of the Castle, reportedly designed by the Founders themselves. Apart from a few gouges in the stone arch marking the entrance, it had suffered negligible damage during the Battle.

Caddy trotted down an impressive gallery hung with tapestries, mindful to keep ahead of the honoured guest and light the way as protocol demanded. For a smallish house-elf with short legs, it was not an easy thing to do. "We is nearly there, sir," he panted, sorting through a bunch of enormous keys on a great brass ring and detaching one of them.

"Here we is, sir. The Ravenclaw Room." Caddy levitated the selected key, directing it into the talons of a carved eagle adorning the door. The eagle's eyes glowed sapphire-blue as its talons closed around the shaft of the key and the door opened slowly.

Severus followed Caddy into the room, noting that as the door closed behind them, the eagle turned to face the interior. Caddy explained the use of the key and pointed out various features of the accommodations. One of these was a bookshelf, currently empty. On request, the bookshelf would fill with any publications the occupant required. The appropriate loan administration would be automatically attended to for any library in the world. Noting Severus' interest, Caddy told him that historically, the Ravenclaw Room was provided to guests of academic inclination, enabling them to continue their research projects while away from home. After making sure Severus would be quite comfortable and did not require anything else, Caddy bowed and vanished.

The Ravenclaw Room was actually a suite on the upper level of the guest wing. In the combined sitting room and study, tall, narrow windows reached from floor to ceiling. Separated by massive stone columns, the windows formed a wide semicircle as they conformed to the internal contour of a buttressed tower. Daylight would provide a fine view of rolling hills and distant mountains. Severus surveyed the bedroom and adjoining bathroom, finding them handsomely appointed without ostentation.

Thankfully, there were no portraits. Only one magically animated painting adorned a wall in the study. The subject of the painting was a strange being indeed. Half owl, half human, it sat at a desk with a blank sheet of drawing paper spread out before it. With one hand, the owl-person drew a bird, colouring it with inks contained in egg-shaped vessels. In the other hand, it held a glass prism.

Wondering if there was something he should remember, Severus watched as the owl-person used the prism to direct a spectrum of light across the drawing of the bird. At the touch of light, the painted bird flew out of the paper, leaving the sheet blank. The sequence repeated itself over and over again. Curiously, each bird the owl-person created was different and they did not simply vanish as they took flight: some pecked at the floor behind the owl-person's desk, while others flew out of a painted window into a painted sky.

Severus checked the time. Nearly one o'clock. He put on his cloak and pressed the key still held in the eagle's talons. On the other side, the eagle dropped the key into his outstretched hand. Severus moved swiftly and silently towards the Gryffindor Tower. As he approached the appointed meeting-place, he was not surprised to see a pair of glowing eyes at half-Kneazle height within the shadows of an alcove.

A much cleaner Crookshanks emerged, gave a slow-blink which Severus dutifully returned and led him back the other way with a twitch of his plume-like tail, occasionally angling one ear back to make sure the wizard was capable of following instructions. Turning down a dimly lit side hall, Crookshanks halted beside a featureless section of stone wall and rubbed his face against it. As the door to the Room of Requirement revealed itself and opened, Crookshanks slipped inside, Severus following close behind him.

Predictably, Hermione was ready to pepper him with questions. Severus insisted the best way to answer them would be to relate all that had happened, without interruption, since Hermione had excused herself from his and Minerva's presence. At length, they settled on a compromise, with Severus pausing in his account every now and then to assuage Hermione's curiosity. Even so, there were questions she felt she needed to ask more than once.

"Six months? You're really here for six months?" Hermione's delight was palpable.

"Indeed. I shall assist Minerva with her administrative duties, see what state Slughorn has let the Potions Store descend to, and produce a new syllabus for Defence Against the Dark Arts. Not quite enough to keep me fully occupied, which may be a good thing. I have yet to find out what Shackbolt wants with me."

"You're going to see him?"

"I expect he will be here next week. Minerva went into ecstasies over the prospect of arranging the meeting. I suppose she knows something I don't."

"She wouldn't give you a place to stay and a list of chores if it was anything bad."

Severus gave a prodigious yawn. "Perhaps not."

Finding the yawn contagious, Hermione was quiet for a moment. "Merlin! It's half-past three! I think it's time we got ourselves to bed."

Severus blinked and stared at her, trying not to laugh as Hermione realised what she had said and blushed admirably. "Really, Miss Granger. For shame," he drawled.

She was on her feet in an instant. "Stop it! You know what I meant!"

"Sure of that, are you? Because to *me* it sounded like..."

Hermione swatted his arm as her blush intensified. Severus was fascinated. It was like watching a potion change colour exactly when it should.

After her verbal slip, Hermione retreated to formality to restore her dignity. As they wished each other good morning, Severus noticed she hesitated to continue her recent habit of embracing him whenever they met or parted. He solved that problem by initiating the contact himself. To his satisfaction, the remarkable colour-change repeated itself. A short time later, he was still grinning as he extinguished the wall sconces in his rooms. The next six months had potential for some interesting developments.

Kingsley Shackbolt waited patiently while Severus perused the contents of a file documenting the numerous lapses, breaches, calumnies, and catastrophes defining the Ministry's capabilities in defence against Dark Magic. As Severus closed the file and leaned back in his chair, scowling thoughtfully, Kingsley dared hope the former Death Eater might consider accepting the offered position.

"As you can see, Severus, the combined misguided efforts of Fudge and Umbridge left us divided and very nearly conquered. If Voldemort had won the Battle of Hogwarts, we would have been sitting Puffskeins. Umbridge in particular made sure of the eradication of vital information. Not just textbooks, either. Dossiers, files, manuscripts, books; so much has gone missing and, I suspect, been destroyed. She even went through the Pensieves. Merlin only knows what we have lost."

"When books are burned, in the end people will also burn," Severus commented. "Heinrich Heine was not wrong in his observation."

"May we never see those days again," Kingsley replied. "I wonder if we will ever recover from this latest scourge. Not since the Inquisitions which plagued both Muggle and wizarding communities have people and knowledge been so ruthlessly eliminated."

Severus shrugged. "If recovery is possible, it will not be through the ignorance heretofore perpetuated by the former Minister and his lackeys." He gave Kingsley a challenging stare. "If one is to be vigilant, one must know what to be vigilant against. Knowledge of the enemy is essential. Particularly if the Ministry's goal is to gather scattered resources and forge them into a coherent, competent defensive force."

Kingsley met his stare evenly. "Are you willing to provide the required knowledge?"

Severus got up and clasped his hands behind his back, gazing out of a window with narrowed eyes. He had coveted the Defence Against the Dark Arts position for many years; who better to give instruction than himself? But this was something bigger and better, where he could stretch his knowledge and skill to the absolute limit. As Departmental Head of an entire section of the Ministry, he would have the authority to manage and direct defence training from the most senior official to the most unsuspecting student.

Severus wrestled with himself. He was of the mind that if something appeared too good to be true, then it was likely to contain a hidden trap. He had been taking a lot of risks lately, and it really went against his grain. Even so, his luck appeared to be holding, and there was another favourable impetus hovering around him: Hermione had stood by him all the way, stalwart and fiercely supportive. He did not doubt she would continue to do so.

"I have agreed to assist Minerva with administrative duties, among other things, for the next six months. Do you have any objection to my drafting an outline of structure and procedures here at Hogwarts?"

Kingsley leapt to his feet. "Not at all! Draft wherever you like! Does this mean you accept the position?"

Severus bit back an *Obviously*. "Indeed."

Kingsley gave a great sigh as relief flooded his features. "Thank you, Severus. We have been bereft of real expertise for far too long. Humphrey!"

With a loud *crack*, a pompous-looking house-elf appeared, neatly attired in two pin-striped tea-towels expertly knotted at the corners. "Yesses, Minister?"

"Humphrey, bring me the files for the new defence department and the particulars for the salary and accommodation of the chosen Departmental Head."

"The Department for the Encouragement of Eternal Vigilance and Defence Against Dark Magic, Minister?"

"Yes! You know perfectly well which department I mean, Humphrey. Bring me the files. At once!"

With a courteous bow, Humphrey disappeared.

"Unusual behaviour for a house-elf," Severus observed.

Kingsley rubbed his temples in mild exasperation. "He seems to think he is some sort of senior advisor. I put up with it, I must admit, which probably encourages him. But it would be needlessly cruel to shatter the little fellow's illusions. He does his work well, and he is a reliable source of information. Where the devil is he, anyway?"

Humphrey duly reappeared, armed with a massive amount of parchment. "Is all here, Minister. Where is Humphrey putting it?"

"Thank you. On the table, please. What's wrong, Humphrey?" Kingsley asked as Humphrey tucked his thumbs behind the upper knots of his tea-towels and regarded him with academic concern.

"Small problems in Ministerial Greenhouses for the Propagation of Vegetation for Magical Purposes, Minister."

"Concerning...?"

"Leeks, Minister."

"Leeks?"

"Yesses, Minister."

Kingsley's jaw muscles began to tic. "Care to elaborate, Humphrey?"

"Unknown persons has appropriated leeks without observation and initiation of proper statutory permissions. Humphrey is guessing leeks are being hid under pillows by young witches. They wants to dream of future husbands, now War is over."

"I really do not have the time or resources to deal with this now," Kingsley complained, thoroughly irritated.

"Humphrey is having suggestion, Minister."

"What is it?"

"If Minister announces official inquiry, everything is puts under active considerations. Situation stays in anonymous in-boxes awaiting Ministerial discretion."

"A Leek Inquiry. I suppose it will buy some time. Very well. See to it, Humphrey. And upgrade the wards on those greenhouses!"

"Yesses, Minister."

Kingsley glared at the air-space recently vacated by Humphrey, his tic gradually subsiding. "Do not be concerned," he assured Severus, who had been watching the exchange with one eyebrow firmly quirked. "I shall assign you a different house-elf. Now, with your permission, I shall schedule a formal announcement to the effect that you are definitely not dead. Let me see... Today is Monday... I have a press conference on Friday; will that give you enough time to steel yourself?"

Severus nodded and gave a wry smile. "Some time ago, I created a Howler Muffling Charm. Are you are interested in a demonstration?"

"Potter! Potter, we can't do this! Robards will have a fit!" Auror Proudfoot had an awful feeling the situation was going to rapidly progress from bad to much, much worse. Ever since Severus Snape's exoneration, Trainee Auror Potter had been impossible to control, let alone advise and instruct. Proudfoot, Potter's immediate supervisor, was approaching the end of his tether. Even Gawain Robards' stern injunctions to The Boy Who Lived made only a slight, and transient, difference. To cap it all off, Hermione Granger told the human maelstrom of testosterone-and-too-many-accolades-charged recklessness some news of a Muggle and a magical object.

To Proudfoot, the whole situation felt sticky from the start. Tobias Snape was reportedly slain, along with his wife, Eileen, during a Death Eater attack over twenty years ago. To have Severus Snape's father turn up alive with something magical in his possession set all his alarm bells ringing. Before Proudfoot could refer the matter to Robards, Potter announced that *he* would go and talk to Snape senior without permissions or permits or any attempt to follow established procedures alone, if necessary. Proudfoot could not let his charge go unaccompanied. Potter was *the* celebrity of the Wizarding world, and if anything happened to him...

"I'm just going to talk to him," Potter hissed impatiently. "Once I get him talking, finding out what he's carrying should be a cakewalk. Compared to chasing Horcruxes, that is. Wait here. And stop worrying! *Finite Incantatem*." His movements now audible, Potter made a beeline for the unsuspecting Muggle.

Proudfoot hesitated, then followed at a distance. He hoped rumours suggesting Hermione Granger was the brains behind the Golden Trio were grossly exaggerated.

Severus wandered around his rooms, wondering what to do. While he had been ensconced with Kingsley, Hermione had attended her first meeting with her parents after their memory restoration. It had not gone well. Mr and Mrs Granger had not disguised the hurt and disappointment they felt at their daughter's presumptive actions and were openly suspicious of her.

Hermione was devastated. Severus, when confronted with her heartbroken tears, had no idea what he could do to help. In the absence of inspiration, he opted to let her have her own space. In spite of telling her that if she needed him, she knew where to find him, it had been two days since he had seen her.

Nothing could quell a nagging suspicion that *his* way of dealing with grief might not be the best method for Hermione. A vague fear that he had done something wrong plagued him incessantly. It never occurred to Severus that Hermione might not want to burden him with displays of heart-on-sleeve emotion. He sprawled on his bed, willing himself to wait until morning. He groaned. It was barely nine o'clock, and he felt no desire to sleep.

A curious burning sensation drifted over him. Like a mild fever without an associated illness, it occurred whenever he recalled encountering her in the corridors, where she would fall in step beside him with a friendly nudge. Or when he spotted her in the library and would stealthily approach to startle her with a whispered greeting. Or when he remembered their animated debates as they contrived the best way to bring him back to Hogwarts without creating a major incident. Waiting was suddenly intolerable.

A few minutes later, he strode along the familiar route to the Gryffindor Tower. At the last corridor, he stopped abruptly as a sense of déjà vu overtook him. He had walked this path, on a mission, before. It had involved a Muggle-born witch and his mission had not ended as he would have hoped. He vacillated between turning back to his rooms, succumbing to the fear of history repeating itself; and continuing on to the portrait door, where history might yet be proved irrelevant. Berating himself for irrationality, it was not long before he stood in front of the Fat Lady's portrait. He disturbed her evening activities, and her display of pointedly ignoring him, by applying a Ceaseless Knocking hex on her frame. He desisted when she flounced angrily to the foreground to see what he wanted.

"Oh, *you* again. What do you want *this* time?" she sneered. Severus ignored her blatant disdain and asked if Miss Granger was available. A threat or four later, one involving prolonged combustion, and the Fat Lady bustled away post-haste to find Hermione.

Alone for a time in the semi-darkness, Severus retreated a little way from the door. Hermione was taking longer than he would have thought. Maybe she had been asleep, maybe she was absorbed in some task, maybe she would not come down. His courage ebbed. As he decided to return to his rooms, the door flew open with a bang and Hermione charged out, missing him completely as she looked in the opposite direction to where he was standing. Severus saw her posture slump and, though he took heart from her obvious disappointment, could not find the means to move or speak.

Unexpectedly, the Fat Lady came to his rescue as she snootily poured herself a glass of wine. "Good! You're here. Now can you please send *him* on his way before he makes a scene?" Hermione turned to see the Fat Lady set her glass down and point in Severus' direction.

Severus felt his breath catch as Hermione's face lit up with a grin of pure delight. With an almost predatory bound, she was in his arms, intent on squeezing the remaining breath out of him with a rib-crunching hug.

"Never," she growled, releasing Severus and half-dragging him back to the portrait where she defiantly turned on the Fat Lady. "Understand this: I will never, ever send him away."

As he enthusiastically returned Hermione's renewed embrace, Severus glanced up at the Fat Lady. She seemed to have forgotten she still held a bottle of wine in one hand. She was steadily pouring it over her feet while she regarded the couple with a very inelegant, open-mouthed stare. "Madam, you are wasting a perfectly good Bordeaux," he intoned with all the authority and composure he could muster. The Fat Lady's mouth shut with a snap, and she set her bottle down with a shaking hand. "This will be all over the castle by morning," Severus murmured in Hermione's ear.

"Do I appear concerned?" Hermione stepped back to look at him. The light in her eyes set his blood racing.

"I am compelled to say you do not." Remembering to breathe, he decided a long walk was the only way to restore his equilibrium. "I believe a walk in what is left of the grounds is in order, if you would care to accompany me?" he asked, offering his arm.

As they meandered through partially restored gardens, Hermione told him of her decisions to accept the offer of accelerating her schooling and to sit her exams as early as possible. As she faltered on the subject of her parents, he placed an arm around her shoulders, silently reassuring her. Fighting tears, she explained that not even written accounts detailing how savagely the War had been waged, her part in it, and why she had to protect her parents, made any difference to their cold wariness.

On a more robust topic, she related her brief discussion with Harry the day before. As far as Harry knew, Hermione had encountered a Muggle on whom she had detected the presence of a magical object while searching for her parents. Naturally, she made some enquiries and found out his name. Harry had said he would take the information to his supervisor, but insisted *he* would take part in the mission to recover the object.

Severus rolled his eyes when Hermione was not looking. The boy was still impetuous. He had no doubt, Trainee Auror Potter's supervisor was in for many a sleepless night.

Toby knew he was being followed. *Took 'em long enough*, he thought grimly. He clenched his teeth, forcing the memory of *that* night to some unknown place in his mind. *That* night: when he had found out that magic was not all about illusion and trickery; it was power and it was real. Toby was certain he would be driven insane with terror if he allowed the whole sequence of events to run unrestrained. It had its uses, though. Whenever the demon drink called to him, he simply let a little of what he had seen play in his recollections. It was enough to frighten the demon away.

While he had not seen his followers, his hearing detected two of them. He also knew *what* they were and what they sought. They had powers he wished he had never known about and they sought the Llygad y Ddraig. In the last words she had ever spoken to him, Eileen had told him to run. The concealment charm she cast over him would last a night and a day. After that, he was on his own. *They* must never take the Llygad, especially if *they* included Severus.

Toby had often thought of hiding the thing, disposing of it. On the sea voyage to Australia, he wanted to drop it over the side as the *Australis* ploughed through azure mountains around the Cape of Good Hope. Somehow, he couldn't let it go. He tried again later in the voyage, but it seemed the depths of the Indian Ocean would not be graced with the damn thing either. After one last attempt to be rid of it by sending it to the bottom of a sinkhole in the middle of a heat-blasted gibber plain he reluctantly decided he had to keep it. For what reason, he had no idea. The whole concept of fate had been incomprehensible to him until a small-town ghost story played out in front of his very eyes and undeniably saved his life. Who would have guessed the Australian bush had its own friendly phantoms?

After the ghostly encounter, Toby had taken the Llygad out of his belt pocket, along with the remnant of a story featuring a boy who called himself Myrddin, and looked at them afresh. He wondered if they were connected in some way. He suspected they were, but figured he would never really know what the connection was. The Llygad belonged to an alien world: a world he was not part of. Now, some natives of that world were tailing him, and all he had were his wits and a sharp knife. He was certain they were not about to kill him outright. A few calculated steps into open ground told him that much. Toby concluded that his followers wanted a close and personal encounter. "Bring it on, lads," he muttered.

Thinking quickly, Toby moved off the sandy bush track into thicker vegetation. Scrambling up a bank of crumbling clay, he spotted what he required not far away. He knew he could not elude the hunters while they were in the immediate vicinity. Eileen said they would sense the power of the Llygad once whatever she had done wore off. That would have been years and years ago. Bloody woman! She knew all along he'd fished the thing out of its hiding place. She had been secretly dropping charms on him up until the night she told him to run for it. Spies, she had said. The Llygad would be relatively safe with a drunken lout of a... Muggle?

Yeah, right, his internal dialogue snarled. *Who would've suspected me? Why didn't she deal with the infernal thing 'erself if it were so bloody important?*

Having chosen his ground, he positioned himself facing a large bloodwood tree, adopting a posture familiar, and usually sacred, to males all over the world. He stifled a snort of disdain. Whoever closed in on him was as deft on his feet as a duck in a ploughed field, judging by the stumbling racket he made. Behind him, the noise ceased abruptly as the person spotted him.

"Mr Snape, I presume?"

Male, around twenty, and as rash as chickenpox. Nah, mate, I'm Doctor Livingstone "Who's askin'?" Toby growled, not taking his apparent attention off his apparent preoccupation.

"Er... Are you Tobias Snape, formerly of Spinner's End, Manchester?"

Not sure what 'e's doin', either. Do these ratbags 'ave rookies? They must do. I reckon this one's as raw as they come. The other bloke can't be too far off. Boss cocky, maybe. "Gimme a minute. This ain't so straightforward once a bloke gets past fifty."

After taking what he considered to be enough time to maximise his questioner's discomfort, Toby turned to face a young man with messy black hair who stood with his bespectacled eyes downcast, shuffling his feet. "Who are you, where 're you from, what d'you want, when're you leavin'?"

"Er... My name's Harry. Harry Potter. I er... I have some news concerning your son."

Sure you do. God's Teeth, what a drongo! "That so?" Toby folded his arms across his chest, knitting his brows as he studied the uninvited messenger. He noted that as he did, Potter's eyes widened and he took a step backwards. From somewhere on Toby's right, a lizard scurried out into the open, quickly finding a new hiding place under a

rock. As it was unusual for lizards to emerge at dusk, he took it as a good indication of where the other ratbag was.

Toby let his posture droop a little, playing the "tired old man" card. "Well," he said in a friendlier tone, "It's a long time since I 'ad news from anyone. Gettin' dark too; it'll be lighter out in the open."

So saying, he took charge of the situation and began to move towards the track. Using the inconvenience of thick vegetation, he ensured Potter was obliged to use his hands for purposes other than magic. With his peripheral vision, Toby watched tell-tale signs. Potter used his left hand to push branches and twigs aside. His right hand was in an awkward position. He was carefully inching something out of his sleeve.

Wait for it. A veteran of many a pub brawl, street fight, and various all-in dust-ups, Toby had timing down to a fine art. *Now!* On the edge of the clay bank, Toby feigned a slip on the unstable surface. In one crouching motion, he turned to face Potter, blocked the young man's right arm and, driving up through his legs, unleashed a vicious uppercut. Potter's jaws came together with a crack like a gunshot; his whole body jumped violently and went limp. Toby seized the unconscious youth by the hair, holding his head up as he shoved a knee into his back, forcing him into a semi-upright position. Scooping up Potter's wand, he stowed it inside his sheepskin jacket. He drew his knife and held it at his hostage's throat. With a crash befitting a charging buffalo, another man burst into view and skidded to a confused stop, wand pointed in Toby's direction.

Mid forties, carryin' more weight than what's good for 'im, and worried to Hell and back about this Potter bloke Toby assessed. "Throw it 'ere," he snarled, indicating the man's wand with a nod and giving his knife an ominous twitch. Through the blade, he could feel a faint pulse. He didn't pay any attention to a small wave of relief. Potter's companion watched him closely, unable to use his wand while Toby had his human shield. "I said; throw it 'ere! Are y' deaf? Reverse t' bloody thing and throw it 'ere!"

Toby acted quickly; he had to keep things moving on *his* terms. He pressed the blade into Potter's throat, right above the carotid artery, but only deep enough to part the skin. It was enough. At the sight of blood trickling down his fellow ratbag's neck, the other man tossed his wand over to Toby.

"Please don't kill him," he pleaded, raising his hands in a gesture of surrender.

Still holding his knife, Toby let Potter drop to the ground and took the second wand in his left hand. On a bloody-minded whim, he pointed it at the motionless form.

"No!" The senior ratbag was nearly frantic.

Toby pocketed the wand and swiftly headed for the darkness of the woodland. He was confident he would not be followed. One man down and one so out of his head with worry he did not even realise Toby didn't have any magic with which to use the wand.

Besides, Toby knew this stretch of land very well, and there was just enough light to recognise familiar features. He suppressed a mirthless laugh as he followed a series of wallaby trails, kept clear of undergrowth by the numerous nightly traverses of the shy marsupials. Stopping near an enormous hollow log, he took the wands and launched them, dart-fashion, into the hollow. He grinned to himself. There was a particularly bad-tempered snake using the hollow as a winter stop-over. An eastern brown big enough to stop a coal train, people reckoned. Of course, this was an exaggeration. But they were not exaggerating when they solemnly affirmed it would come out fighting and chase a bloke too.

They halted near the remains of a stone wall. Hermione recognised the spot immediately. When she had run outside during the Yule Ball, she had come here. It had been a silly thing to do; she had been far from dressed for the weather. She wondered if Severus remembered the evening. On one of his ubiquitous patrols, he had found her sitting on the wall, sniffling and shivering. After a cool enquiry, during which he established she was physically unharmed and Mr. Krum had not done anything reprehensible, he silently cast a Warming Charm and tersely informed her she had five minutes to pull herself together. After that, willing or not, he would escort her back to the Castle. He had moved a short distance away and turned his attention elsewhere, allowing her to calm herself without scrutiny. At the time, she had wondered how the snarky, sarcastic Potions master could treat her with more dignity than the young wizard she had set her heart on.

Severus seated himself on the wall. "I have something which may be of interest to you," he announced, looking a little pleased with himself. "I take it you are still interested in the care and control of magical creatures?"

"Yes, absolutely! It is my first career choice."

"It seems the Department for the Regulation and Control of Magical Creatures has a slight problem concerning a conscious entity incarcerated in the Ministry vaults. They are unsure whether the creature should be the responsibility of the Beast Division or the Being Division. Indeed, they don't know what to make of him. I say 'him' because he calls himself Petrus: an appropriate name for one composed of stone. He has graced the vaults for over five hundred years. Only now do we have a wizard who claims an injustice has been done and a Minister who is willing to listen to a petition for the creature's release."

"Five hundred years! What on earth did he do to deserve that?" Hermione was horrified.

"I shall request a copy of the case documents to be sent to you; they are very interesting reading. In addition to a questionable ancient artefact stored in the same vault, Shackbolt has asked me to examine Petrus for any traces of Dark Magic which may have lain undetected by his Unspeakable. I would be honoured if you would attend."

"Severus, I'd love to! How extraordinary."

"It is. Especially since you have already met the Unspeakable who vouches for his gargoylesque friend."

"Oriens?"

"The very same. A friend of yours, is he not?"

"Severus! As I said before, I have only met him once." Sliding off the wall to stand in front of him, she seized the collars of his coat. "Why do you insist on teasing me about it? Anyone would think you are jealous."

Severus said nothing. He looked at the ground, his hair falling over his eyes.

"Hey," she said, trying to coax him into looking at her again. She laughed softly. "One of the most powerful wizards in the British Isles and I have him by the collar," she quipped, shaking him gently.

Severus raised his head and gazed at her intently. He placed his hands on her forearms, holding them in place. "Now that the brightest witch of *the* age has such a wizard at her disposal, what does she propose to do with him?" he purred.

Hermione caught her lower lip between her teeth. "I... I didn't think about that."

"No?" he asked, encouraged by the way she slid her hands over his shoulders and clasped her hands behind his neck.

"Actually, I did" she began, silenced as Severus brushed his lips against hers a chaste, experimental touch. He pulled back to examine her reaction with a question in his eyes.

"I thought about it a lot," she admitted, meeting him half-way as he continued his attentions.

Hermione's very first kiss, with the earthy and rather physical Victor, had been one-sided and ultimately forgettable. With Ron it had been... well... She had jumped the poor

boy for a hurried and woefully unpractised snog. Also very forgettable, though abilities had improved with time.

With Severus, it was perfect from the start. Tentative and demanding, gentle and unexpectedly passionate, he called forth a slow-burning intensity she never knew she had.

One deepening kiss followed another until, after a length of time neither of them could measure, they separated and rested in each others arms. Hermione could not stop smiling. Severus was having trouble opening his eyes properly.

"You haven't run away screaming," he observed, blinking his way out a libido-induced haze.

"Neither have you," she replied, snuggling closer so she could hear his heartbeat.

An increasing coolness to the air alerted them to the lateness of the hour. Reluctantly, Severus escorted her back to the portrait door. The Fat Lady, resplendent in frilly night-gown and matching cap, was far from pleased to see them and groused about the lateness of the hour. Severus silkily pointed out it was more early than late, the hour of midnight having passed some time ago.

As Hermione placed her hand on the door, two silver cats appeared with *twirpops* and immediately began delivering messages: one to Hermione and one to Severus. Within the garbled overlap of information, they discerned that Harry Potter had been taken to St. Mungo's with a badly broken jaw, the result of unexpected resistance from a Muggle named Tobias Snape. Harry was expected to make a full recovery, but would be kept in a sedated sleep until well into the next day.

Minerva instructed them to report to the entrance hall in fifteen minutes. Her message to Severus was tinged with alarm and concern as she mentioned a magical object and asked if he knew anything at all about what it might be.

"I'll meet you down there," Severus whispered to Hermione. "I have a couple of things to get from my rooms." Responding to her look of quizzical agreement with a reassuring squeeze of her hand, Severus quickly made his way to the Ravenclaw Room.

Once there, he rummaged through the pockets of his increasingly-neglected teaching robes. He pulled out the torn photograph showing Lily's image and the parchment bearing her signature. "I believe it is time you went back where you belong," he told her. Folding both items into a clean sheet of parchment and tucking it into his pocket, he headed for the entrance hall without delay.

Dementors and Death Eaters

Chapter 8 of 32

Summary: Toby has caused quite a stir in the Aurory. Severus agrees to put duty first with respect to an errant source of magic. Oriens is given a confidential task. Hermione finds out more about the prisoner in the vaults while Severus revises defensive strategies against Dementors. Fortuitous? Perhaps. Dementors are apparently on the move – rounding up Death Eaters.

A/N's

Khamsin: Arabic: a hot, dry wind from the desert associated with deadly sandstorms.

Obdormiscere: "go to sleep" (Collins English-Latin dictionary).

Reviendrez-vous?: Will you come back? (English-French on-line translator).

"To wear your heart on your sleeve isn't a very good plan; you should wear it inside, where it functions best." (Margaret Thatcher, British Prime Minister 1979-1990). Severus says something very similar I like to think he said it first and Ms. Thatcher heard it via a certain painting in No. 10 Downing Street.

Bunyip: a creature from Australian Aboriginal mythology. Descriptions vary from tribe to tribe, so I assume the nomenclature refers to a family of creatures (Bunyipidae?) rather than one particular animal. Bunyips inhabit waterholes, swamps, and rivers. They are usually feared by humans.

Drop-Bear: described as a carnivorous koala with a nasty habit of dropping on unsuspecting humans and tearing them to pieces. Regarded by Muggles as a hoax, the threat of Drop-Bears is usually employed to make a fool out of a naïve foreigner by tricking them into doing or wearing something ridiculous to prevent attack. NOTE: palaeontologists have found fossil evidence of a creature dubbed *Thylacoleo carnifex*. *T. carnifex*'s postulated lifestyle is remarkably similar to that of the Drop-Bear. As far as Muggle scientists know, *T. carnifex* is extinct or is it? For interested readers, Wikipedia has an accurate summary of *Thylacoleo carnifex*.

Singing the Spirit: These ceremonies do exist, and there have been recent moves by tribal Elders to reinstate them. Aside from what is mentioned in this fic, I claim no knowledge of the ceremonies themselves. No disrespect is intended towards the Elders of the Aboriginal people or their traditions.

Schooner: a beer glass of 425 ml (15 fl oz) capacity. Usually found lurking in pubs along the Australian east coast states and in the Northern Territory. Inexplicably, the volume can vary from state to state so be careful.

Apologies to Victor Hugo: I have taken the liberty of using an "AU inspiration" for his masterpiece *The Hunchback of Notre-Dame*. The "AU inspiration" exists only in imagination and has no real-world link to Mr. Hugo or his work.

Many thanks to Justice who beta'd this chapter in another time, for another place. Special thanks to TeaOli for helping me drag this chapter out of dusty archives and give it a polishing suitable for this site.

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Minerva waited anxiously amid a litter of restoration materials adorning the paved floor of the Entrance Hall. The news of Harry's injury rattled her, not because of the injury itself; physical risk was part of an Auror's job. Her main concern was Head Auror Robards' specific request for Hermione and Severus' presence as soon as possible in St. Mungo's High Security Wing. Sighing, she skirted around a temporary Apparition point installed to provide a secure connection between Hogwarts and St. Mungo's while rebuilding was in progress.

A summons in the wee small hours was most unusual, though not inappropriate. As a senior member of the Order, Minerva expected to be informed of the mishaps of other Order members. Yet, as far as she could tell, no other Order members had been called for. *Then again*, Minerva thought, *Hermione is Harry's best friend. I wonder if Ginevra or Molly have been contacted? I think not, considering Severus has also been asked for. Kingsley has not made news of his survival public yet. Tobias Snape... Goodness me! I thought Severus' father was dead. If it is his father and not someone of the same name... but the presence of a magical item suggests it really is him.*

Her deliberations were interrupted by Hermione's slightly breathless arrival.

"Is there any more news?" Hermione asked, brushing the ginger evidence of Crookshanks' affection from her robes.

"Not yet," Minerva replied. "Aside from my message, all I can tell you is Head Auror Robards has requested me to bring you and Severus to the Entrance Hall as a matter of urgency. He said he would send an Auror to take you both to St. Mungo's."

"He had better have a bloody good reason." Severus snarled his way around a minor obstacle course of building materials. To all appearances he had been rudely roused from sleep and, in return, was determined to be surly with the world. He fastened his cloak, grunted an acknowledgement in Hermione's direction, made an insincere effort to tidy his hair, and leaned against the wall with his arms folded.

"It sounds as though he does," Minerva responded tartly. "You shall just have to wait and see."

They did not have to wait long. With a *crack*, a young Auror appeared, stirring up a small cloud of grouting dust in the process. After a volley of sneezes, he identified himself in a distinctly Oxford accent as Yvan Kozlowski. Without further ado, he asked Hermione and Severus if they were ready to leave.

They Apparated into a wide hallway which echoed with the sound of shouting. Approaching an open door, from which the commotion issued, Auror Koslowski preceded them into a visitor's waiting room.

"By the pits of Abaddon, Proudfoot, what the *hell* were you thinking?" Gawain Robards was in a fine temper. "If you were bloody well thinking at all! You, my friend, were supposed to be *supervising* Potter not going along with whatever scheme he pulled out of his arse!"

Gawain turned briefly to glare at the three arrivals as Severus gave an involuntary snort. "We're just lucky our Australian counterparts were happy to let this go; it could have been an international incident! Not that *they've* ever escalated anything, thank the Powers. They've got their hands full as it is! Bunyips are invading Muggle swimming pools because of the drought, and Drop-Bears are on the move. You don't want to know about the attacks nasty business. Two Death Eaters handed themselves in. *Handed themselves in!* Asking for protection! Something to do with Dementors chasing them through Hell and high water. *Herding* them, actually, if Death Eaters can be believed."

Gawain shoved his hands in the pockets of his robes and gave a lugubrious sigh. "That will be all, Kozlowski; you may return to the Aurory. Dismissed." Kozlowski bowed and left the room. Gawain eyed Severus warily for a moment. After a quizzical glance at Hermione, he apparently decided all was well.

"Potter does not know what it is to be *properly supervised*," Severus commented, ignoring Hermione's reproving frown.

"That's for sure," muttered Proudfoot gratefully. "Once Potter decided he was going after the Muggle, there was nothing I could do to hold him back. He would not listen. He just said he was going, he knew what he was doing, and off he went. I couldn't let him go alone."

Gawain shook his head, exasperated. "You could have restrained him, Proudfoot. Supervisors have the authority to keep their charges out of trouble using appropriate means. A good dose of *Immobillius* would not have hurt him. Far better than letting him drop into a sovereign land without so much as a permission parchment."

"On anyone else I would have, but he's..." Proudfoot hesitated, thoroughly discomfited.

"Harry Potter. Yes, I am beginning to be aware of the full implications of his identity." Gawain rubbed his eyes as his anger drained away. "I should have seen something like this coming. Potter is way too cocky for his own good. Oh, he'll make a fine Auror one day, if our training regime can flog some sense into him. Gods! To think Scrimgeour wanted to turn him into some kind of poster boy. It would have been an outright disaster."

Gawain beckoned to Severus and Hermione. "This way, if you please."

He showed them into a softly lit room where a Healer efficiently conducted half-hourly readings of Potter's vital signs. After assuring them Harry would be awake by lunchtime, she discreetly left the group alone.

"Oh, Harry. You really do have a gift for finding trouble." Hermione smoothed her friend's wayward hair, wincing at the purple smudges under his eyes evidence of just how hard he had been hit.

Severus felt his stomach lurch as he read the chart at the foot of the bed, which detailed two clean breaks in Potter's lower jaw, two fractured molars, and some severe bruising to the muscles at the base of his skull.

Gawain held out a sheet of parchment with a sketched likeness of the man who dropped The Boy Who Lived Twice like a sack of potatoes. "Is this definitely Tobias Snape, your father? We have Proudfoot's memory in a Pensieve if you..."

"It is," Severus interrupted curtly. "I have no need of a Pensieve to identify him."

"You've seen this kind of thing before?" Gawain asked, gesturing between Potter and the chart in Severus' hands.

"He was always quick with his fists," Severus answered without emotion. "According to his reputation, a right uppercut was still his specialty."

"Did he ever kill anyone?"

"None that I know of."

"Hm. Your old man seemed ready to take this right down to the wire." Gawain indicated a small cut on Harry's throat. "I think Voldemort himself wouldn't have called his bluff."

Severus could only shrug.

Gawain drew a breath and nodded, more to his own evaluations than to Severus' reaction or lack of it. He stood beside the bed and regarded Harry balefully. "Boy, when you wake up, you are in a whole world of trouble. By the time I'm through with you, you'll be reciting the Auror's code of Muggle Contact Procedures in your sleep. You will know it syllable for syllable, inside out and backwards, if I have to lock you in Rapunzel's Tower for a hundred years to do it minus Rapunzel. And that's just a warm-up. You are hereby *grounded* in every sense of the word I can think of."

Evidently feeling better after pronouncing a suitable doom, Gawain surveyed Severus and Hermione candidly. "Right-oh, what do you two know about Tobias Snape; and do you, Severus, have any information at all on the magical object he's carrying?"

Hermione gave her often-rehearsed explanation of how, when, and where she encountered the Muggle in question, thankful for the careful detail she and Severus had worked into the written record provided to Oriens. She had no doubt it would be referred to and examined. When asked why she had not alerted the Aurors when she first

detected an errant source of magic, she apologetically recounted that, at the time, her values were biased towards people rather than things. Her parents' welfare was important to her, and she was greatly distressed at her inability to find them. To her relief, Gawain accepted her reasons for the oversight. She did not have to enhance her tale by pulling out any painful details regarding her own efforts to recover from the things she had endured and done during the War.

Severus' account was brief in the extreme. He simply stated life in his childhood *residence* was far from appealing. He had left as soon as humanly possible and had nothing to do with *Tobias* from then on. From the time he had received the Mark, he had believed both his parents to be dead. He had not requested, initiated, or participated in the murders. *Riddle*, for reasons unknown, had decided on their execution himself. While he admitted being caught off-guard, and hence a little confounded, to learn of *Tobias'* survival, his current disposition towards the man was one of complete estrangement. He could not begin to guess what the source of the magic might be. As far as he knew, his mother had relinquished her use of magic and had not possessed anything of magical origin.

After a thoughtful pause, Gawain continued. "As you no doubt appreciate, Tobias Snape must be apprehended, and whatever it is he's carrying recovered. There are two things to be considered: Firstly, one does not simply *take* a magical object from a Muggle. I have seen cases where Muggles have been bound to magical items. Taking the item away without due care can cause terrible mental or physical injuries to the Muggle. I cannot allow that risk to be taken. Retrieval must take place under carefully controlled conditions, with an observation period of up to one month afterwards to ensure the absence of magical residues. Secondly, when we retrieve the object, we will need you, Severus, to examine it for Dark Magic. Perhaps, when you get a look at the thing, you might recognise it if you have seen it before. Proudfoot tells me the unidentified object is something of great power..."

"I'd never felt anything like it once we were within range," Proudfoot interjected.

"I believe our friend Tobias may know something about what he carries; he was certainly willing to fight over it. Whether this is due to the importance of the object, or some threat to his life, we will have to determine."

Severus stood scowling at nothing in particular. After a brooding silence, he gave Gawain a nod of agreement. "As you wish. Such examinations are now part of my duties, I believe."

Duties? Hermione was instantly beside herself. *What duties? Oooh, the meeting with Minister Shacklebolt! Of course! He mentioned Shacklebolt asked him to screen Petrus and some other thing in the vaults. Severus, you silly wizard, why didn't you give me all the details? Because, Hermione, you were too busy babbling on, that's why. He couldn't get a word in edgeways... and then... She felt her cheeks redden. Her breath came a little faster. Then I was... too preoccupied to remember to ask She stole a look at Severus. I wonder if he didn't tell me because he was preoccupied as well. I hope so*

A slight commotion in the hallway preceded a flustered Koslowski's return. "Sir, we have another incident," he began.

"*Please* tell me it's nothing to do with Potter," Gawain muttered through clenched teeth.

"No can do, sir. The wand recovery did not go as smoothly as we would have liked."

Gawain slumped in a chair. "What happened?"

"Trainee Auror Weasley detected the presence of Potter and Proudfoot's wands in a hollow log. Auror Jenkins checked for hex traps, found none, and he..." Koslowski stared very hard at a spot on the floor, restraining mirth with a monumental effort. A menacing creak issued from Gawain's chair. The Auror hastened to finish his report. "Jenkins *Accio'd* the wands, and a bloody great snake came out as well; it must have coiled itself around them inside the log."

Gawain stared into space. "Surely it is common sense to use a shield when one *Accios* things one cannot actually see? Nimuë's knickers! I *cannot* work under these conditions!" His eyes re-focussed on Koslowski. "Any injuries?" he asked resignedly.

"Jenkins took three bites to the left leg before he managed to immobilise the snake. Weasley, to his credit, knew enough to apply *Ferula* to the bitten limb, but he nearly choked Jenkins while ramming a Bezoar down his throat."

Hermione quietly breathed a sigh. By the sound of it, Ron was capable of recovering himself and getting on with his life in a functional, if rambunctious, fashion. This simple knowledge gave her a great sense of relief.

Gawain consulted his pocket-scroll and began noting details with a half-quill. "Did either of them secure the wands?"

"Yes, sir. The wands are safe in the Aurory.

"Thank Merlin! Something actually went right." He scribbled a few more notes and put his writing materials away. "I have an appointment with Shacklebolt first thing in the morning." Gawain checked his watch before rolling his eyes and amending his statement. "In a few hours time. He says he has an Unspeakable with current permissions who is capable of finding and *properly* dealing with a recalcitrant Muggle. I imagine it will not take too long to bring Tobias Snape in." He addressed Severus carefully. "Will you be ready when we do?"

Severus knew Gawain asked the question on more than one level. Somewhere in a sealed-off recess of his psyche, something stirred. A deep, dark pool of anger, hurt, and distress. He banished it behind a wall of Occlumency and answered Gawain with a silent nod.

"Good. I'll be in touch. Koslowski, since you are here, would you escort them to the Apparition point? I have to send an urgent owl. Proudfoot, come with me."

With a salute-cum-wave, Gawain and Proudfoot left the room. Koslowski diplomatically offered to wait for them in the hallway.

Moving closer to Harry's side, Severus took the folded parchment from his pocket and placed it under a familiar pair of spectacles. James Potter had worn a pair exactly the same. How often had he seethed when he saw Lily's eyes regarding him with pure hatred from behind those lenses? He reflected on the remembered annoyance. It didn't trouble him at all, now. It even seemed a little surreal.

Hermione gave him a questioning look.

"Some items belonging to Mr. Potter," he said very softly, so only she could hear. "It seemed appropriate to return them."

Hermione checked over her shoulder before taking his hand in both of hers. "Good for you," she whispered. She held his hand a little tighter. "Severus, did anything like... like that... happen to you?"

Severus closed his eyes. "Not quite as bad. I learned very quickly how to read warning signs when to run and how long to hide. Even then, I did not always escape unscathed."

He looked Hermione in the eyes, surprised to see tears threatening. Taking her face in his hands, he gently wiped them away with his thumbs.

Hermione managed a faint smile. "Sorry. I know you don't appreciate seeing hearts on sleeves."

"I shan't hold it against you, ever. Though I believe one's heart functions more effectively when kept in its proper place."

She held him close, pressing her ear to the left side of his chest. She listened to the steady beat of his heart with solemn gratitude. "I have to agree with you," she said.

They moved apart as Harry stirred sluggishly and opened his eyes. His wandering, bleary gaze rested wonderingly on Severus for a moment; then he slid back into a potion-induced sleep.

When Oriens returned to Britain with the Wilkins/Grangers and reported to Minister Shacklebolt to submit the obligatory bundle of parchments, he had taken the opportunity to mention the artefact in the vaults. He related as much of its history as was known and his unease at Arawn's interest in it. Not wanting to arouse undue suspicion of a wizard so recently exonerated, Oriens did not mention Snape at all. Explaining just *how* he knew Arawn frequently examined the artefact during the last week of the War was a perfect lead into Petrus' predicament.

As expected, Minister Shacklebolt could not *formally* and he said so with exaggerated sobriety investigate Arawn without proof he was up to something nefarious. However, to Oriens' delight, Shacklebolt agreed to read the case notes on Petrus' incarceration and determine what could be done. With his mind at ease, more for Petrus' sake than having voiced his suspicions, Oriens paid a quick and informative visit to the vaults before returning to Australia to continue with one of his many projects.

Shacklebolt's lynx Patronus delivered a summons not long after Oriens had finished participating in a very important ceremony. Australian Aboriginal Elders called it "Singing the Spirit", a series of songs for maintaining and restoring the health of local waterways. The ceremonies and songs had been fading out of memory for over one hundred years, and the Elders were anxious to restore them before they were lost forever.

Oriens assisted by monitoring the flow of power within the chants, looking for any discordant patterns which indicated a missing word, a syllable mispronounced, or a dance step out of rhythm. It was a lengthy, exhausting, and very rewarding process. When the songs were restored to the Elders' satisfaction, they invited Oriens to join them in full ceremonial capacity. Hence his current appearance.

Well, Shacklebolt did insist on *immediately*.

If a high-ranking Unspeakable had showed up in Fudge's office wearing nothing but a loincloth, with sacred ochre symbols painted all over his bare skin, Fudge would have thrown a puce-faced tantrum. Shacklebolt did not even blink. One could have assumed such presentations were a daily occurrence and completely unremarkable.

The Minister quickly confirmed that, in accordance with the Australian Commission for International Magical Cooperation, Oriens' permits were still current for temporary residence and research. Permissions to perform non-harmful magical procedures on Muggles for a specific purpose and to magically transport Muggles for a very good reason were not yet expired. Oriens listened attentively as Shacklebolt imparted the latest news and what he required Oriens to do.

Severus Snape had showed up alive and well, accepted a position within the Ministry, and would reside at Hogwarts for six months before taking up his Ministerial duties in full capacity. A press announcement would soon be made to this effect. Severus Snape's father had also showed up alive, with a source of magic he was demonstrably willing to defend. At the hands of a Muggle, the wizarding world's favourite son had been rendered insensible, two wands had been taken later recovered and an Auror bitten by a highly venomous non-magical snake. This information was strictly confidential. Oriens' mission was to locate Tobias Snape, subdue him by non-violent means, and transport him to St. Mungo's High Security Wing.

Oriens was surprised. "Not the Muggle Quarantine Facility?"

Kingsley stood up and pointed his wand at the fireplace. A generous blaze roared into life, startling a priority-message owl out of a well-earned snooze on the mantelpiece. "For Merlin's sake, man," he said, steering Oriens to stand in front of the fire. "The last thing I need is an Unspeakable down with hypothermia. I am making an exception to Muggle apprehension procedures. I believe security is important both for the source of the magic and for our Muggle. Auror Proudfoot and Miss Granger describe the magical aura as something quite powerful. Therefore, under the current post-war circumstances, I do not think it wise to employ anything less than high security.

"Unless you have any questions, I shall let you get on with your mission. Be careful, too. I have reports of Dementor sightings: two in Australia, four in Argentina, one here in London, six in Paris, and three in Thailand; though one of those might have been a Lethifold. Avoid confronting Tobias directly; he's obviously a bit of a handful."

Thus, Oriens undertook a covert role in Muggle tracking and apprehension: a long way from his usual occupations in Magi-Ecology. While the resourcefulness of Tobias was extraordinary in itself, the most peculiar and astonishing realisation was that *two* Snapes and *two* magical objects stood at opposite ends of an unsolved equation.

Probably a three-dimensional, hexa-prismic one, with time-dependent multipliers Oriens mused.

It was beyond doubt that Tobias Snape was linked with a magical *something*. The connection between Severus Snape and the artefact held in the vault was still one of pure conjecture, but in the light of recent revelations, Petrus' words repeated often in his mind *Perhaps the bow is not so long*.

Examining the site of Trainee Auror Potter's incident, Oriens followed sporadic signs: a partially obscured boot-print here, a broken twig there. He found his way to the hollow log, where the now infamous snake spotted him and reared up in a threatening posture. Oriens chanted a sūtra, specially designed to soothe angry or frightened creatures. The snake ceased its threats and rested its lower jaw on the edge of its hollow log, absorbing and analysing the vibrations of the Unspeakable's voice. After a short time, it slid gracefully back into the depths of its winter home, allowing Oriens to pass by unmolested.

The signs ran out at a rocky river bed, mostly dry except for a shallow flow winding its way down the middle. Oriens spotted a rusting rail bridge spanning the river not far away. He considered what Tobias' next move would have been.

A gut feeling insisted the Muggle would have taken the fastest, most direct route away from the area. Oriens was sure Tobias would avoid heavily populated places and, since his encounter with Potter, would probably avoid localities where he would be recognized.

Disguised as a backpacker gradually working his way north for the mango season, he stopped at the pub in a nearby town to listen in on the local gossip. Nobody looked twice at a dusty traveler perusing the newspapers with a schooner of mid-strength bitter, a toasted sandwich, and a plate of hot chips. Hearing nothing helpful, which told him Tobias had kept the incident entirely to himself, Oriens took his empty glass back to the bar for a refill, deftly de-alcoholising it when the barman was not looking.

With a few discreet questions, Oriens established that the road winding over the mountain range led only to more farmland and grazing properties where everybody knew each other pretty well. The rail bridge he had seen belonged to a disused branch line, decommissioned in the late 1950's. It ran some five miles north-west and passed through a cutting in the range, ending at a railhead where a freight line supplied consumables to the inland and mineral ores and coal to the sea ports. Along its inland route, the freight line passed through wide, grassy plains which thinned out into the red dust of saltbush and spinifex country.

The barman, an ex-fettler in his mid-sixties, described in detail the landmarks along the inland route: blink-and-you-miss-them rail sidings where wheat silos gave the only shade for miles, tumbledown hamlets where kangaroos rested in derelict gardens, and several two-pub towns all but abandoned since the days when wheat and wool ceased to rule the export market standing like punch-drunk fighters insisting they were not down for the count. The route to the east progressed through more populated areas; Oriens dismissed this latter option without a second thought.

He fished a map out of his backpack and examined the route of the abandoned branch line. With a small flicker of certainty, he decided Tobias had followed it to the railhead and hitched a ride on west-bound rolling stock. As he reached down to feel for a Muggle pencil stowed in a side pocket, something cool and moist nudged his fingers. He looked down to find a blue heeler watching him intently.

Mindful of canine etiquette, in which it is the height of rudeness to pat a dog on the head unless one knows the animal very well, Oriens scratched the animal under the jaws. A paw placed decisively on Oriens' knee gave permission for a thorough rubbing of the ears.

The dog's head jerked at the sound of a piercing whistle, followed by a stentorian "Diesel! Where are ya? Outta that pub, ya cheeky bugger!" As he loped out of the door, Diesel looked over his shoulder and flashed Oriens a toothy grin.

Having slept for a few hours, Severus readily threw himself into the Defence Against the Dark Arts syllabus. Smirking, he wrote the heading for the next lesson block: *Defence Against Dementors Two Established Methods*. He would make sure Trainee Auror Potter was one of the first to learn the second method, simply to prove a point.

A light, structured knock and a tingling sensation from his wards announced Hermione's presence. Tossing his quill aside, he vaulted out of his seat and strode to the door. In one fluid movement, he opened it and swept her into an ardent embrace.

"You know, there could have been *anyone* lingering in the gallery," she murmured, emerging from a series of very thorough kisses.

Severus nudged the door closed without letting her go. "Ah, but there wasn't. Besides, I did not have the opportunity to properly wish you good morning." He scowled as he recalled Apparating back into an Entrance Hall inconveniently swarming with house-elves and construction workers.

"You have it now." Hermione traced his lower lip with a finger. "Speaking of lingering..." She proceeded to apply the concept in a manner which left him completely besotted.

An impatient tapping at the window pane caused Severus to unwillingly call himself to order. Opening the window with a casual gesture of wandless magic, he allowed a Ministry Archives owl to settle itself comfortably before relieving it of a miniaturised package.

"Your timing was perfect for more than one reason," Severus told Hermione as he examined the enlarged item in his hands. "The case documents regarding the incarcerated gargoyles," he said, handing them to her.

Hermione placed the documents on the desk and unfastened the leather clasps. Her initial perusal was curtailed by the owl's rasping hiss of excitement. Severus was dangling a recently killed mouse above its head.

"Eew! Was that in here?"

"No." Severus dropped the mouse and watched as the owl snapped it up eagerly. "Your fur-coated *fiend* left it on my doorstep not more than half an hour ago. I intended to feed it to the carnivorous plants in the greenhouses, but the owl is hungry and I do not have any owl-treats."

"It sounds like something he'd do, but you can't be sure it was Crooks."

"Yes, I can. He left a distinctly ginger hairball next to it."

Hermione gave in to laughter. "Well, aren't you privileged? 'One mouse. Warmest regards, Crookshanks.' Sorry about that; I gave him a pot of cat-grass and let him out before I went to bed. He's normally very good about leaving his hairballs outside. Although," she added with a grimace, "he occasionally leaves one or two for me to find in unexpected places."

Severus stood behind her and gathered her in his arms. "Regurgitated balls of half-Kneazle hair and dead mice aside, referring to your initial observation, I find I am very privileged indeed."

Hermione turned to face him. "You haven't told me the outcome of your meeting with Minister Shacklebolt. The presence of an Archives owl and your mention of 'duties' earlier this morning suggests you have a new occupation."

Severus slid into his chair, pulling Hermione with him so she was seated happily on his lap. "I intended to tell you last night. Certain distractions pushed the matter out of my mind."

He proceeded to relate the gist of his conversation with Kingsley, from the first wary greeting to the signing of an Acceptance of Position scroll. He pointed to a chalkboard covered in what Hermione recognised as flow charts. "I started reviewing the Dementor section early yesterday morning. So far, the guidelines I will write for the Ministry training procedures parallel those for the school syllabus in structure. Of course, the Ministry training will be far more rigorous and will touch upon concepts having no place in a school." He looked over his writings with grave purpose. "Considering the recent reappearance of Dementors, this may prove useful sooner rather than later."

Hermione nodded in agreement. "Nobody knows where the Dementors went after the War. One minute they were everywhere; then they all retreated. By the time anyone noticed, they were gone."

"Gawain mentioned two Death Eaters had surrendered to avoid pursuit by the creatures. Then he revised his statement, saying the Dementors were 'herding' the fugitives."

Hermione frowned. "I've never heard of them doing that."

"Another thing to consider is this: from what we know of Dementors, which is precious little, inter-personal discrimination is not their strongest point... Is something wrong?"

Hermione's expression was one of alarm. "Umbridge. She said she sent Dementors after Harry. Could she do that? Is it possible?"

Severus considered her words carefully. "Most people would say it is not; however, it happened. Given the paucity of knowledge on the subject, it may be wise to regard it as possible until proven otherwise." In a sudden change of mood, he gave a shrug of resignation. "As always, research into a topic inevitably raises more questions."

"Isn't that why we enjoy the challenge?"

Severus eyed her knowingly before breaking into a genuine smile. "Absolutely." He indicated the case notes left on the desk. "Best get to it before that owl makes a nest in important documents. I believe Minerva is consulting with Hagrid with the aim of including this exercise as part of your assessment."

Rolling her eyes, Hermione transfigured a footstool into a perch and gently relocated the owl so it could digest the mouse in peace. "I'll take these up to my room," she said, fingering the pages carefully.

"Study here, if you like," Severus offered, indicating the broad expanse of his desk. "There's room. If you complete your task in a timely fashion, I will show you the wonders of this bookshelf."

After a puzzled glance at the empty shelves, Hermione moved a chair to the vacant side of Severus' desk and began to read.

Silence prevailed in the Ravenclaw room: a steady observation of contemplation and constructive thought was punctuated only by the scratch of Severus' quill, the soft rustle of parchment, and an occasional hiccup from the owl. Hermione was rapidly absorbed in her task, though she soon regarded the document as less of a piece of Ministerial administration, and more like a tale from long ago.

It began in A.D. 1191. During the third crusade, a ferocious sandstorm delayed Richard the Lionheart's forces on their way to do battle with Saladin's armies. When the storm finally abated, the crusaders found the landscape altered beyond recognition. A mighty dune had been swept away, revealing the mummified remains of a trading caravan buried untold centuries before.

At first, the crusaders were wary, claiming this was the work of the Devil. The remains were not huddled together as would be expected of a caravan caught in the dreaded khamsin, or ambushed by Bedouin raiders there was no sign of a fight. To a man, each of them lay as though they had been felled, simultaneously, in mid-stride. Camels and horses lay in orderly lines, their harness and saddle girths still fastened.

The goods were intact. Evidently, this observation soon helped the men to overcome their fear. The crusaders carried off as much booty as they were able including a statue, fearsome in appearance and exquisitely carved.

In honour of a treaty between the deceased Henry II of England and Philip II of France, Richard the Lionheart presented part of the treasure, including the statue, as a gift to the French king. The statue was installed as a gargoyle on the recently completed *Cathédrale Notre-Dame de Paris*.

In A.D. 1200, in the dawn after the longest night, two boys were making mischief from the parapets of the cathedral. With balls of mud encased in snow, they rained merry havoc on people passing far below. The boys' enjoyment turned to terror when, as one of them threw a missile, a strong gust of wind caused his target to be missed. Instead, it struck one of the gargoyles, just as the first blaze of sunlight broke free from the horizon. The gargoyle a figure of stone which *should* be unmoving turned its head and looked at them.

From then on, rumours persisted of strange occurrences at *Notre-Dame de Paris*. Watchmen told of a terrifying figure moving around in the dead of night. Items would sometimes be moved to different places, though nothing was ever stolen. A priest entered the cathedral one morning to find a penitent weeping face-down before the altar. The man claimed he had broken into the cathedral to steal, but could not leave because a demon waited for him outside the doors, threatening all the punishments of Hell. In a hastily scribbled attachment dated some years later, the same man was acquitted because he had not taken anything and had confessed his error. He became a reformed character and did much good among the poor.

At times the great bells, Marie and Emmanuel, would ring when no human was there to sound them. The French Ministry of Magic investigated and, upon discovering the source of the misdemeanours, sternly instructed a gargoyle to desist from engaging in visible or audible activities. As moving, talking cathedral-gargoyles were nothing unusual, the French Ministry officials gave no further thought to the matter. Among the Muggle population, the inexplicable happenings faded from memory and were thereafter dismissed as superstition.

Hermione smiled at a scribbled comment in the margin. The gargoyle called himself Petrus, simply because he thought it appropriate after hearing so many sermons mentioning "Peter the Rock".

A.D. 1420, and a dark wizard rose to power. Iudris overthrew the French Ministry with intrigue, treachery, and extortion. He infiltrated the most powerful governing bodies, and took the unusual step of employing Muggles to do a large part of his murderous work.

In the summer of A.D. 1427, the 'superstition' of *Notre-Dame de Paris* revealed his presence in a spectacular fashion.

Captured by Inquisitors acting under Iudris' dictates, a young witch was framed for treason. As she knelt in a prison cart, her magic bound, one of Iudris' minions denounced her as a heretic and traitor from the steps of the cathedral. She was sentenced to one hundred lashes. Then she would be taken to Montfaucon, where she would be hanged by the neck until dead.

Suddenly, in front of hundreds of Muggles, a gargoyle launched itself into the air from the towers of the western facade. With a snarl of fury, the creature swooped low over the Inquisitors, scattering them in all directions. Iudris' followers, Muggle and magical, retaliated with a volley of crossbow bolts and hexes. It was said the gargoyle deflected even the strongest curses with its bare hands. Fighting like the demon he resembled, Petrus prevailed over Iudris' guards, caught the witch in his arms, and flew her to safety in the north bell tower.

Panic and rioting ensued, with a hand-to-hand battle fought in the portals of the cathedral itself. The French Aurors and Unspeakables seized the moment to regroup, their numbers boosted by a contingent of English and German Aurors. They initiated a counter-attack. In the melee and confusion, Iudris' forces were driven back beyond the city boundaries.

In the cathedral, Petrus was eventually subdued, taken to a secret location, and questioned. This time, French Unspeakables examined him extensively. They concluded that his origins lay in Thâmūd: an ancient and extinct civilisation with extensive trade routes throughout Arabia. Uncertain of Petrus' powers or tendencies for good or evil, the French Ministry deemed it was neither safe nor prudent to keep him on European soil. From northern France to Spain and southern Germany, Iudris still held the upper hand. Many wizards, witches, and Muggles had died by fire, water, or the hangman's rope. Nothing was stable. No-one could be trusted.

Petrus was transported to England's shores. The English Unspeakables were at just as great a loss to explain what ~~it~~ was, despite Petrus' objections that he was not an "it". With true Gallic indignation, he objected to being labelled as a gargoyle. His meticulously documented words were annotated with an English translation, 'I am *not* the glorified water spout!' Further, Petrus claimed he required neither definition nor explanation to justify his existence.

In a show of fiery defiance, he declared himself completely unrepentant for having revealed his presence against the dictates of the law. All of this was unheard of among the wizarding community's experience of *gargoyles*, and the Unspeakables concluded that if Petrus was indeed such an entity, he was a very unusual one. Of greater concern to the Wizengamot, before whom the matter was finally presented, Petrus had proved himself a credible threat to both Muggle and Magical populations.

That's ridiculous, Hermione thought. It was a time of terrible danger; he never hurt anyone before he saved the witch's life. I'm glad they at least brought her over to England as well. She looked at the list of signatories, some of the names familiar to her. Families with prestige and power, their names all too often cropping up in the lists of Death Eaters. Families who prided themselves as pure-bloods. Hermione read on, reaching her own conclusion. To have a "thing" address proud wizarding families in tones of defiance was simply not to be tolerated. Petrus was sent, as an undefined magical object, to the vaults in the Department of Mysteries.

Hermione read the entire case again. True, the breach of secrecy at *Notre-Dame de Paris*, and the subsequent riot in which twenty people died, was a serious infringement. It was also true the deaths were not Petrus' direct fault. The only people he had injured not killed were Iudris' followers.

The last entry to the archive was centuries newer than the others. Under his name and the year, 1981, Oriens told how he met Petrus for the first time. Searching for the third Round Stone, known only in the vaguest legends, he made daily visits to Vault Five for nearly a week. He would sing in his native tongue while he sorted through the contents of the stone chests. Simple songs, the sort people use while tending their animals, planting their fields, or waiting for the monsoon to end. Having found the stone and cleared it for removal, Oriens placed his hand on the door to leave. He froze when he heard a quiet voice from the shadows. *'Reviendrez-vous?'* it had asked.

From then on, Petrus' existence took a turn for the better. Oriens wrote of an intelligent being with a better education than many humans could imagine. During his years at *Notre-Dame de Paris*, Petrus had secretly accessed the literature held within the cathedral and eavesdropped on the sermons, disputes and lectures of learned men. Petrus had a gift for languages; he was fluent in Latin, French, and Ancient Greek. He picked up English as quickly as Oriens could teach it. He was also very fond of books.

Hermione shook her head at the attachments embodying Ministerial attitudes towards non-human creatures. "Request denied" was stamped over every one of Oriens' attempts to have Petrus' situation revisited.

She felt her resolve building, her intellect honing itself in readiness to fight for a cause. "Not this time," she said aloud. Her tone must have held a little more steel than she intended. Severus looked up from his work, eyebrows raised in surprise.

"Fighting words, Miss Granger?"

"Fighting words, sir." Her expression softened to a smile as she regarded the wizard seated opposite her. In white linen shirt and black waistcoat, collar unbuttoned and sleeves rolled up, ink on his fingers and hair delightfully tousled, it was hard to think of him in the role he had played in her life over the past six years. She got up and stood behind him, resting her forearms on his shoulders.

"May I be of assistance?" he asked, threading his fingers through hers and decorating them with an ink smudge in the process. She gently nuzzled his ear, causing him to wonder if she was aware of the response she was generating. Or was it simply his intimacy-starved instincts overreacting and sending liquid fire through his veins? To Severus' mingled relief and regret, she desisted.

"Maybe. I have finished my task, and I now want to know about this bookshelf. When you are ready, of course." She drew away from him to return to her seat.

Severus quickly called his mind away from some definitions of "ready" that were certainly not appropriate to dwell on just yet. Standing, he caught her arm and settled for kissing her soundly. He took out his wand and pointed it at the bookshelf. "Give me some search terms for a topic of interest."

"Let me see... Try 'Thâmūd and curse', then 'ancient Arabia and magical creatures'. As a first step, I need to gain some familiarity with the subject matter."

Severus repeated the words and tapped the shelf with his wand. A scroll appeared and unrolled itself, revealing a list of publication abstracts matching the search terms. Hermione looked them over carefully. "These twelve look promising," she said, highlighting the titles with a touch of her wand.

Severus read the titles out loud. Within moments, the requested tomes materialised on the shelf, dust and all.

Arawn placed his hands on his desk and stared at the *Prophet* again. He read Minister Shackbolt's statement for the third time. He looked up at the Dementor hovering in front of the old Floo connection. *Why couldn't you find him?*

We hungered; we ate the memory. We tasted the hatred; we savoured the rage. We followed; we found nothing.

Knowing further questions on this particular topic would be pointless, for Dementors were very statement-of-fact creatures, Arawn let the matter lie. *You found the others?*

We found them. Some escaped us. Some would not submit; we fed upon them. We fed well.

Arawn had read the *Prophet's* report of two Death Eaters who, ironically, handed themselves in to escape. Asking about numbers was a useless exercise. Dementors had no use at all for the concept of quantity. *Those you found, where are they?*

In the appointed place.

They really could be frustrating. Dementors had no use for place names either. *The ghost city?*

The Dementor inclined its head, one of the few gestures their kind would make. Arawn sat down to think, mulling over possible reasons why Snape was not discovered. All the other memories obtained from Lucius Malfoy had been, by the sound of it, successful. Arawn guessed the problem lay with a peculiarity of the Dementor he fed the memory to. The others, working in pairs or triads, had found their quarry without difficulty.

Arawn had observed displays of individuality among Dementors before. Some were capable of making complex decisions; others showed leadership and could organise small groups into effective teams. Some definitely had a shorter fuse than others.

Arawn sighed. It was a question for a later date. He now knew Snape had survived and where he was residing. Hogwarts would be a problem. The wards were not only thorough and strong, they had been upgraded since Voldemort's second fall. He sent a mental image of the Castle to the waiting Dementor. *You know what to do*

Oriens waited by the freight line, listening to the pulsing rumble of two locomotives as they strained up the slight grade to the railhead. The pitch of the engines changed as the engineer throttled back in readiness for a sweeping curve, marking the beginning of the long descent to the plains beyond. As Oriens expected, the train slowed to a walking pace, container after container passing by on protesting bogeys.

Tell-tale boot-prints alongside the track marked where Tobias had climbed aboard. The same prints he had memorised from the site of the Potter incident. The same prints he had found beside the disused branch line, where the rail ballast and sleepers were too overgrown with lantana to be trafficable. Taking his broom out of his backpack, he enlarged it and restored his clothing to its original configuration.

The cockatoos were a stroke of luck. The third settlement Oriens examined was blessed with a wide, deep creek running beside it. Further on, the creek banks were thick with vegetation and swarming with the noisy, feeding, bickering birds. There was some sort of commotion, though not a dangerous one. The birds were curious about something and chattered about it incessantly. Oriens decided it was worth investigation, as a Muggle on the run would no doubt seek cover, and in these parts, try to stay near water if it were possible.

In the muddy bank, Oriens found what he was looking for. The signs were only a few hours old. Using layers of Concealment and Silencing Charms, as well as a considerable amount of jungle-craft learned in his native land, Oriens silently moved along the creek bank. Before long, the sensation of magic tingled in his fingertips.

His only problem was the not-a-stroke-of-luck-anymore cockatoos. The winged clowns could sense him through the charms. They were voraciously inquisitive, recklessly noisy, and determined to find out all about him. His ears ringing from a series of deafening shrieks emitted by one bold individual, Oriens strained his hearing as a twig snapped not far ahead of him. Peering through the tangled foliage, he saw a man standing motionless, watching the cockatoos with open suspicion.

Oriens wasted no time. He silently cast *Obdormiscere* and kept absolutely still. Tobias yawned and swayed a little. Blinking heavily, he bent down to pick up his swag and dropped to his knees. Oriens did not make a move or a sound, even when a cockatoo flew right into him and fell, bewildered, to the ground. Tobias caught his weight on his hands as he yawned again and shook his head. By the time he collapsed into a deep sleep, the cockatoo had decided to climb up its unseen obstacle's leg. Oriens obligingly cancelled the charms and helped the astounded bird into a tree, where it would no doubt relate the adventure to the rest of the clan.

He approached the sleeping Muggle cautiously. Rolling him onto his back, Oriens gasped as the magical aura charged every nerve in his body.

"Merciful Buddha," he whispered. "What, in the name of the Sacred Scrolls, are you carrying?"

Taking Tobias' knife as a precaution, he prepared his charge with *Immobillius* and *Protego Totalis*. He sent his Patronus on ahead with a message: He had found Tobias Snape, the situation was under control, and he would arrive in St. Mungo's High Security Wing very shortly.

Converging Paths – part 1

Chapter 9 of 32

Hermione and Severus meet Petrus. Severus examines an artefact over which concerns have been voiced.

A/N's

Re the Salem Witches' Institute (Advice provided by TeaOli the Knowledgeable, A.D. 2012): Because it may not be common knowledge to everyone, the term "witch" used to be a gender-neutral term, and remained so at the time of the time of the witch-trials in colonial Massachusetts. One can assume that gender-neutrality has been preserved for historical reasons, and the Salem Witches' Institute is co-educational.

Language de-coders

Australian:

Clobber clothing (the term is archaic in urban areas)

French:

Félicitations congratulations

S'il vous plait if you please

C'est bon it is good

Indonesian:

Makassar trepanger fishermen from the southwest islands of Indonesia who visited the coast of northern Australia in search of "trepang" (sea cucumber) and traded goods with the Aborigines. Small communities of mixed-blood descendents still inhabit the northern coast.

Kris a long knife with a pistol-style grip. Often has a distinctive wavy blade and magical powers.

Silat a form of martial arts practised in South-East Asia

Latin:

praecepsi operor non congruo per divinatio pendo the results do not agree with the predicted values (online translator)

Ursus arctos horribilis the North American brown bear (grizzly bear)

Scottish:

Keep the heid! keep calm/don't lose your temper

Pugsley Addams is the property of the cartoonist Charles Addams. I make no profit from his character. I have assumed Pugsley was around eleven years old when *The Addams Family* TV series aired in 1964, which puts him in his mid-forties at the time of this fic.

Canon characters are the property of J.K. Rowling. I make no money from them.

Many thanks and a vial of Felix Felicis to TeaOli for beta-ing this chapter.

"I am *sure* Mr Potter would welcome a visit from you; he will not have had nearly enough people to fuss over him." Severus sent a venomous glare at the supposedly napping Albus and stood up to leave the Headmistress' office.

"Don't be so snide, Severus. Honestly." Minerva followed Severus' line of disapproving sight and rolled her eyes. "I really should move that portrait," she muttered. "Will you be available to discuss the Potions budget tomorrow afternoon?" she asked, raising a more immediate concern.

"Yes, Minerva, though you may want to prepare yourself. The outlay will be higher than usual for the next year or so. At least until Pomona has the greenhouses back to full productivity. I have located external sources for the essential consumables. The restoration grant from the Ministry will help ease the financial pain... a little."

Minerva sighed. "I expected as much. Oh well, it cannot be helped. Do you have any recommendations for Horace's replacement? We only have a week until the students return. Out of the four applicants for the position, these two look most promising." She indicated two scrolls in her *For Immediate Attention* tray.

Severus replied without hesitation. "Pugsley Addams. In addition to his internationally recognised professional standards, he has a proven track record in keeping Salem's students in line. Particularly those given to breaking curfew. If anyone can help with the unresolved Honeydukes conundrum which I note you have filed somewhere in the Doxy-infested ecosystem behind the bookshelves it would be him."

"Really? How would he manage that? We have never caught anyone toffee-handed, in spite of the Flumes' insistence that our students are responsible."

"Pugsley patrols in his Animagus form."

Minerva leafed through Pugsley's *curriculum vitae*. "Ah, here it is. He is a registered Animagus... He takes the form of a bear."

"Approximately eight hundred pounds of *Ursus arctos horribilis*. As you can imagine, his edible contraband detection capabilities are second to none."

"He has a wife and two children. Do you know it has been over eighty years since we had a staff member's family in residence?"

"Think of the joy it will bring to the house-elves."

Minerva huffed and shook her head, making a note to write to the Salem Witches' Institute immediately. "Well, if Professor Addams has your endorsement, he is the one to bring on board. I hear you are going on a small excursion this afternoon."

Severus narrowed his eyes. "You know I cannot say too much."

The Headmistress held up her hands. "Yes, granted, but we are terribly proud of you. Quite an elevated position in the Ministry: you have certainly earned it."

Taken aback, Severus retreated into suspicion. "*We*?"

"Why, yes. I know *I* am. *Hermione* is positively aglow. She has not revealed any *details*, mind, but she practically bursts every time the new department is discussed which inevitably involves the mention of *your* name."

Now genuinely suspicious, Severus read between the very obvious lines. "Is there some obscure point you are trying to raise?" He had already guessed, but the temptation to give the older witch a dose of incomppliance was irresistible.

Minerva stiffened with the faintest hint of a bristle. "Very well, I shall speak plainly. You and Hermione have been seen together quite a bit lately. I'm afraid it has made the gossip network. People are beginning to talk."

"People," he snorted. "The *portrait* network, you mean. *Portraits* have always talked and will always do so. It is not as though they have anything better to do."

"Be that as it may, the Fat Lady is reputed to have said..."

"The Fat Lady is known for her embellishments and occasional histrionics, is she not? No doubt, whatever tale she came up with has been, shall we say, added to? Tell me, was I wearing my Death Eater regalia at the time?"

"That may be true... no, not about your attire. Oh, keep the heid, will you! That stare might repel a dragon, but it will not repel me! I must ask you: is there something you would care to tell me?"

Severus smirked internally. Minerva was right where he wanted her with no expended effort on his part. As a bonus, he could almost hear Albus' painted ears straining to eavesdrop on the pending revelation. He affected a stance of pensive contrition. "Now that you mention it, there is." He paced uncertainly, looking considerably pained. "I am not sure of the best way to tell you, but..." He shrugged, sighed, squared his shoulders, and looked Minerva directly in the eyes. "You are beginning to sound *exactly* like Albus."

Seizing the outraged silence as an opportunity to escape, Severus noted a flurry of motion in Albus' portrait as the former Headmaster vacated his frame in headlong flight. He quickly slipped out of the office and pulled the door shut behind him. *Beautifully timed*, he congratulated himself as a high-velocity projectile thudded into the other side.

Waiting in Minister Shackbolt's office with nothing much else to do, Hermione could not help feeling a little anxious. "Do you think she knows?"

Severus gave a satisfied smirk. "She suspects."

Hermione sighed. "I worry a little about what might be said to you. But we aren't doing anything wrong; I mean, you're not a teacher any more."

"I believe I have told you before: I have a fairly thick hide. As you have correctly observed, we are not transgressing any rules. Officially, I work for the Ministry. And you..." Severus gave a half-smile as Hermione tenderly brushed a lock of hair out of his eyes, "...are regarded as a student purely for administrative purposes."

"I never did get that normal, ordinary school year," she said with a resigned shrug.

Severus took her hands in his. "Are you sure you would want it? Besides, I have a feeling things may get a little more unusual."

They discreetly moved apart as Kingsley's footsteps announced his arrival. The Minister for Magic entered his office with a noticeable weariness in his stride. "Merlin, that was a morning I would rather forget," he grumbled as he removed a Disillusionment Charm from something he carried within his robes. He placed a plain wooden box on his desk. "In the presence of the Keeper of the Lore, the Keeper of the Law, and Her Majesty the Queen, I spent half a day under Veritaserum to bring this delightful object out of hiding." He opened the lid and took out a slender rod of dull gold with an eyelet at the end.

Hermione thought it looked rather like a giant's darning needle.

"The Sceptre of Permissions," Kingsley announced with appropriate grandeur. "With this, the Minister for Magic may access the vaults without needing an Unspeakable present. It is only given out for five hours at a time and only after exhaustive questioning as to the underlying motive for needing access to the vaults."

"What happens after five hours?" Hermione asked, overcome with curiosity.

"Don't know for sure," Kingsley pondered out loud. "Perhaps it turns into a pumpkin."

Severus gave Hermione a *well-you-did-ask* smirk. "If the available time is restricted, shall we make better use of it?"

Kingsley nodded as he wandlessly opened the door. "Good call, Severus." The two wizards stood back to allow Hermione to exit first.

"Nobody would ever guess this was here," Hermione whispered in awe.

"There would be little point in keeping potentially dangerous magical antiquities in obvious places," Severus whispered back, keeping close to Hermione in case she stumbled. Her attention was everywhere except the long flight of stairs winding down to the cavern floor.

"Look at this," Hermione said, tracing her fingers over the smooth walls. Bands of rock, some several inches thick, others as thin as a pencil line, swept up and down in graceful curves nearly forty feet high. "Can you imagine forces able to bend layers of rock like layers of Plasticine? The heat and pressure alone..." She shook her head, lost in contemplation.

Severus scanned the gloom of the cavern. Kingsley had told them it had been formed by a long-extinct underground river. Severus wondered where the river had gone and what sort of pallid, eyeless creatures had lived out their lives in it. Perhaps, somewhere along its course, the river had worn through its own bed and drained away into the unfathomable mysteries of the deep underground, suiciding in a thundering cascade no-one ever heard. He had read of even deeper caverns than this one in parts of Europe and the Americas. Caverns so deep they were unbearably hot and full of gigantic crystals. The High Table at Durmstrang was carved from a single one of these crystals.

"Hey! You two! Are you going to stand there all day?" Kingsley's voice woke innumerable echoes which immediately vied with each other in sibilant, teasing whispers.

Severus placed a hand on Hermione's elbow as they hurried to catch up with Kingsley, who waited for them at the foot of the stairs. They followed the Minister as he approached a featureless door seamlessly moulded into the rock.

Kingsley touched it with the tip of the Sceptre, and a glowing Roman numeral appeared in the eyelet. He repeated the procedure for the next door, and the next. "The vault numbers are randomly assigned," he explained to an increasingly fidgety Hermione. At the fourth door, a "V" appeared in the eyelet. Holding the Sceptre to the door, Kingsley placed his hand against the smooth surface and pushed gently.

With a practised glance, Severus quickly noted the features of the vault interior. Arrayed around the perimeter, seven stone chests waited in silence: warded, immovable, and ponderous with secrets. One of them contained the artefact Kingsley wanted him to examine. His eyes rested on a motionless stone figure features frozen in a formidable, soundless snarl crouching on a plinth.

"Well," Kingsley stated, gingerly walking past the figure and seating himself on one of the chests. "Impressive, isn't he?"

Petrus neither moved nor spoke. Severus closed in for a better look, Hermione right beside him with one hand clutching his robes. "He appears to be made from the same stone as the vault," he noted.

Kingsley nodded. "Oriens told me about that aspect of his friend. When he animates himself, he has quite a different... er... geology."

"Like a chameleon," Hermione said, looking at the motionless gargoyle with fascination.

Severus guessed the stone 'chameleon' was reluctant to reveal himself without a trusted ally being present. Petrus' pose looking slightly down and to the left meant his right flank was, in a sense, vulnerable. Purposefully, Severus positioned himself in this blind spot, keeping as close to the wall as he could. Kingsley and Hermione watched as he took a quill out of his pocket and began flicking the tip with his thumbnail.

Catching on, Hermione stood where she assumed Petrus could see her and made a series of gestures questioning Severus' "actions."

Severus watched as Petrus' right ear changed colour, morphing to a warm, sandy-grey. He shifted his position, causing his robes to rustle against the stone wall of the vault. The ear twitched ever so slightly. "I believe *now* would be a good time to stop pretending," he drawled disinterestedly, moving to stand in front of the creature.

The sandy-grey colour swept over Petrus with remarkable speed.

Hermione thought that the expression his features relaxed into was very similar to the one Crookshanks wore when caught daydreaming.

Petrus looked at each of them in turn, emitting a small gasp when Hermione smiled at him. "Forgive me, Mademoiselle, I have forgotten the manners." Petrus jumped down from his plinth, causing Severus and Kingsley to reflexively reach for their wands. If Petrus noticed, he gave no sign of it. He bowed to Hermione with a grace befitting a royal court.

Kingsley took a scroll from his robes. "For the purposes of correct procedure: your name is Petrus, and you were brought here from the *Cathédrale Notre-Dame de Paris* in the year 1427 under, to put it delicately, problematical circumstances?"

Petrus stood to attention. "*Oui*, Monsieur!"

Kingsley suspended the scroll in the air and unrolled it. He produced a quill and ink and wrote something on it. "I am the Minister for Magic; my name is Kingsley Shacklebolt. May I introduce Severus Snape, recently appointed director of the Department for the Encouragement of Eternal Vigilance and Defence Against Dark Magic, and Miss Hermione Granger, who has agreed to conduct an investigation pertaining to your probable release?"

Petrus cocked his head. "*Probable*, Monsieur le Minister?"

"Yes, *probable*. I have deliberately chosen the word over 'possible'."

"You will understand why once you have known Miss Granger for a short length of time," Severus remarked in response to Petrus' mystified silence.

Petrus turned and regarded Severus with unabashed interest. "Monsieur Severus, it is an honour! I have read much about you." He delved into the space behind his plinth a space that would be effectively hidden by the drape of his wings when he occupied it, thus forming a perfect hiding place. He pulled out a sheaf of *Daily Prophets* and *Quibblers*. "*Félicitations*, Monsieur Severus, on your survival and your acquittal."

A little gratified at the formally correct and reverent pronunciation of his name, Severus gave a nod of acknowledgement and took one of the *Prophets*. "Oriens brings you *these*?"

Petrus shrugged. "I ask him to. I think perhaps a shadow of the news is better than none at all. Tell to me *il vous plait*, am I the only one to believe the articles of Madame Skeeter should be taken with, how do you say, the grain of salt?"

"Try loads of it," Hermione snorted. "Visualise the Dead Sea."

Petrus obediently visualised the sea in question. "I have read of this sea. Such an amount of salt would surely preserve Madame Skeeter's articles forever." His stone eyes sparkled like mica deposits exposed to the sun. "Oriens also brings the proper books; unfortunately, there is little capacity for storage."

Hermione stealthily looked Petrus up and down, recalling everything she had read about gargoyles and their uses in ancient Arabia. He wore no armour or weapons if one discounted his teeth and talons. There were no sigils or brands to indicate his origins or his intended purpose. Whoever had carved him had seen fit to gird his loins, which suggested he had been destined for servitude in a palace or some other noble dwelling.

In that moment, Hermione decided that the Beast Division would not be involved in future proceedings. She had never seen a gargoyle so uninhibited in movement, or so expressive in speech. Neither had Severus, judging by his intense evaluation of Petrus' every move. Petrus was a *Being* of some sort. The Unspeakables had been correct all those centuries ago this was no ordinary gargoyle.

The realisation that this was not a textbook case study and she had undertaken a great responsibility swept through Hermione in a wave of mixed exhilaration and alarm. She felt she should say something to Petrus, but what? Uncharacteristically, she said the first thing that came into her head. "You pronounce your aitches." She felt her cheeks flame as soon as the words were out of her mouth. Of all the things she could have said to at least *try* and sound professional...

Petrus did not mind at all. "Ah! For the aitches, Mademoiselle, you may thank Oriens. Always, he insists I pronounce them. What is this 'aitch'? What is its use? The aitch itself is not pronounced with an aitch! Why, then, do the other words need the aitch to be observed?" He stood expectantly for a moment, his tail describing slow, sinuous curves.

"No riposte, Miss Granger?" Severus' tone held a stealthy touch of affection.

Kingsley stood up, gaining everyone's immediate attention. "Petrus, as you may be aware, when you were brought down here there were certain concerns regarding your origin and your capacity for magic. I have brought Severus on this occasion for two tasks. With your permission, one of these tasks is to screen you for Dark powers."

Petrus nodded slowly. His voice was quiet when he spoke. "Oui, Monsieur le Minister. It was done once before. Without permission. If any of the Dark power was found, I was not told of it." He faced Severus with a show of bravado. "The process, it was not comfortable, but I will submit to it again if it will assist Mademoiselle Granger."

He moved away from his plinth, lashed his tail and bared his fearsome canines. "But *will* say this about the events at *Notre-Dame de Paris*.

"Monsieurs, Mademoiselle, what is the greater crime? To reveal my presence in defiance of the laws, or to allow innocent blood to be shed? They would have flayed her to the bone, hanged her like a common criminal, then torn her body apart like stray dogs at the corpse of a sheep! *Pour quois*? Because her family dared to defy a filthy despot! For this, she was accused of the crimes she did not commit." Petrus laid his ears back. "I would do it again Monsieur le Minister; I would do it a thousand, ten thousand times!"

Hermione rallied her courage and laid a hand on Petrus' forearm, secretly relieved when he quietened immediately. "What is the greater injustice, Minister?" she asked. "To allow the innocent to die defenceless, or to imprison those who would defend them? Is it a crime to defy a ruling when the rules have been rewritten to suit a Dark purpose? Is it possible to break a law when the laws have already been broken by those who would enforce their own interpretations with torture and death?"

Kingsley stared at Hermione with admiration and approval. "If you can work those questions into an opening statement for Wizengamot, you will certainly grab their attention," he said.

"Doubtless, they will ask some tedious questions," Severus added, circling Petrus with measured steps. He looked the gargoyle in the eyes. "You would be wise to keep silent about what you would or would not do. Let Miss Granger do the talking, understood?"

Petrus scuffed one foot on the floor, looking a little like a student caught using the wrong stirring rod. *Oui*, Monsieur Severus, understood."

Severus shifted to professorial mode. "For your information, there are two examinations I will perform. The first is comprised of similar procedures to those you have already experienced several hundred years ago. I say 'similar', because the methods I will use are more advanced and far more comprehensive. The second screening may, under recent rulings, only be used in the presence of the Minister for Magic. It is a form of Summoning, it has its origins in Dark Magic, and I will ask the Minister to confirm that I am authorised to use it under specified circumstances."

Kingsley nodded gravely. "Severus is authorised to use a Summoning to allay any suspicion of Petrus having enough Dark Magic to cause the mass annihilation of the people of ancient Thâmūd. Petrus, as you know, you were found in an inexplicable situation involving a number of dead men and animals. Someone will raise the issue..."

Petrus held up one hand. *"S'il vous plait*, I understand the concerns, Monsieur le Minister. Monsieur Severus, I am ready."

Hermione watched with agitation as Severus began the procedures to search Petrus for Dark Magic, deploying the charms with masterful efficiency. Petrus grimaced and flinched as the magical traces rippled through his entire body. A soft, white ball of light appeared briefly above his head.

"Phase one, all clear," Severus muttered. "Now, this *will* be uncomfortable."

Hermione looked anxiously to Kingsley as Severus placed one hand on Petrus' chest and spoke in a language she had never heard before. It sounded ancient and imperious, commanding and cold. It brought to mind lurking shadows, furtive ghosts lost in desolate places, and terrible beings imprisoned and angry longing for release with malevolent intent. The air seemed to chill, and for a moment she thought the light had dimmed. She fought her way out of the clinging grip of a particularly nasty memory and looked around.

The Summoning had been mercifully quick. Severus sat on one of the stone chests, pale and uneasy. Petrus' eyes were closed and he was visibly trembling. Kingsley gave an involuntary shiver before composing himself.

"Phase two clear," Severus confirmed tonelessly, while Kingsley made a mark on the scroll. "If there was anything Dark occupying Petrus' body, the Summoning would have brought it out and bound it."

Dispensing with all pretence at secrecy, Hermione sat next to Severus and clasped his hand.

He turned his head and met her eyes for a moment, then quickly looked away.

Hermione read something in his look, a question asked in deeply held foreboding *Do you still want to know me after what you have just seen and heard?* She answered him by closing the small distance between them. She rubbed her other hand over his icy knuckles, intent on warming him, body and soul.

"I know it was a big ask, Severus." Kingsley had his back to them as he rolled up the scroll and tucked it away in his robes. His eyebrows shot up as he turned around and saw them in such close proximity. "It's a bit like licensing Aurors to use Unforgivables," he said, focussing on Hermione. "Never a good thing, but at times necessary. It is a sore trial of morals and ethics."

Petrus sneezed violently and flexed his wings.

"How are you feeling, Petrus?" Kingsley asked.

"I think maybe I am in one piece," he answered querulously. As he opened his eyes, his posture straightened and his ears strained forward. *C'est bon!* I *knew* it!" he exclaimed, recovering his ebullience in a burst of glee and pointing to the couple seated on the chest.

"You did?" Hermione asked, wondering just what he knew and how he knew it.

"Mademoiselle, one does not observe the people of Paris for so many years and still be blind to the signs of love."

Love. Severus and Hermione looked at each other. Hermione blushed furiously, and a faint rush of colour graced Severus' countenance. Neither moved away from the other or broke eye contact. Severus laced his now very warm fingers through Hermione's as she nudged him gently a wordless exchange confirming Petrus' observation as correct.

Kingsley whistled softly to himself. "Land alive, I didn't see this coming." He awkwardly adjusted his robes, then addressed Petrus. "Yes, well... Now we are sure you have no Dark tendencies, the next step will be for Miss Granger to present this information to the Department for the Regulation and Control of Magical Creatures, and from there to the Wizengamot.

"Miss Granger has already found an obscure ruling which may act in your favour, should you choose to take advantage of it. I have instructed the Department to adhere to the ruling, which is this: since you, as a non-human magical creature, have resided, in a sense, in England for more than one hundred years, you have the right to stay permanently. Technically, you are still the property of the French Ministry of Magic, though no claim on you has ever been registered. Miss Granger checked. If you would like to stay on this side of the Channel, I have a few strings I can pull with the French Ministry to make it happen. The only proviso is this: you must spend a minimum period of three years with persons of good repute who are willing to vouchsafe you."

Petrus considered this for a moment. *"S'il vous plait*, if it is possible, I would like to stay."

Severus took a small leather-bound primer from somewhere in his robes. "I believe I can arrange for the proviso to be met if Oriens is not in a position to do so." He handed the book to Petrus along with a sheet of parchment, a quill, and ink. "Turn to page fiftyfour and translate the first paragraph from English into Latin, Ancient Greek, and French. You will find an exercise on page seventy. Extract the numerical codes hidden within it, express them in written English, then use geometry to reproduce them in a visual form." He scowled at the astonished expressions of his human audience. "Do not be concerned. I have a plan. Petrus, I am aware you are both literate and reasonably numerate. I assume you can also write. However, if you feel the task is beyond you..."

"*Non*, Monsieur Severus the task, it sounds most interesting." Petrus arranged the writing materials on his plinth as though he did it every day. He quickly found the required paragraph and began reading with an avidity Hermione instantly approved of.

Kingsley took up the Sceptre of Permissions again. "Next on the agenda," he said, "the artefact which has so captured Arawn's attention." He counted the third chest from the left of the door and touched it with the Sceptre, standing back as glowing silver bands appeared and unclasped themselves. "I think this is it," he said, as the chest opened to reveal a hoard fit for a hundred very miserly Goblins. "Petrus, could I ask you to confirm this is the object over which Oriens has voiced his concerns?"

"...*praecepsi operor non congruo per divinatio pendo*" Petrus muttered to himself as he wrote. He put the quill down and came over to the open chest. *Oui*, Monsieur le Minister, it is this one." He pointed to a pale blue crystal disk flanked by two silver dragons, a long silver chain coiled neatly around it.

Severus levitated the object, oblivious to Petrus' oblique watchfulness especially when Kingsley asked Severus if he had seen anything like it before. Severus shook his head. He silently cast several incantations and waited for a response. He shook his head again. "All magical objects have their own unique signature; I cannot say I have ever encountered this one." His brows knitted as he concentrated on a more powerful formula designed to penetrate the defences he had found. Hermione gasped as he reached out and took the artefact in his hand. Petrus looked up from his continued translation.

"Anything?" Kingsley prompted.

"I am sure it is not an object of Dark Magic. However, it holds the promise of great power. The wards and protective charms are arranged in concentric spheres a series of mazes, each one with a more elaborate patterning than the one above it. I detect none of the nuances common to true artefacts of Dark Magic.

"It holds a lure the lure of the power I just mentioned, but cannot define any further without accessing it. It stays barely within reach of consciousness as one finds a way through the layers of protection. Whoever created this was someone of considerable power and guile."

Kingsley frowned as he made a decision. "Can you access the power within it?"

Severus gathered his magic into a pinpoint focus, then sent his awareness into the artefact. After a minute or two, his eyes snapped open with a grunt of surprise, and he stepped back with a hiss of discomfort. He quickly sat down and rested his elbows on his knees. Hermione was with him in an instant. "Severus? Are you all right?"

"That was a new experience," he growled, taking some deep breaths.

"Arawn's notes describe a sensation of dizziness, disorientation and nausea, progressively worsening with each subsequent attempt to penetrate the protections," Kingsley said.

"I made note of it when I read his account. I was convinced I had found a way through to the seat of the power, then I found I was right back where I began with no idea of how I got there. Arawn's description of the physical discomfort is accurate. It seems to be more of a warning than an attack, which supports my initial observation: artefacts of Dark Magic do not ever give warnings."

He looked at the object in his hand with respect. "At this stage, I can only assume the power itself is neutral. That is, it could be used for good or evil. Speaking from experience, it is certainly something Riddle would have been interested in, but I am curious as to why he did not carry it himself."

Kingsley rubbed his eyes. "We are certain he never accessed it. The thing was encased in black iron, with Voldemort's personal seal, when it was found on the body of a Death Eater."

"To protect it, most likely. Or safeguard the power it contains from anyone else until it was time to launch whatever plan he had for it. I am certain the artefact itself is not dangerous. For the record, Kingsley, Riddle never mentioned it to me."

Kingsley's eyes flicked from Severus to Hermione, then back again. He gave them a small smile and levitated the artefact back to its position in the stone chest.

"Are you just going to leave it here?" Hermione asked.

"It's all we can do for the moment, Miss Granger," Kingsley answered. "But I do have a plan of my own, inspired by your exemplary use of the Protean Charm." He took an unglazed clay tile out of his pocket. "Petrus, have you completed your assignment?"

"...and the distance is five and twenty feet." Petrus used the edge of a bookmark to draw a straight line. "Oui, it is done." Petrus quickly annotated the bottom of the parchment and handed it to Severus.

"I have a small task for you," Kingsley continued, giving Petrus the clay tile. "Scratch a mark into it, if you will." Petrus complied, and Kingsley produced another tile bearing an identical mark. "As you can see, you now have a means of sending me a signal. Because it may take a little time to get you out of here, perhaps you would keep watch? Should Arawn come in here, make one mark on the tile. If he examines the artefact, make two parallel marks. If he removes it from the vault, make a cross."

Petrus nodded his comprehension, then looked at each of them forlornly.

Hermione gently touched his arm. "You will see us again; don't worry. I'm sorry we can't simply bring you out now."

Petrus simultaneously shrugged his shoulders and his wings. "It is in order, Mademoiselle. Arrangements, they must be made *non*? Besides, I have a small duty to perform. Waiting is not so hard if one is patient."

After more assurances from Kingsley that he would not be abandoned again, Petrus climbed back onto his plinth and adopted the same posture as when they had first seen him. His colour quickly changed to match that of the vault. Hidden in his hand was the clay tile Kingsley had given him.

Having seen Hermione safely away to visit her parents with a silent hope the ice would have thawed Severus retreated to his rooms. At least this time he had managed to stir himself into action and extract a promise from Hermione: that she would come to him if she needed him, even if her heart had fallen off her sleeve and she had to carry it in a box. Severus had assured her he would do his best to put it back where it should be, and asked her to be patient with him if his attempts to do so were a little unpolished due to lack of application. He summoned Caddy, requested several boxes of tissues and a consignment of chocolate Severus Snape was not one to neglect preparations for a worst case scenario then sat at his desk to review Petrus' work.

The gargoyle exceeds expectations, he thought when he had finished, reluctantly admitting to himself that Petrus' Ancient Greek was a little better than his own. *Three-quarters of the insufferable underheads in Seventh Year would have struggled with the same exercise. There is definitely more to him than charm-animated stone.* He scowled as he read the last minute annotation:

Last time Arawn very angry.

Mentioned half-blood and name Severus. Be careful.

Minister does not know. Find Oriens.

Startled, Severus quickly cast *Evanescio* on the message and turned it over to mental scrutiny while he changed for dinner in the Great Hall. Presumably, Arawn thought Severus was linked to the artefact in some way. If this was the cause of Arawn's anger, what was the reason behind it? Severus had never even met the Unspeakable. Petrus and Oriens knew of this assumed connection, but neither of them had mentioned it to Kingsley. At least, not yet. Be careful? Severus snorted. 'Careful' was a habit coded into his genes by now, surely.

He knew Oriens had been tasked with finding Tobias and that a meeting with the latter was inevitable. While he did not relish the thought of being in the same room as his Muggle father, it might give him a chance to firmly buttonhole Oriens and find out what the hell was going on. Severus was suddenly alight with curiosity. *Two magical objects, neither of them identified. Both supposedly powerful. People assume I might know what... he... has, simply because of... a blood tie. Now it seems I have something to do with the one in the vaults as well. Unbelievable.*

He paused halfway through buttoning his coat. When he had tried to find a way through the layers of protection on the artefact, a ghost of something familiar had raised itself, though it had not seemed significant at the time: it was hidden in the twists and turns of the magical patterns. It flitted and darted in the false leads, dead ends, and spiralling, branching paths of deception. Somewhere in that complex array was a magical cadence uncannily similar to his own.

He scowled as his mind suddenly fought to identify something tugging at the edge of his memory. His eyes rested on the painting of the owl-person, still busily engaged in bringing avian creations to painted life with a spectrum of light. He cocked his head as the elusive something took a fleeting form, vanishing as quickly as it took shape: tiny rainbows dancing and flickering, a flash of silver, a voice he did not recognise. For the life of him, he could not identify where the memory came from if it was a memory at all. Severus was not certain if it was even real.

Toby resisted the urge to move as the weight of sleep lifted and dissipated. Without opening his eyes, he knew he was in a very different locale to the one represented in his most recent memory. *We ain't in Kansas anymore*, he thought wryly. Strangely enough, the place smelled rather like a hospital with a Chinese herbalist next door and a hippie commune over the road. He opened his eyes slightly, seeing what he could through his eyelashes. He was not alone.

On the other side of the room, a man stood side-on to him, reading from what looked like a scroll *What've we got 'ere? Christ! Get a look at 'is clobber! Who does 'e reckon 'e is, Robin Goodfellow?* From what he could see, the man was clad in shades of green and brown. As Toby watched, the man shrugged out of his forest-green cloak and draped it over the back of a chair.

Toby held his breath. *Oh, bugger. Not good.* Any thoughts of overpowering the man evaporated. While lightly built, he looked fit and agile. But it was the blade strapped to his back that really put contention out of Toby's mind.

In Australia's northern tropics, descendants of Makassar trepangers told of these long knives in song and story. They called the distinctive wavy blade *Kris* and they were thought to have magical properties. He had even seen one in the hands of an old man who told a chilling tale of how a Kris "came to life" to avenge its murdered master. Having seen a harrowing display of magic with his own eyes, the tale prompted a week's worth of nightmares. Further, if the man owned such a blade, he was highly likely to be a master of Silat as well as being one of *them*.

Toby's thoughts turned to the Llygad. There was no way he could check to see if it was still safe while he feigned sleep. He stretched cautiously, relieved to find his movements unencumbered. Sitting up, he gave Robin Goodfellow his most curmudgeonly glare, all the while trying not to think of how a set of Pan-pipes would suit the bloke down to the ground. "For starters, who're you?" he asked gruffly.

Two Dementors hovered in a dank alley strewn with refuse. The body of an itinerant Muggle lay sprawled against a wall, his sightless eyes staring into oblivion. A manhole cover lifted slowly into the air. A third Dementor surfaced from the sewers and joined its companions. As they huddled together, an observer would have thought they were arguing about something. At length, they apparently reached an agreement and drifted, like smoke, down the access hole and out of sight.

They emerged, unseen, not far from St. Mungo's. One of them drifted higher and, picking up speed, headed northwards. Two remained behind, their ragged robes limply fluttering in the breeze. One Dementor straightened suddenly.

Like a leech questing for the blood-heat of a host, it turned this way and that. Purposefully, it began to move towards the hospital, tracking the taste of a memory and the scent of fear. The other followed not far behind.

Converging Paths – part 2

Chapter 10 of 32

Toby is reluctant to reveal what he knows about the source of the magic he carries, but in a moment of tension he drops a familiar name. Severus revisits some disturbing memories. In his quest for information, he refuses to take "no" for an answer.

A/N's

"Purring Therapy" The healing properties of feline purring have been explored since the 1970s, so I am not sure which reference Severus has read. For interested readers, a good place to start exploring is: *Why do Cats Purr?* Leslie A. Lyons, School of Veterinary Medicine, The University of California, Davis. April 2006. Scientific American (online).

The "boy and the mirror" scene is adapted from pages 5556 of *The Crystal Cave* by Mary Stewart (1970), where Merlin examines his reflection in Galapas' cave.

Pugsley Addams is the property of the cartoonist Charles Addams. I make no profit from his character.

Canon characters are the property of J.K. Rowling. I make no money from them.

Many thanks to TeaOli for beta-works and some more chances to use my favourite piece of punctuation!

Toby folded his arms and scowled as Oriens explained the perils of magical objects and the reasons he had been "abducted" and brought to the high-security section of what sounded like a major hospital. *At least the walls ain't padded*, he thought. "Got a good reason why I should believe you why I should ever *think* about trustin' you?"

Oriens patiently listed some significant reasons. "You are not dead, you are not physically or mentally restrained, you have not been tortured, you have not been questioned under duress, you still have your source of magic no-one here has touched it or asked to look at it, and you have received a concise explanation as to why you are here."

Toby only narrowed his eyes and looked away with a shudder. "I was warned someone one of *your* kind would come lookin' for it."

Oriens sensed that Toby had witnessed something deeply disturbing and whatever he had seen still held him in thrall. "We are not ~~na~~ barbarians," Oriens said gently.

The effect was immediate: Toby's eyes flashed with a mixture of anger, rebellion, and gut-clenching fear. "That's not what I seen." He spat the words out as though they were poison. "You seriously expect me to believe you when you say you only want to put the thing into safekeeping? That you're concerned about my wellbeing? Bullshit! You 'aven't even mentioned the one who's really after the damn thing!"

"By 'the one', I assume you mean your son?" It was a shot in the dark, but it struck home. Toby flinched as a wave of anguish momentarily smothered his pugnacity.

"Logic'ly, I s'pose," he mumbled distractedly.

Oriens mentally summarised his assumptions. There was a serious rift between Tobias and Severus. Tobias had seen something which terrified him completely. Whatever he had seen involved Death Eaters and, very probably, the object he now carried. The man had been told, by Eileen presumably, that Dark wizards would come for whatever-it-was should they learn of its existence. He had also been told that his son was numbered among the Death Eaters and would have some reason to lay claim to

it.

Putting a myriad of questions aside, Oriens decided he could at least do something to assuage Toby's fears concerning Severus' allegiance. "Your son did take service under a Dark wizard of particularly evil intentions. I'm guessing you knew of this?" He watched as Toby nodded and shivered. "Severus changed his loyalties, but he could not desert the ranks of the Dark completely.

"To do so would have meant a shortened life and a very prolonged death. He became a spy for the Light. Without the information he gained, the war could not have been won. Without him, the Dark would have prevailed and our world and ultimately yours would have fallen under a regime of bloodshed, slavery and unrelenting fear."

"War?" Toby embodied the definition of incredulity.

Oriens nodded soberly. "I think the best way to inform you is for you to read the reports for yourself. Have you seen Wizarding photographs before?"

Toby shook his head, and then shrugged.

"Be prepared for the fact that they move. They cannot hurt you; they simply record a few moments in time and play it over and over again. I shall bring you some reading material, and you can make your own assessments of what has occurred in our world."

Toby rested his elbows on his knees and examined his hands. "Is... is Sev'rus... You said there was a war. Is 'e still alive?"

"He is, though some would claim his survival defies universal odds. The last time anyone saw him before the end of the Battle of Hogwarts which you will read about he was assumed dead.

"Aurors our equivalent of what you would call the tactical response division of a police force went to find him once the fighting had ended. After a small detour leading to the unexpected apprehension of a rogue giant, the Aurors came back to where he was last seen and found no trace of him. He vanished completely for several months, then showed up alive and well. Our Minister for Magic a position ranking on a level with the British Prime Minister has since recruited him into a role of considerable responsibility and trust."

Toby rubbed his eyes. "I see. Well, I don't, really. Dunno what to think."

"I'll bring you the reading material. Take your time over it. Do you understand why you must stay on these premises?"

Toby sighed. "Yeah, sort of. I reckon I'll take your word for it. Can't do much else, eh? Is there such a thing as tea in this place?"

"There certainly is! Without it, everything would come to a grinding halt. Tea shall be arranged," Oriens said encouragingly as he left the room. He decided he would bring it himself. It was not yet time to introduce Tobias to house-elves.

The guard Aurors leapt into action as St Mungo's wards began to tingle, then crackle with fierce energy. Following drills practised until they were as natural as breathing, they quickly located the source of the disturbance and surrounded the main gates.

There was no need for subjugation. The ragged, raw-eyed wizard scrabbling at the wards threw down his wand as soon as he saw them. He clasped his hands in a wailing, gibbering plea for mercy, claiming he had not slept for weeks.

Moments later, the Aurors escorted what looked like an Inferius into the Emergency room. Astonished Healers hurried to assist as the staggering, cadaverous shell of Antonin Dolohov collapsed in a convulsive faint.

As night fell, two Dementors emerged from a demolition site. Side by side, they approached the gates wherein their prey had found refuge. One of them raised a gaunt hand and pointed. It could still sense its objective behind walls through which it could not pass. The Dementors parted, each following a circuit around St Mungo's, pausing every now and then to test the completeness and strength of the wards.

Severus frowned as he followed his internal auto-pilot along familiar routes through the castle. After spending the evening consoling Hermione as best he could, he was half-tempted to pay her parents a visit and give them a very graphic description of what they could have been faced with, had Hermione not effectively removed them from the scene. Of course, he would not. Minerva had already tried the same tactic, albeit in a far more diplomatic manner than *he* was inclined to display.

Besides, if her parents ever did re-establish Hermione's place in their lives, it would be important not to upset them. He would have to tell them... His mouth went dry at the thought. How hard would it be to look them in the eyes and say he loved their daughter? Not to mention answering the inevitable questions about his intentions and himself. Severus felt even more out of his depth when he considered that, by the time such a confession was due, he and Hermione could well be lovers. The thought pulled him up suddenly, half in the shifting shadows thrown against the wall by a single flaming sconce.

Unexpectedly, a mammalian snuffle on a vast scale echoed from the darkened depths of the corridor. Severus watched as a massive shadow loomed and took shape in its own sweet time. "Good evening, Pugsley." Severus greeted his peer as a respected equal, Animagus form or not. "I assume you find the corridors to your liking?"

Pugsley lifted his muzzle and made a show of catching scents in the air, an expression of bliss in his small eyes. Although Severus could not understand Ursine, Pugsley's anthropomorphic body language was easy to read. Pugsley raised a front paw and examined his meat-hook claws before modestly polishing them against the heavy fur of his chest.

"Let me guess: you have found something important in the quest to preserve the Flumes' business from juvenile pillaging?"

Pugsley stood on his hind legs and gave as graceful a bow as a bear could manage, finishing with a grumbling *harrumph* that nearly extinguished the sconce.

"I admire your efficiency," Severus mused out loud. "The students arrive tomorrow, and yet you are already on their trail."

Pugsley eyed Severus artfully. He touched his nose to the floor with his lips drawn back, breathing noisily. He half-reared, closed one eye, and lowered his head, giving himself a hunch-backed appearance.

"The One-eyed Witch?"

Pugsley gave a long, low growl as he stared into the darkness. He snuffled again and licked his lips.

"The One-eyed Witch conceals a secret passage to Honeydukes? Through the aftermath of destruction, reconstruction, and everything in between, you could pick up enough of a trail to lead you to a secret passage?" Severus was impressed. No wonder Pugsley Addams held the world record for correctly identifying potion ingredients by scent alone. He hid a smirk; the students were in for more than a few surprises.

Pugsley signalled his intention to continue his preparatory prowling, then looked Severus in the eyes with a jerk of his head and a questioning rumble.

Feeling pleased at the offer in spite of his usual tendency to seek solitude when perturbed, Severus accepted, adjusting his stride to match the bear's leisurely amble.

The disparate pair paused every now and then while Severus pointed out short cuts, vantage points, students' bolt holes, and places where the castle was prone to rearranging itself unexpectedly. At length, they arrived at the Astronomy Tower, where Severus took his leave and ascended to the top.

With Hermione ensconced in her room in the Gryffindor tower and hopefully sleeping, Severus intended to process Gawain's message alone. He took a moment to look around the scene of one of his darkest hours. It had not been not a conscious decision to come here; he had simply found himself gravitating towards it. Perhaps it was a fitting place to examine another dark facet of his existence, one he knew he had to face and was not sure how to handle.

He found a spot illuminated by moonlight. He was not inclined to use magic at all up here, not ever *Lumos*. Severus took Gawain's message out of his pocket. Without reading it again, he considered its contents: Tobias Snape was currently held in St Mungo's. He was unharmed, in good health, and had not behaved aggressively towards anyone. He had not surrendered the magical object, nor had he volunteered any information concerning it. There were sound reasons to suspect Eileen Snape had originally owned the source of magic which Tobias carried making Severus' involvement inextricable. The matter had been referred to a Ministerial level. Complete confidentiality was expected.

A confrontation, as Severus considered it, would take place in forty-eight hours. He leaned against a wall, trying to make sense of a sudden upwelling of emotion. Too late, he tried to restrain it. Inexorably, it gathered momentum and took form...

He was six years old, and something was very wrong. He had never seen his father behave like this: shouting and threatening, unsteady on his feet. His voice was strange. Had he forgotten how to talk properly? His mother was crying, but shouting back.

Severus covered his ears. *Stop it! What are you doing? Please, just stop!* He could not understand it, or why it hurt so much. Too confused to cry, he watched as his father stormed out of the door. Spurred into action by a sudden sense of loss, Severus ran out after him. "Da! Where're you going? Da', wait for me!" Severus stood for a moment on the wet road. Disbelief washed over him as his father kept walking with that curious, unsteady motion.

Concluding that his father had not heard him, Severus broke into a run. "Da', what's wrong?" He caught up and reached out, catching hold of his father's sleeve. His father turned on him like a whirlwind.

"Git 'ome!"

Wide-eyed, Severus let go and took a step back. "But, Da', I..."

"I said, git 'ome. Give yeh a taste of t'belt. Now, git! Piss orf!"

Completely stunned, Severus tried again by catching his father's hand. It was a mistake. Severus barely felt the swift backhanded blow that knocked him to the ground not until the suddenly numb side of his face began to tingle, then to throb. Scrambling to his feet, he took one more look at his father, who advanced on him with a raised hand, and fled.

He reached the front door and tripped over the threshold, landing in a sobbing, breathless heap on the floor. His chest hurt and his throat burned. It was hard to breathe and he felt sick. Taking fright at the thought he might be dying, Severus got up and called for his mother, but the words came out in a barely audible, strangled whisper. He stumbled through the house and found her in the kitchen, seated at the table, her hands pressed hard to her eyes.

"Mum?" His mother did not move. Severus tugged at her wrists. "Mum? Please... Tell me what it is. What's happened?" Still she did not move.

Assuming she was ashamed to be seen crying, as Severus himself usually was especially when he had a runny nose he went in search of a handkerchief. Finding none, he seized a flannel from the bathroom which, to his mind, would serve the same purpose. When he returned to the kitchen, his mother was not there. The prickling heat of fear gave way to the cold of desolation as he searched the house for her. His parents' bedroom door was closed. Perhaps she was in there. He knocked and called, with no response. Cautiously trying the door handle, he found it was locked. It could only be locked from the inside. She was in there. For some reason, she would not answer.

What did I do? Why do they hate me? Severus was too young to reason otherwise, and too young to know he was in shock. He only knew he sat in front of the door until it was completely dark. Then, shivering so violently he could barely coordinate his limbs, he crawled into his own room and curled up in bed. While outwardly he did not make a sound, inwardly he could not stop crying...

A velvet paw gently touched his hand. With a ragged gasp, Severus broke free of the recollections which marked the beginning of a soul-numbing limbo. He had slid down the wall and was sitting on the cold stone floor, one knee drawn up to his chest. Wiping his eyes, he looked down to see Crookshanks watching him gravely.

Severus hesitated for a moment, then reached out and stroked the animal's warm fur. His eyes began to sting as an aching emptiness rose from the fretful loneliness of his childhood. Before he met Lily, he had tried to make friends with the stray cats haunting the boarded-up mill. Wary of any human, they would only look at him with round, startled eyes and slink away with their bellies close to the ground. He had thought that if he had food to offer, they may have come closer, but Severus had no food to spare. As it was, his stomach was constantly trying to gnaw its way through his backbone.

Once, on one of his wanderings between Muggle school and the place he could not bring himself to call home, he had stroked a cat sunning itself on a doorstep until the owner came out and scooped her pet away, muttering nasty things about "that mucky Snape lad".

There were a few dogs shadowing the streets around Spinner's End. After only one attempted approach, Severus realised that the roaming packs of street dogs would befriend no-one. They were mangy, vicious curs, seemingly all ribs and teeth, and would growl and bristle at people until somebody threw something at them. Severus later learned they were used to fight other dogs in brutal, bloody competitions for money or alcohol.

Many years later, Severus and Lucius had come across one such arena. Severus had muttered something about giving the degenerates a dose of their own potion. Lucius picked up on the concept immediately, deciding it would be fun to pit feral Muggles against Acromantulas for the next Dark Revel's entertainment. It had seemed like a good idea at the time, but Severus had felt ill for days afterwards.

He shuddered at the memory and wondered how Crookshanks could stand to be around him. Yet the half-Kneazle seemed content enough. "I intend no harm to your mistress; I suspect you know that already."

Crookshanks gave him a slow-blink and curled the tip of his tail.

"Therefore, I shall endeavour to stay on your good side," Severus affirmed, recalling Ronald Weasley's voluble complaints at being hissed at and scratched. It occurred to him that he and Crookshanks shared some unlikely common ground. "A half-blood and a half-Kneazle," Severus pointed out with a half-smile. "Perhaps we can come to an understanding?"

As if in answer, Crookshanks climbed onto Severus' lap and began to purr in earnest, then arranged himself so that his body pressed against Severus' chest with his head next to the scars left by Nagini.

Obligated to hold the furry mass in place like a baby, Severus concentrated on Crookshanks' rumbling purr, finding it soothed both body and mind. "You know," he said quietly, stroking the living hot water bottle, "I read a research journal describing how cats use purring to accelerate healing when they are injured or sick. Is the same true for Kneazles? The researchers did not say if the effect was transferable between bodies. I begin to think it is."

Crookshanks added a low croon to his purr.

"Perhaps the ancient Egyptians had another reason to venerate the cat, aside from keeping rats out of the granaries." Severus allowed his mind to explore the possibilities of "purring therapy", contentedly drifting from one idea to the next without really taking any of them seriously. He was still thinking of potential applications as he persuaded the Fat Lady to allow Crookshanks to return to his mistress. He had no doubt that Hermione would receive the same "treatment".

"You put him up to it, didn't you?" Hermione placed an armload of books and her Potions kit on Severus' desk.

"Put whom up to what?" Severus asked innocuously.

"Professor Addams. Look at my literature review and practical research topic." Hermione waved a sheet of parchment in the air. "You know, don't you?"

"*Accio* Hermione's assigned literature review and practical research topic." He caught it deftly and examined the assignment with a calculating smirk. "Variation in the physical effects of Polyjuice Potion with the use of heterospecific hair samples." He handed the parchment back. "Interesting." He leaned back in his chair and stared speculatively at the ceiling. "It could lead to an alternative hypothesis on partial shape-shifting and perhaps even false Animagi."

He blinked and frowned. "I *know*, do I? I know a great many things, Hermione, but you can hardly expect me to expound my knowledge if you have not specifically identified the subject."

"Hmph. If you really *don't* know, I am quite happy to keep it that way."

"Ah, but your assigned topic seems to have struck a nerve, and you are not about to reveal the reason why. Now, what can I read into that observation? An unintended outcome? Perhaps a trifle embarrassing? Involving Polyjuice Potion? Of course, it would not have involved accessing the Potions store without permission."

His silky composure was abruptly shattered as Hermione leapt on him and wrestled him out of his chair. Grappling for an advantage, Severus used his size and strength to move behind Hermione and pin her arms to her sides. "Really, this is most unseemly," he purred, roughly kissing her cheek as she struggled once more and gave up, laughing breathlessly. He moved in front of her and held her at arms length. "Do you have to wear that thing?" he complained, indicating her school uniform.

"I suppose not," Hermione admitted, "but it doesn't feel right attending classes without it."

Severus took his time looking her over. "I am surprised you do not find it irksome. It appears to be... a size too small... in places."

"Are you saying I'm fat?" Hermione teased, intuitively sensing the real nature of the issue.

Severus' colour, already a healthy glow from the exertions of wrestling, deepened another shade. "No, not at all. It's just..." he searched frantically for words. "That uniform was made for a *girl*, not a woman. Witch. Lady."

Hermione watched him impassively until he very nearly squirmed, then smiled and produced her wand. She transfigured the girlish attire into a flowing robe of deep green, with a golden lion embroidered over her heart. "Is that bet..."

She did not get to finish her question as Severus roughly pulled her hard against his body and delivered the most searing kiss she had ever experienced. They clung to each other fiercely, hands exploring bodies as they crossed an unseen border where something vital and alive forged them together with heat and longing.

A clock chimed softly, bringing them back to the reality of duty and schedule. "Gods, Severus," Hermione murmured, touching her slightly swollen lips. "Where did that come from?"

Severus held her in a gentler embrace. "Gods, yourself," he answered. "I could ask you the same question." His expression grew serious. "You are aware of where continuation of these activities will lead us?"

Hermione nodded. "I am."

"Then know that I will never let you go if we proceed down that path. Not for anyone. Not for *anything*."

Hermione seized a handful of hair behind his ear and kissed him again, pouring all her love and desire into the action. "Count on this, Severus. I will never let *you* go. Not for anyone. Not for anything."

They absorbed these declarations in silence until Hermione glanced at the time. "I'd better get going," she said reluctantly, collecting her books and restoring her uniform. "The War Veterans' Herbology tutorial is being held in the greenhouses. May I leave my Potions kit here for now? I'll pick it up after dinner."

Severus crossed the room to his desk. "Certainly. Though I anticipate I may not be in the best frame of mind when you return to collect it." He handed her Gawain's message. "This explains why, partially. The information is supposed to be completely confidential, but I want you to know."

Hermione read the message twice and handed it back to him. "Thank you for trusting me with it." She noted the almost complete lack of emotion in his eyes. *He is finding this extremely difficult. I bet he has sealed everything behind his walls.* "When does it happen?"

"Two o'clock this afternoon."

"Did you want... Should I arrange to come with you?"

Severus shook his head. "Not for this occasion. Besides, you have tutorials for the rest of the afternoon." He stood before a window and looked out across the landscape. "I would... if you would... sometime this evening..."

"Seek you out? Listen to what you have to say? Give you whatever comfort I can if you need it? Of course I will! You did the same for me the other night don't roll your eyes, you really helped! Will you be here?"

Severus shrugged. "I don't know. I might be. It depends."

Hermione thought for a moment. "How about: I'll find you here if you are at peace with the world. Where should I look if you are not?"

"Somewhere isolated and suitably desolate," he replied morosely.

"The middle of the Atacama Desert?"

Severus managed a small smile. "Somewhere within the Hogwarts wards."

"Which narrows the possibilities down to any one of several dozen." Hermione gave him a firm hug. "I'll find you. I meant it when I said I would never let you go."

It was this surety Severus carried with him as he followed Kingsley through St Mungo's. Passing through security clearance under the watchful and suspicious eyes of guard Aurors, they found Oriens waiting for them outside a nondescript door with no identifying number. They passed through into a spartan antechamber.

Despite his Occlumency, Severus felt vaguely sick. He chastised himself for stupidity. Tobias Snape was no Tom Riddle. Severus wondered at the strange disquiet he felt: a slow-moving tumult which defied definition and threatened to addle his wits. He focussed on formally greeting Oriens, who gave a clinical summary of his observations and recommended no sudden displays of magic. Oriens then opened another door and announced their arrival.

Kingsley placed a hand on Severus' shoulder. "Ready? Are you sure..."

Severus cut him off abruptly. "Shall we just get this over with?" With that, he strode into the room.

Oriens and Kingsley shared a moment of concern as the room's atmosphere thickened and pulsed briefly before settling to a subliminal hum of tension.

Before the silence became awkward, Oriens broke it by calmly introducing the Minister for Magic. Toby stood and shook Kingsley's offered hand, looking him in the eye as he did so. Oriens' bearing did not falter as he called attention to Severus' presence. Toby gave his son a fleeting glance, raising his eyebrows in what might have been surprise or apprehension.

Severus stared blankly at a wall.

Kingsley decided to keep things moving. "Mr Snape, I believe Oriens has explained the dangers associated with magical objects for yourself and both of our worlds should such an object fall into the wrong hands. From what he has told me, you have had some lengthy discussions on the subject. Do you have any further questions?"

"No questions. And m' name's Toby," he grumbled.

Kingsley took the brusque reply in his stride. "Oriens will perform some diagnostics to establish whether or not you are magically bound to the object you carry. If we find nothing, we will then ask you to place it on the table and cross to the other side of the room. Have you ever tried to part company with it before?"

Toby nodded and held up three fingers.

"Three times? What stopped you from leaving it behind?"

Toby looked steadily at Kingsley. "Dunno. But it wasn't like I was addicted to it or nothin', if that's what yer gettin' at." His eyes flicked over to Severus who had not yet looked in his direction and then to the floor. "If I were to call it anythin'... Not sure. Obligation, maybe?"

Severus snorted and folded his arms, his posture rigid.

Toby flinched as though touched with a red hot brand.

"Perhaps we should proceed with the diagnostics?" Oriens suggested.

"I'd 'preciate it if you would," Toby muttered uneasily.

Oriens palmed his wand. "Tobias, I promise this will not hurt. You will not even know it's happening. I only need you to keep still."

"Get on with it."

The bond detection process took a full fifteen minutes, during which Severus did not move a muscle. Kingsley watched him pensively, hoping he had not asked too much of the wizard who had already given so much everyone had their breaking point, even Severus Snape.

At last, Oriens made an announcement. "There are no detectable bonds between Tobias and the source of the magic." He addressed Toby. "Do you think you can put it on the table and walk to the other side of the room?"

Toby remained silent, clenching and unclenching his fists. He gave Severus a sidelong glance, then looked away.

Suddenly, he spoke in a hoarse whisper. "What'd yer mother ever do t' deserve what 'appened?"

Severus scowled and turned to face his father, but still would not look at him.

Toby grew agitated. "I'll own I deserved it, but what'd she ever do to make you send yer mates to... It was murder, y' know that? Cold-blooded murder by a pack of spineless mongrel..."

"I never asked for anyone to die." Severus interrupted, his voice cold as a tomb.

"Nah. Course not. Just rough 'em up a little, was that it?"

And what did you do when you staggered through the door with a skin-full? Severus felt his control slip enough for a response to emerge as a guttural growl. *What?*

Toby's blood was instantly up. Dogged by fear for so long and finding himself backed into a corner, he was more than willing to show his hand consequences be damned. He moved to the centre of the room, reckless with desperation. "Why wouldn't y' do it yerself, eh? Sent yer posh-arsed mate Malfoy and 'is brown-nosed bastards to..."

"*Malfoy?!*" Severus thundered, throwing off his cloak.

This time, their eyes met with an almost audible clash. Like a pair of gladiators intent on death or glory, they took each other's measure and squared off for the next move.

"Gentlemen!" Kingsley used his physique and authority to call the potential combatants to attention. He stood between them with his wand drawn.

Oriens moved behind Toby and placed a restraining hand on his elbow.

Kingsley looked from one Snape to the other with a calculated amount of censure. "Are you really a pair of mere schoolboys spoiling for a fight in the gutter?" he asked quietly. "Because you are both painting that very picture, and it is neither pretty nor civilised. I do not think I need explain to anyone in command of their faculties, brawling will not be tolerated in a hospital." The Minister for Magic watched carefully as Severus reined in his power and his temper, appearing to make use of a strenuous mental exercise.

Toby shook his head as though to clear his mind. He glanced at Oriens, who released him immediately. Toby moved towards the table, facing it with his head bowed. Oriens wondered if Severus had noticed his father's look of hopeless despair. After a moment, Toby spoke again. This time, he sounded beaten and weary. "Just tell me, did you want yer mother dead?"

Severus closed his eyes. "No."

"Did you want 'er damaged?"

"No."

Toby dragged a chair into position and sat down. He poked a stack of documents. "These say you... you ain't with the dark stuff anymore. That right?"

"Yes."

Toby sighed and ran his hands through his hair, then leaned back and fumbled at his belt. He was deathly pale when he placed something on the table. It was an object Severus, Oriens and Kingsley instantly recognised.

It was an exact double of the artefact held in the vaults.

Toby did not respond to their astonished stares. His next words were tremulous with unspoken pain. "Eileen called it the Llygad y Ddraig."

Severus was first to speak. "This time, Minister, I can safely say I have seen something like it before." His question to Toby lashed the air like a command. "Where did you get this?"

Toby stiffened as his features glazed over. "Can't... Don't ask me. Please, don't ask me."

Severus graced him with a look of complete contempt and levitated the Llygad. Toby jumped like a scalded cat as it rose into the air.

"Easy does it, man," Kingsley said, standing beside the now terrified Muggle. "Severus is going to check it out for Dark Magic. He won't touch it until he knows what the risks are."

Severus followed the same procedures he had used with the artefact in the vaults, forming a series of conclusions as he did so. "As with its counterpart in the vaults, I detect no sign of Dark Magic. There is power within it but it too, appears neutral. The complexity of the protective charms and wards is identical. I believe this... Llygad... and the artefact in the vaults are twin objects. Or one of them is a very convincing duplicate. I shall attempt to access the power within to see if it contains the same warning."

Taking the Llygad in his hand, Severus sent his awareness into the disc of blue crystal. This time he kept watch for anything familiar and for any sign he was about to be unexpectedly ejected. He could sense power; it hung like a palpable presence in front of him as he navigated his way through the labyrinthine defences. Annoyance flared as he was caught unawares an unexpected void, a falling sensation, a dizzying twist, then something completely different. A sharp pain flickered behind his eyes and was gone.

He opened his eyes and looked around. He was aware that, physically, he had not gone anywhere, yet his perceived surroundings were different. It was marginally like being in a Pensieve. He stood in a dimly lit cavern: a cave both spacious and clean. Leaning against one wall of the cave was a polished sheet of bronze. A boy stood before it, examining his own reflection with rapt attention.

Severus could not recall seeing the boy before. His tunic and sandals were caked with mud and ill-kept, though the dagger at his belt looked serviceable enough. In the dim light, it was hard to tell if the urchin was fair skinned, or swarthy. His hair was disgracefully unkempt and jet black: the same colour as the eyes almost hidden by the intensity of his scowl. He could not have been more than ten years old, but he had the sullen wariness of one who was used to watching his back. Severus quietly empathised he knew the feeling. Suddenly, the boy grinned at his reflection, transforming himself into someone friendly and approachable.

With a stomach-churning lurch, he was back in the room in St. Mungo's. Oriens and Kingsley watched him anxiously, while Toby sat trembling like a beast awaiting slaughter. "This Llygad is different to its apparent twin," he stated.

His eyes locked on Toby. "How did you come by it?" he growled, holding the Llygad between them.

Toby scrambled out of his chair, looking wildly around the room. "No. I can't..."

"Minister, I think he's had enough," Oriens warned.

Kingsley nodded. "Perhaps we should leave it for now, but we really need to know where the Llygad comes from..."

"No!" Toby yelled, his voice crackling with fear as Severus tossed the Llygad to the centre of the table. "Not now, not ever! You can't make me go back there. I won't!" His eyes met those of his son for a split-second.

Severus struck like a viper. "*Legilimens!*" Following a steadily increasing trail of resistance, he soon found what he sought. Gradually, a familiar room came into focus. What he saw truly amazed him.

Pieces of the Puzzle

Chapter 11 of 32

The "Ghost City" is not as abandoned as Muggles believe. Severus sees something extraordinary in Tobias' memories and has trouble coming to terms with it. Hermione to the rescue! After a close call in St Mungo's, Toby finds himself in even more peculiar surroundings. News from the vaults does not bode well.

A/N's

Capere Latin: capture (on-line translator)

Somnus the Roman god of sleep

Pripyat a city near the Chernobyl nuclear power plant, northern Ukraine. In 1986, the city was abandoned after Chernobyl's reactor 4 suffered a series of catastrophic explosions in its core.

Golem: an animated human-like being created from inanimate matter. I have borrowed the concept from Jewish folklore and elaborated on it with the use of five elements (metal being contained in blood) in its creation.

Fred Brophy's boxing tent the last travelling boxing troupe in Australia and reportedly the world (the sport was supposedly banned in 1971, but not everybody took a great deal of notice).

Pugsley Addams is the property of the cartoonist Charles Addams, and I make no profit from his character.

Canon characters are the property of J.K. Rowling, and I make no money from them.

Historical thanks to Justice, who beta'd this chapter long ago. Present-day thanks to TeaOli for giving this chapter a thorough dusting and polishing.

On the outskirts of the "ghost city", Arawn stood and listened as the crack of his Apparition echoed back from deserted buildings and empty streets, eventually dying in the

cold, still air.

Having made certain that he was alone, he crossed a rust-stained bridge leading into the city. Muggles called it the "Bridge of Death", in honour of those who stopped to watch a nuclear disaster unfold and were fatally dosed with radiation. In the distance, the hulk of reactor number four presided over the abandoned city of Pripjat.

He paused in the empty square in front of what had been a gymnasium and waited. From the unglazed windows, a Dementor drifted down to meet him. "All is in order?" he asked.

The Dementor inclined its head.

"Good. Assemble them." The Dementor turned back to the empty building and vanished within its shadows. Arawn followed a short time later. He climbed a flight of stairs to a musty room where people had once practised floor routines. A rotting pommel horse occupied one corner, and the floor was strewn with the remains of exercise mats, rodent nests, and bird droppings.

Huddled together, their eyes bright with fear and restrained rebellion, a small band of Death Eaters watched him furtively. Arawn counted fifteen of them as he paced silently before the group. In terms of what was needed, he was sure their combined experience would be sufficient. One Death Eater broke the silence abruptly.

"Who are you? What do you want?"

Arawn turned to face the questioner, holding up one hand as a Dementor advanced.

The creature halted, but did not back down.

"Original questions, applicable to many situations," Arawn responded. "Luckily for you, *Travers*, I already intended to answer the second question." He addressed the Dementor out loud. "These will serve our purposes. Use the others as you will."

The Death Eaters watched as the Dementor moved to the centre of the floor. From doors at the far end, a small army of the creatures appeared. They clustered together for a moment before leaving the building.

"Before you even consider trying anything..." Arawn pointed upwards. More Dementors hovered among the massive steel girders supporting the roof. "We require your assistance in reaching our goal. We only needed one of your associates. One in particular. But it seems he is... unreachable. We find we cannot access what we need without him."

Amycus Carrow licked his lips nervously. "One of *our* associates? Who? And what do we get in return?"

"Severus Snape." Arawn waited for the murmur of surprise to die down. Amongst it, he caught the words "traitor" and "half-blood." A wave of hatred emanated from the group. *It appears they have the necessary motivation*, he thought. "In return for him, your lives."

The Dementor's voice ran cold through his mind. *They have hatred. They have desperation. It consumes them. They will serve our need.*

"What do you think he means by *we*?" Alecto hissed, tweaking her brother's arm to get his attention.

In spite of his confidence in his ability to bargain his way out of any situation, Amycus felt a deep sense of foreboding as he looked around the derelict gymnasium. Hidden behind him, his sister prodded him impatiently. He half-turned and gave a barely audible answer, indicating the girders with an upward flick of his eyes. "I think he means *them*."

Severus had witnessed many fights between his parents. Over time, he had realised their quarrels were, for the most part, not his fault but this knowledge did not bring him the slightest bit of comfort. When his instincts for self preservation began to tell him to fight back or to run to defend himself overtly or deploy a stealthy hex, he had done so with the feeling someone had poured molten lead into his heart. At least, he had until his grief gave way to anger and his anger settled into a relentless, seething hatred.

They were fighting again but this time it was very different. Toby was pinned to the wall, which did not stop him struggling. He was shouting, but not a sound could be heard. Severus realised his father was not so much shouting as screaming, his protests muffled by a Silencing Charm.

Looking to his mother, Severus froze in astonishment. Eileen was using her magic, wielding it with skill and precision without the use of a wand. It poured out of her in a torrent of white-hot power, pulsing with indomitable vitality. Her black eyes flashed fire, and her lank hair stirred with every movement and she moved with the grace of a dancer. He stared at her, transfixed. As she was in that moment, Eileen Snape was beautiful.

"Are you going to *listen*, or do I have to give you another taste of what I *carreally* do?" Eileen eyed her husband ferociously.

Toby clenched his teeth and shut his eyes.

"*Imperio!* Open your eyes, fool. This is bigger than both of us. Did you think I hadn't noticed when you took the Llygad y Ddraig from its hiding place? Did you think you would be safe wandering around the streets with it when the Dark Lord's spies are watching? I made sure you would be, though not from any concern for *you!* They never suspected a drunken lout of a Muggle might bear something of value and power. The Llygad was, is, *and will be*, relatively safe with of all beings on Earth your sterling self."

Eileen allowed her words to sink in before continuing in tones of hushed urgency. "Listen well, Toby. There are wizards and witches on their way here tonight, with powers and intentions more terrible than even I can imagine. I have *seen* them. They already have Severus.

"Oh, don't worry," she snapped sarcastically. "They haven't hurt him. Yet. He's one of them... until his Dark Lord has no further use for him. Severus must *never* take the Llygad y Ddraig. Do not ask why. Not that you can," she smirked. "Thankfully, he is not with those who are coming for us."

Her eyes grew cold and hard. "My brother died to keep the Llygad safe from those who would use it to work evil, and they will work evil on a scale not seen in this country since the days of Vortigern. It is likely that I will soon follow my brother through the Veil. For my weakness I must pay a high price, but I will pay it willingly. You, on the other hand, have a chance.

"Thanks to a deception arranged by my brother, the Dark Lord's servants will not even think to look for the Llygad. Until now, I have cast charms on you every day to shield it from perception and to make you forget you had it. Don't look so frightened, Toby. You would have exchanged it for your precious drink if you had remembered, wouldn't you?"

Eileen turned from him, her next words tinged with sadness. "I wish the thing never existed. Toby, this is the last time I can conceal the Llygad and you. After tonight, you will be on your own. Take the Llygad and get as far away from here as you can. The charms I have cast will last a night and a day. After the charms have faded, anyone with magic in their blood will sense the Llygad's presence, and they *will* investigate.

"What fate awaits the Llygad, I could not see; nor could I see a place in this land where you will find refuge. You must travel far over the sea. There will come a time when you will be discovered, but the outcome was not revealed." With a wave of her hand, Toby's slipshod clothing was transfigured into sturdy outdoor apparel suitable for a

traveller. "There is money and a passport in your jacket pocket. Stay away from the drink. Your life and the lives of many others now depends upon it." Eileen drew herself to her full height. "There is one more thing to be done."

Severus held his breath as Eileen began to chant. Even through the memory, he could feel the air of the room becoming painfully dry. Before the fireplace, a column of air thickened and swirled, shimmering like a heat haze. The pace of Eileen's chant quickened.

Droplets of moisture appeared in the column, coalescing until they formed a churning mass of water.

Eileen reached into her skirt pocket and withdrew a handful of soil. With a sharp exclamation, she threw it into the water, watching as it took on the consistency of thin mud.

She held up a splinter of wood. At a word, it ignited, and she sent it into the heart of the semi-liquid mess which was beginning to take a human-like shape.

She levelled her gaze at Toby.

Severus shivered when she produced a razor-sharp, silver knife. At her wordless command, Toby helplessly extended his left arm, holding his hand palm-up with his fingers splayed. Eileen quickly slashed the pad of his thumb. Severus swore under his breath as he looked from his mother to his father. He knew only too well that fear could kill a man. It was a wonder that Toby had not died there and then. Eileen levitated nine drops of blood from the wound and sent them, one after the other, into the restless agglomeration of elements.

Severus watched breathlessly. He had a theoretical knowledge of golems, but had never watched one come into existence. The golem rippled and quivered, then settled into a convincing replication of flesh and blood. Eileen traced invisible symbols across its forehead, and the golem began to move. Severus jumped when his mother spoke again.

"*Rennervate!*" She glared at Toby contemptuously as he groggily regained consciousness. Severus realised his father had fainted when the golem turned into his doppelganger. With a few terse words, the golem was clothed and in position, sprawled upon the horsehair sofa in an apparent drunken stupor.

"Charming sight, aren't you?" Eileen sneered at her husband. Toby stared at the golem in blank-minded horror. For a moment, the silence was absolute. Severus heard a tap dripping, the soft creak of a floorboard settling in his parents' bedroom, a dog barking in the distance.

Eileen looked up suddenly, sensing something unseen. "They come." She released Toby, stepping out of the way as he fell to the floor. She seized a handful of his hair and dragged him to his feet. "Run, you idiot," she snarled as she shoved him towards the back door.

Severus stood in the tiny, overgrown yard behind the house as Toby skidded to a stop in front of the lean-to where he used to tinker with various mechanical projects. He darted inside and emerged with an oiled canvas tool bag. Severus knew its significance: the tools were bequeathed to Toby by his own father, weeks before a torpedo in the English Channel ensured he would never come home again. Toby fitted the strap across his chest and moved towards the back fence, diving behind a stack of wooden pallets and a mass of thistles as a blinding flash illuminated the windows of the house.

The memory became a chaotic jumble of noise, punctuated by the sound of blows, curses, hexes, and agonized screams. The back door opened, and two masked Death Eaters emerged. One of them walked around the yard and checked inside the lean-to.

"There's nothing here."

"I insist I heard something."

Toby didn't dare breathe. Beside him, something stirred. A rat scampered past and, sensing the proximity of a human, bolted into the open. A fierce word, a flash, and the rat exploding in a mist of blood and fur. One of the Death Eaters laughed.

"The fearless Malfoy, spooked by a rat," he chortled.

"Shut up, you mindless troglodyte! Or do you wish to be next? Come, we shall set the scene as a murder-suicide for the local Muggle news. Our Lord will alert the Aurors himself as to what really happened. He desires to rub their noses in their own incompetence."

"What about the half-blood?"

"Lucius will inform him of this evening's events. The Dark Lord will then test him. He may prove useful for other sundry tasks until such time as our Lord's plan is fulfilled. You, my imbecilic acquaintance, will leave him alone."

"What's so important about *him*? He's..."

"Perhaps you would like to raise your concerns with the Dark Lord himself? No? How unexpectedly intelligent."

The two returned to the house, still sniping at each other. Toby waited until silence and stillness prevailed. Slowly, he crept to the back fence and located a small doorway set low to the ground. In the days before plumbing and indoor lavatories, it allowed the "midnight mechanic" to collect his unenviable payload without entering the premises. Toby wriggled through into a back lane strewn with rubbish and broken glass. Getting to his feet, he began to run, pausing only once to be violently sick.

Severus frowned at the fractured quality of the next memories. Evidently, Tobias had come perilously close to losing his sanity. Only a few clear images could be discerned: hiding under a jetty, a barge on the Irwell, the soporific rhythm of train travel, the noise and bustle of Portsmouth. Eventually, the memories began to display logical coherence. The Muggle's resilience had prevailed though his mind would certainly carry scars. Toby emerged from a Red Cross collection centre, having exchanged a pint of blood for a full stomach, and consulted a brochure with the word 'emigration' in the title.

The Dementor paused in its circumnavigation of St Mungo's. It sensed a fluctuation in the wards. It waited. The irregularity was minor but followed a predictable sequence. The Dementor turned to face its companion approaching from the opposite direction. The creatures exchanged information. The gap in the wards appeared again, and both Dementors slipped through unnoticed. They studied the hospital thoroughly, using sightless senses to form a map of the entire structure.

As a group of Healers headed eagerly for the tea-room, the grill covering a ventilation duct moved to one side. The Dementors entered the corridor and began to search. One picked up the trail very easily having been fed a very specific memory, it could sense the target's proximity. Slipping into a stairwell, it waited out of sight for an opportunity to act.

The other scouted for potential prey, retreating into storage cupboards or alcoves at any sign of human activity. How far it had travelled was irrelevant, but in one particular place, the Dementor came to an abrupt halt.

It could sense power. A lot of power. It tasted the air. Power, fear, anger, grief. Irresistibly drawn to the source of these emanations, the Dementor floated to the ceiling and moved towards two warm bodies that would no doubt block its path if they detected its presence. In the Dementor's experience, prey never thought to look *up* when indoors.

The guard Aurors shivered as the unseen predator approached, and complained to each other about the cold. "I'll go and check the renewal schedule for the temperature charms," one of them said, embarking on a long trek to the end of the corridor.

The Dementor waited until the vibration of footsteps faded. With the chosen victim now suitably isolated, it attacked.

Severus broke contact. Only one thought slashed through his awareness and it cut him to the heart *I never knew who she really was. She was a powerful witch and she did nothing...*

He was vaguely aware of Kingsley and Oriens. Their concerned voices barely registered through the white noise in his thoughts and the pounding rush of blood in his ears. Someone touched his arm, but it felt distant and detached through his numb flesh. Shaking off the contact, he made for the door, thinking only of getting outside.

He reacted with reflex and instinct before he even processed the sight of the Auror's struggles, wordlessly blasting the attacking Dementor with a sudden pulse of infrasound. The creature writhed like a rag in a tempest as the energy slammed into it, hurling it back while the Auror sagged against the wall.

A badger Patronus charged past, following the direction in which the Dementor had been flung.

Severus heard Kingsley shouting orders. St Mungo's alarm system began to sound in a series of urgent chimes. Grim-faced Healers and ancillary staff hurried to their assigned emergency positions with wands drawn.

Hermione frowned at the small mountain of literature in her room. The treatises on Polyjuice Potion variants were often contradictory. After a mere several hours' worth of scrutiny, she scorned some of the proposed theories. She doubted they counted as 'theories' at all, given the lack of supporting analysis. Sorting her notes and tucking them under her arm, she checked the time. Motivated by a sudden inspiration, she decided to see if Professor Addams would allow her to test some of the more prominent 'theories' with a spot of experimental brewing. She also wanted to prove to Severus that she was not afraid of visiting the circumstances of past mistakes and re-working them into something useful.

Even before the war, the dungeons had been usually quiet, but now they held a sense of chastened introspection. A Slytherin prefect gave her a terse nod without meeting her eyes. He then appeared to rouse himself and formally asked if she required assistance. Hermione shook her head, unable to think of anything to say. It was an unusual feeling to be in Slytherin territory and remain unchallenged, unprovoked, and un-hexed. She made her way to the Potions classroom. The door stood ajar, allowing a pool of light to spill out onto the flagstones. Before Hermione could knock, a gruffly genial voice greeted her.

"Miss Granger, come on in. What's on your mind?"

Hermione grinned, then gasped as she entered the classroom. A cauldron sat heating on one of the front benches, with Neville and none other than Draco Malfoy in studious attendance. "Good evening Professor, Neville... Draco."

Draco barely looked at her, muttering something as he carefully shredded a small pile of mugwort.

Professor Addams sighed patiently. "Mr Malfoy, I thought you had agreed to assist in re-establishing goodwill towards Slytherin House."

Draco shifted uncomfortably. "Yes, sir."

"Well, it seems to me that a glance and a mumble is no way to acknowledge a lady's presence."

Draco hesitantly raised his eyes. "Sir..."

"Mr Malfoy," Professor Addams urged, "the mugwort won't sprout legs and run away if you let it sit for a second or two."

Draco put his knife down and stiffly gathered what once was his dignity. "Good evening, Miss Granger," he said with a half-bow. He stood awkwardly. The haughty grace and disdainful bearing he had been raised to display seemed to have completely deserted him.

Hermione felt a wave of compassion. "Thank you, Draco. Please use my first name; it isn't as though we are strangers." She gave a warm smile as Draco suspiciously appraised her. He swallowed thickly and turned back to his mugwort. Professor Addams gave him a light pat on the back and gestured to Hermione to follow him into the office.

"Small steps, but significant ones," he said, offering her a chair. He levitated a child's puzzle book off the floor with a long-suffering grumble about kids leaving stuff everywhere. "My youngest was down here for a pre-nap visit," he explained with quiet affection.

Hermione smiled at the sight of the brightly coloured book now adorning the bookshelf a sharp and lively contrast to the solemn bindings of scholarly volumes. "It is a surprise to see Neville and Draco working together. Do they get on?"

"They do, now that they've gotten past the walking-on-eggshells stage. I'm tackling two problems at once with that pair. So far, it's working out better than expected." He studied Hermione's expectant expression for a moment. "Oh, all right. Mr Longbottom needs to build some Potions muscle if he wants to make the most of his Herbology apprenticeship. Mr Malfoy could do his Potions lab-work at home, but I figured he'd be better off facing a few demons and maybe making some new friends instead of moping around on his own. Besides, he *really* needs to get away from his mom's apron strings but you didn't hear that from *me*.

"He knows what he's doing in a laboratory and has a recently discovered talent for teaching: he's showing Mr Longbottom how to brew without the boom. In return, Mr Malfoy is now on conversational terms with a very generous and decent young man. I merely supervise and answer questions."

Professor Addams frowned appraisingly as he pocketed a pink-sequined Puffskein harness which had somehow become entangled with his quills. "Mr Malfoy believes all he has left in the world is the prospect of a completed education. He's not even sure he'll get a chance to use it. Your kind words to him just now did more good than he realises."

He eyed Hermione's bundle of notes with interest. "Okay, down to business. What have you discovered, and how do you propose to test it?"

Elated with the prospect of sharing supervised brewing sessions with Neville and Draco, Hermione hurried to see if Severus was in his rooms. Before she even reached the door, she knew Severus was not, as he put it, in the best frame of mind. The door's carved eagle faced the gallery with empty talons. He was not there.

Hermione almost ran back to the Gryffindor Tower, thinking hard as she dodged students and excused herself from potential conversations. Locking herself in and warding the door, she gave herself a moment to gather what was needed.

The first thing to do was easy. Water, a heating charm, and a spoonful of the Duboisia extract Severus had prepared for her. The second thing was a little daunting. Casting her Patronus was only part of it she was not sure if she still had one. If she did, could it take a corporeal form? She knew Severus had used his Patronus to lead Harry to Godric Gryffindor's sword. Could she instruct her Patronus to find Severus, then come back and lead her to wherever he was?

Deep breath, relax, focus. She thought of how *right* she felt when Severus was with her, concentrating on the sense of wholeness and strength he brought to her war-buffed soul. She allowed the feeling to intensify until it tingled in her blood and...

"*Expecto Patronum!*" A jet of silvery light poured out of her wand and swirled indistinctly for a moment. Hermione's heart pounded as she watched the light gather itself and circle the room. "Oh! Wings! You have wings," she called out to it excitedly.

Her new Patronus gained brightness and definition. With a squeak of delight, Hermione held out her arm, and a small falcon landed on her wrist. "Look at you," she breathed. "You're beautiful! You're... a merlin!" She had seen one of these compact, robust birds riding the breezes not far from the Forbidden Forest. Hagrid had proudly told her there were two of them. He hoped they were a bonded pair, but hadn't managed to get close enough to tell. There was also one represented in a tapestry near

Severus' rooms: a small hunting scene where humans mounted on unicorns rode side by side with centaurs. The humans were part of a royal family, judging by their dress and the fact that one carried an eagle on his arm only kings could hunt with eagles. Behind him rode a young man with a peregrine falcon. Hermione assumed he was a prince. The prince appeared to be chatting up a laughing damsel with a merlin gripping her gauntleted wrist.

Chewing her lower lip, Hermione took her broom and checked outside. The Tower was empty of students. The evening meal would begin very soon. It seemed everyone had gone to the Great Hall to find their seats. She swiftly made her way downstairs, her merlin holding out its ethereal wings to keep its ethereal balance. She felt sure Severus would be somewhere outside.

Exiting the castle, she scrambled to the top of a low hill. "Well, here goes..." She held Severus' image in her mind, then visualised the merlin leading her to Severus. Concentrating intensely, she sent the images to her Patronus.

The merlin bobbed its head once and glared at her as though waiting for something.

"What?" she asked, wondering what else was required. Comprehension dawned. "Oh, I get it." She raised her arm and the merlin took flight. It soared high above the Great Hall and vanished behind the silhouettes of the towers.

After what seemed an eternity, her Patronus swooped towards her and executed an agile turn. As Hermione urged her broom aloft, her merlin streaked ahead and threw a barrel-roll, leading her to wonder if it was pleased to have her as a flying companion. She followed the glowing falcon across the grounds. The gloom of the Forbidden Forest loomed, and Hermione exhaled with relief when her Patronus banked gracefully to the right and began a descent over the lake. It flew low, swift, and straight, heading for...

"Dumbledore's tomb," Hermione muttered anxiously. The merlin settled on the edge of the tomb and shuffled its wings. Hermione achieved a perfect landing, for once, and propped her broom against a tree. "Severus?" She heard a sharp intake of breath and tracked its origin to the far side of the tomb.

She found her wizard sitting with his back against the cold marble. He raised his head as she approached, his obsidian eyes expressionless and frighteningly empty. *Oh, Severus.* She knelt in front of him and grasped his hands, apprehension fading as she realised he was not going to send her away. Deducing that no amount of questioning would draw him out of his internal fortress, she simply sat with him until he decided to move or speak.

It grew steadily colder. A mist formed over the lake and began to creep towards the shore, tumbling over itself in slow motion as it sent delicate tendrils through reeds and grasses.

"The merlin is yours?" Severus asked quietly. His voice seemed oddly disembodied from the rest of him.

Hermione squeezed his hands. "Yes, it is. My new Patronus is a merlin. Tonight was the first time I cast it since my otter faded. I wasn't sure if I still could cast a Patronus, that is let alone get it to lead me to you."

"There has been a veritable zoo of ethereal creatures arriving with messages. I thought Minerva only had three cats. She sent five of them. All at once."

"She is probably worried about you. Did any of them spray on the tomb?"

Severus gave a half-hearted snort. "Not that I am aware of." He stared out over the lake for a moment. "European otters are solitary creatures."

"Are they?" Hermione questioned, wondering what had brought this statement into the open. *Ottery Street*, she thought, considering the locale of the Weasley home. *I wonder if that is what gave my first Patronus its shape. Or was it because I felt alone so much of the time a solitary creature? Even with Ron, I felt... separate, different. I don't feel any of those things with Severus.* She put the thought aside to consider at a later date. "I saw Molly Weasley today. She was visiting Ginny, and I ran into her unexpectedly."

"And?"

"She seemed to look past me, or through me, it was hard to tell. I've been avoiding her because of... you know. But I can see she is grieving for Fred, and she is frightened for George. Ginny says he hardly speaks anymore. I guess I am either *persona non grata*, or Molly has much more pressing things to worry about. Perhaps a bit of both." Hermione sighed. "I'd been expecting Howlers and all sorts of accusatory messages, but nothing ever happened."

"Nor should it." Severus closed his eyes. "I believe you made the right decision."

Hermione shifted to sit beside him, appropriating his arm and placing it over her shoulders so she could press close to his side. "So do I." The mist had crept almost to their feet, and the air was now damp and bitterly cold. Severus flexed his fingers as she cast a Warming Charm. He gazed at the sky and a gathering mass of cloud.

"I used Legilimency on him. I saw my mother the night she..." He shook his head. "I never knew who she really was. She was a powerful witch, and she never let me see it."

"Why didn't she use her power? She could have defended herself and... she could have... we could have... *Why* did she let *everything* collapse around her?"

Severus ground his teeth. "I suppose nothing *mattered* to her. Including me. I didn't matter here, either. I once thought that Hogwarts would provide a chance for me to belong somewhere and to build a better life after the lost cause that was Spinner's End. I simply found out how expendable I was and that a person alone, without allies, is considered fair game for peoples' most vicious tendencies."

"People like... James... *Potter* and his verminous sidekicks. Oh, I had seen their ilk before. The salubrious surroundings of Spinner's End abounded with them. People who think they can get away with anything and everything. Especially when the object of their attention is someone who they believe has no place in the world and no right to exist. It appears my own mother had the same belief. Perhaps, in her opinion, I should never have been born."

Alarmed and dismayed, Hermione squeezed his thigh. "You matter to *me*. I cannot answer your questions, but I can promise you, you matter to me more than anyone else on Earth. Perhaps, if you will allow me, I can convince you that you are definitely *not* expendable and I consider your existence a blessing?" She fell silent as tears welled in her eyes.

Moving slowly, Severus took her hand and pressed each of her fingers to his lips.

Hermione felt wetness on his cheek as she turned his face towards hers. She studied him for a moment. "I think you need to sit before a good fire for a while. Sorry, I'm bossing you again, aren't I?"

Severus gave a barely perceptible nod, then glanced at her hesitantly. "Stay with me," he murmured, then hurriedly added, "I'm not asking you to... do anything... I..." He sighed and shook his head slightly, causing his hair to cover his eyes. "Never mind."

Hermione jostled him gently until he stood up. "I know. You don't have to explain," she said, taking his arm. "Shall we head back? I need to get my circulation moving, and you have been sitting there longer than I have." Together, they walked back to the castle, Hermione's broom hovering behind them.

As they passed through the Entrance Hall, Hermione spotted Minerva keeping vigil and signalled the Headmistress to remain silent. With a puzzled frown of concern, Minerva nodded reluctantly, her eyebrows nearly vanishing beneath the brim of her hat when she noticed their clasped hands.

So it is true, Minerva thought. *Severus, you dark horse! Although, it does take two...* She shrugged as she watched the couple until they passed through a doorway and out of sight. *Two of Hogwarts' bravest and brightest.*

In St Mungo's, everything was quiet. The night staff patrolled in pairs, exchanging purposeful glances with Aurors. After the expulsion of a Dementor, the protective wards had been examined and repaired. Nonetheless, everyone was on edge. They did not know their vigilance was justified. They had no idea *two* Dementors had gained access to the building.

The undiscovered creature emerged from its hiding place in the boiler-room, having found the stairwell distinctly uncomfortable when a hedgehog Patronus came dangerously close. The alarm chimes had irritated the Dementor beyond endurance, and it had fled to the bowels of the hospital. Keeping to the shadows, the Dementor scanned every corridor before passing along it.

It paused and sampled the air. Like motes of dust, it could taste the scattered relics of its evicted comrade's thwarted purpose. Something had been found. Something irresistible. Its original mission aborted for the moment, the Dementor followed the new trail. It probed a particularly powerful set of wards strung across a corridor. Warm bodies stood beyond, guarding the promising throb of power which lay behind a closed door.

The Dementor backtracked, pushing open a door to a bathroom. Drifting up to the ceiling, it examined an inspection hatch which provided access to the cavity between the ceiling and the floor of the next level.

Having consumed an entire pound of chocolate and enough tea to slake a camel's thirst, Toby could not decide whether he felt plausibly human again or slightly sick. At least his headache had eased, and his thoughts had ceased to flit around in uncontrollable random fragments.

"If yer bloody magic don't kill me, diabetes will," he growled, scrunching the chocolate wrapper into a ball and lobbing it into a waste-parchment basket at the other end of the room. He got up and collected the Llygad from where Severus had left it. "I 'aven't felt any urge to pick it up," he told Oriens. "I don't think I'd miss it if it were gone." He rubbed his thumb over the crystal disc. "What does this thing do, anyway? Eileen never said."

Oriens gave a silent prayer of thanks. Tobias was not about to succumb to his recent tribulations, physically or mentally *Buddha's Breakfast and Merlin's Muses! I knew Muggles could be tough, but he's in a league of his own.* "I don't know, but it does contain a tremendous source of power. Hence we must keep it from falling into the wrong hands."

"Like that bloke you mentioned... What's 'is name...? Arawn?"

Oriens nodded. "If Severus can find out what the Llygad actually is, we may be able to discern its use. From there, we can take an educated guess as to what Arawn wants with its companion piece in the vaults. Though Severus did say the two were different in some way."

"Eileen only ever mentioned one this one. Two of 'em?" Toby scowled as he tried to force his mind into some form of order, with transitory success. "God's Teeth, the sod fairly shredded me. Sev'rus won't get into trouble on my account, will 'e? Far as I'm concerned, it was chooks comin' back to roost, if you follow my meanin'."

Oriens grinned. "Severus isn't in trouble the Minister heard you loud and clear. But somehow, somewhere along the way, I think a few of your chickens turned into emus."

"And proceeded to kick the crap outta me." Toby shrugged stoically. He had taken a heavier pounding in Fred Brophy's boxing tent though it was not a bad effort to last five rounds with a bloke who could shear four hundred Merino ewes in a day. Having experienced Eileen's power, and from what he had read of Severus' reported activities, Toby figured his son could have easily inflicted far worse damage if he had chosen to. *God knows, I gave the lad reasons enough* "Y' reckon 'e really saw my memories?"

"Severus is a powerful Legilimens, as in 'reading minds'. He would have watched your memories as easily as watching television."

Toby rubbed his arms as he tried to avoid thinking about it. "I believe 'im when 'e said 'e wasn't behind the attack. Sev'rus left pretty sudden though, eh? Didn't look too good either."

Oriens thought for a moment, reading the hesitant concern within Tobias' sparse statements. He decided not to mention Severus' timely intervention with respect to a Dementor. "I believe him, too. He has not answered any messages, but I'm sure he will respond when he is ready. The Minister liaised with the Headmistress of the school where Severus is staying and heard that neither he nor Miss Granger showed up for dinner.

"Miss Granger and Severus seem to have formed a close friendship, though the Minister says there is more to it a lot more. He was adamant that if she has gone in search of Severus, she will find him and bring him back alive. Besides," Oriens added with an enigmatic smile, "I believe Severus has some questions for me."

Toby frowned. "What's the lass' name again?"

"Miss Granger Hermione Granger."

Toby trawled through his memory, finding it still skittish and elusive after Severus' "shredding". *Granger... The Granger place Eddie was tellin' me about. Shit a brick! That's what Diesel was lookin' at. What's the bet she's the granddaughter, and she was there that day. Of all the shifty bloody... So that's 'ow they found me.*

"Tobias? Is something wrong?"

"Eh? Nah. Nothin's wrong. I deal with stuff like this every flamin' day. I'm used to it." As he finished speaking, Toby felt a slight and sudden drop in temperature. He stood up, tucking the Llygad back into his belt pocket. "Did you feel that?"

Oriens shook his head in answer to the whispered question, but was ready to take any alert seriously. Without uttering a word, he handed Toby's knife back to him and moved around the room in a methodical search for anything out of the ordinary.

Toby's hands clenched and his wrists instinctively locked as he sensed something else: the metallic, airless hiatus that always happened before a fight, seconds before the first punch was thrown and all hell broke loose. He watched warily as Oriens tensed near the chair he had been sitting in, drew his wand, and...

"*Eads up!*" Toby yelled as a large section of plaster warped, cracked, and broke loose from the ceiling. Oriens sprang clear and raised his wand. Toby blinked as he thought he saw a bright light stream out of it.

Something else was in the room. Toby could not see what it was, but it felt like a distant weight pressing on his mind: slowing, deadening, chilling. Oriens' attention was focused on something in the corner, his entire body shaking with the effort of holding whatever it was in place. Toby wrenched himself into action and hammered at the door. "Guard!" he shouted, feeling foolish and theatrical at the same time. He jumped to one side as the Aurors burst through the door. One stood protectively in front of him and two more joined Oriens. Toby had no idea why, but they cried "*Expecto Patronum, Capere!*" at the same time.

Hermione stretched, enjoying the warmth of the fire on her bare feet. Severus sat beside her on a generously padded leather sofa, nursing a glass of Firewhisky. It had taken some time for Severus to emerge from his insular brooding and begin to relate the events of the afternoon. Hermione noticed he kept to the intellectual aspects of what he had seen, avoiding anything leading to emotion. "The way you say the boy was dressed... It sounds Roman," she said.

"Roman with a Celtic influence. His dagger was definitely in the Celtic style." Severus watched the flames as though he were scrying for a repeat of the image.

"He sounded a bit like you."

Severus gave her a *don't-be-absurd* scowl. "I can assure you, I have never seen him before. I have no clue as to his identity."

Hermione scowled back, wishing Severus had allowed her to write down what he had seen in Tobias' memories. She was absolutely exhausted and her reasoning was beginning to fray. "Severus?"

"Yes, Hermione?" His free arm circled her as she curled snugly against him.

"Do you think there were two Llygads all along? I mean, the one in the vaults is reportedly ancient. Were they both made at the same time?"

"I cannot say without examining them further. As I said, one could be a copy of the other." Severus' eyes narrowed as he sat up. "Oh, gods."

"What is it?" Hermione took the glass of Firewhisky from his hand and sampled it cautiously.

Severus' eyes bored into hers as he arranged pieces of information into a readable pattern. "She said, 'Thanks to a deception arranged by my brother, the Dark Lord's servants will not even think to look for the Llygad.' A *deception*... and her brother..."

"Your uncle," Hermione could not help saying as she handed the glass back to him.

"Died to keep it safe. Let us assume the *deception* is a duplicate Llygad a forgery carried by... my uncle. Obviously, his death allowed Riddle to gain possession of what he thought was the real item.

"The Death Eater on whom the *assumed* duplicate was found was Alroy Crevan. He came off second best in a fight to the death with Aurors, not long after... the Potter murders. Crevan was a close associate of Abraxas *Malfoy* and one of Riddle's most trusted advisors. From Crevan's body, the forgery found its way to the vaults.

"From what Kingsley told me, in addition to the artefact's documented history, an Unspeakable, Arawn, developed an unhealthy obsession with it. He only ceased experimenting with it when he was sent to babysit Dementors. Evidently, he never let it go." *And he mentioned my name in anger the last time he examined the Llygad. He must know of the family connection, but how?* "If the vault Llygad really is a counterfeit, it is an absolute masterpiece."

Hermione shivered at the thought of Dementors. Putting them out of her mind, she rapidly summarised the information. "On those assumptions, the Llygad Tobias has is the real one. But who made the duplicate, and when? What did Voldemort want with it?"

Severus shook his head, suddenly looking more fatigued than Hermione had surmised. "I will think about those questions in the morning." Silent fury briefly flickered in his eyes, matching the reflection of the flames. "I never knew..." he snarled quietly. "She told me *nothing*."

He's hurting, Hermione thought, detecting an undercurrent of pain in his words. "About your uncle?"

"All *she* told me of the Prince family was of their impressively long bloodline, and that they are all deceased. Of course, she told me nothing of the Llygad."

"*All* of them?" Hermione wondered how such a thing could happen.

"Except her, at the time. And me. An ancient lineage was the only source of pride I could lay claim to for many years." Severus finished the Firewhisky and placed the glass carefully on the table. "The first time I met Riddle in person, he told me some of my ancestors turned to the Dark Arts centuries ago. He said they were outstanding practitioners and he had studied their work with interest. From him, I learned of a rift within the Prince family, between those who stayed with the Light and those who followed darker paths. Over time, as familial factions will, they gradually dwindled with a little help from each other."

Severus stood and began to pace in front of the fire. "She said I must never take the Llygad. When she said those words, I was firmly allied with Riddle. 'Evil on a scale not seen since the days of Vortigern', she said. Perhaps this would have been the outcome if Riddle had used the thing." *Or if he planned to order me to use it for him* He shuddered when he considered the power Riddle could have wielded with the Elder Wand and whatever lay within the Llygad y Ddraig.

Hermione shifted uneasily. "Vortigern. Why does that name have an unsettling sound to it? Well, you have taken the Llygad, in a way, and you are not serving the Dark. If you ever were to access its power, I'm sure it would be in safe hands."

Severus gave her a half-smile which revealed as much sadness as it did gratitude for her vote of confidence. Warily, he sat down again. "I suppose I should report to the Ministry and arrange to pay Lucius a visit in Chateau Azkaban. I hope he will be forthcoming if indeed he knows anything. He may have been just another benighted pawn in Riddle's plans."

Hermione wrapped her arms around him. "Not yet. In the morning. Right now, we both need some sleep." She yawned as he held her close. The next thing she was aware of was a soft pillow beneath her head and a goose-down quilt being carefully tucked around her. She opened her eyes to see Severus leaving the bedroom. "Where are you going?" she murmured sleepily.

Severus paused, turned, and leaned uneasily against the door jamb.

Hermione persisted. "I said we *both* need a good night's sleep, not that one of us should be less than comfortable in your study. This is not a single bed; I'm sure you have noticed."

Severus shrugged and looked at the floor.

"Severus, I don't expect you to do anything either. At least, not tonight. Next time I will not let you off so easily," she added, with more nerve than she actually felt. *Oh, that was worth it*, she thought, enjoying the thrill of his instant, undivided, and slightly disbelieving attention.

Severus spent a moment trying to convince himself Hermione did not really mean what she had just said. He gave it up as futile exercise when he realised she was looking at him in a way no woman had ever looked at him before. From *his* bed. "I *will* hold you to that last statement, witch," he growled softly. "If you dare."

"I was rather hoping you would," she fired back, sending his mind into freefall and his senses into a blissful chaos of anticipation. "By the way, I most definitely dare."

Severus quickly rounded up his galloping thoughts and bundled them behind a wall of Occlumency. He crossed the room to the wardrobe, faced with a problem he never thought he would encounter what to wear?

His old, grey nightshirt caught his eye. He silently vowed to burn the thing. It brought to mind endless nights plagued with hopeless longing and torturous nightmares. Of waking alone to day after day of living his life on a guilt-ridden knife-edge made slippery with barely repressed anger. No, he would not wear it again. Ever.

Ransacking his top drawer, he unearthed a pair of boxer shorts. *Close, but no cigar*, he thought. While safely hidden in the warmer climes of Australia, he had discovered that sleeping in what he considered to be underwear was more comfortable than he would have expected. It had been a decision of necessity rather than choice; there had been nothing else available. He had continued his new tradition to date remembering to cast a Warming Charm on the sheets before getting into bed.

Severus deliberated. Aware of his need to pace himself and not make foolish mistakes in haste, he decided the time was not yet right to parade around in the next best thing to nothing. Grabbing a couple of items, he took refuge in the bathroom. After a few transfigurations, he had something very suitable.

He rolled his eyes as he changed into a simple pair of black pyjamas. Shiny black buttons and a touch of white at collar and cuffs had manifested without his conscious intention.

Feeling more like himself, Severus took a deep breath and stalked into the bedroom. Hermione lay on her back with her hands behind her head and her eyes closed. Severus allowed himself a sheepish grin. He had taken so long fussing over nightwear, she had fallen asleep again. She, too, had engaged in some transfiguration. Severus was relieved to see a modest result, rather than something provocatively skimpy or the Powers forbend something resembling her school uniform.

He quietly slid under the covers and wondered what to do next. Propping himself on one elbow, he drank in the sight of her for a moment, then leaned over and softly kissed her. A warm hand trailed through his hair as she stirred and kissed him back. Severus wandlessly extinguished the sconces and opened the curtains, allowing sight of a night sky piled with clouds and illuminated by pale flickers of sheet lightning. They watched the display until Somnus gave them his blessing.

"Minister, this is highly irregular. In fact, such a thing has never been done before in the entire history of Hogwarts." Minerva nibbled on a piece of shortbread while she considered Kingsley's request. She was fully aware that if she refused, Kingsley could upgrade the request to an order. It was a sign of the respect he held for her that he proposed to negotiate a strategy rather than dictate an action.

"I will hold myself personally responsible if anything goes wrong, Headmistress. The wards system of St Mungo's is strong enough to sustain the occasional attack, but if Dementors persist in seeking entry, I am not sure how well our very thinly stretched resources can prevent them. Two of them got in today without anyone knowing."

"I assumed, from what you have told me, they were after Dolohov, not Tobias Snape."

"Apparently. Before he passed out again, Dolohov said a Dementor had been tailing him for weeks. He suspected it was trying to force him to cross the Channel into Europe. He did what he could to escape, but it kept wearing him down, not letting him sleep or eat. When another Dementor joined the first..." Kingsley frowned and sighed. "All he remembers after that is running until he got to St Mungo's."

"Pursuing him until he dropped?" Minerva sipped her tea. "It sounds like the opening scenes from the novel *White Fang*."

"Ah, Jack London's work. I remember that scene, where the wolves wore down their quarry over days of relentless harrying. We have moved Dolohov to the infirmary in Azkaban; he should be safe enough there until we get him to trial."

"Quite. But how is your Muggle involved in all this?"

"Tobias has a powerful magical object in his possession. We are not yet sure of what it is or what it does, but we are certain Voldemort had an interest in it, which is reason enough to be vigilant. Based on a rarely quoted theory that Dementors can sense latent power, I think at least one of the invaders inadvertently picked up on it and tried to get closer."

"To do what?"

Kingsley shrugged expansively. "Nobody really knows if Dementors can access external sources of magical power, or what they might do with it once they get it. The only documented observations we have involve attraction to strong emotions particularly anger, hatred, and grief. Personally, I do not think I would like to find out what Dementors are capable of if they were to access the kind of power we believe lies within the Llygadyddraig."

Minerva nodded slowly. "Hogwarts' wards incorporate recently upgraded devices to keep Dementors out. The maintenance is rather energy intensive. We have so many students who have lost one or both parents, as well as sisters, brothers, and friends. Poppy has taken on two specialised Healers to deal with the emotional fallout alone: the very emotions said to attract the creatures in the first place. I suspect we are the most Dementor-proof location in the world at the moment. Very well, Minister. We shall give Tobias refuge within our walls. But here be dragons: how do you intend to handle Severus' reaction?"

"With every ounce of my diplomatic skill. Severus and I have things to discuss anyway. I need him to bring forward his timetable for instructing the Aurors in the second method of defence against Dementors. All Hogwarts' staff members and senior students should learn it too, as a matter of urgency. I have a gut feeling we need to move on this quickly."

"So there are two ways to repel Dementors? Severus mentioned it once at a staff meeting when he was Headmaster, but nobody believed him. Nobody trusted him." Minerva bit her lip before adding, "Including me."

"He saved an Auror's life with it today," Kingsley stated emphatically. He drained his teacup and pocketed an extra piece of shortbread. "As an afterthought to the management of Severusian dragons, perhaps it may be wise to engage Miss Granger's assistance?"

"Yes. I believe Miss Granger is in a position to give him something else to think about," Minerva responded dryly.

"So it would seem," Kingsley replied, poker-faced.

Barely an hour later, Toby silently followed Oriens, the Minister for Magic, and Headmistress McGonagall through the cold, draughty halls of a castle of impossible proportions. For all the strangeness of his surroundings, he could not get over one very obvious fact: some witches really did wear pointed hats.

Hermione woke slowly, savouring the scent of freshly brewed coffee. She opened her eyes to find Severus standing apprehensively by the bed, a steaming mug of the coveted substance in his hands. "Ooh, lovely," she said, sitting up to accept the proffered beverage. "Did you sleep well? I don't usually move around too much. I hope I didn't disturb you."

Severus gave a small smile. "If you moved at all, I was too out of it to notice. Therefore, yes, I slept well."

He would keep to himself the fact that he had never before shared his sleeping arrangements with anyone. Asleep, he would have been too vulnerable a dangerous thing for a young Death Eater who knew he had enemies, and in later years, it would have been an even more dangerous thing for a spy with enemies watching his every move.

It had been risky enough engaging in very occasional "business transactions", even though he had always Polyjuiced himself as a different person and had used various assumed names. He had never eaten, or drunk, anything on offer. And he had always left immediately afterwards before the physical satiation subsided and he began to wonder what it would be like with someone he actually felt something for. Feeling cheated, and smouldering with resentment, he would scrub his skin raw and down enough Firewhisky to dull the emptiness that clawed its way up from his gut to his heart. Like a malicious spirit, the emptiness would laugh at him and taunt him, telling him he would be alone and despised forever the flawed product of an utterly pointless existence.

For the first time in his life he had woken, feeling completely at peace, in the arms of a witch who meant everything to him. He realised the emptiness had been banished from its lair, and to his awestruck surprise, he knew how it had been routed:

Love *shared* was the power that sent it away the power that restored and healed, supported and shielded, gave and received. *To love, and be loved powerful magic indeed*, he had concluded.

Enthralled with this wondrous discovery, he had watched Hermione sleeping until the sun broke through the clouds and banished the half-light of a grey Saturday mid-

morning. Then he had reluctantly dragged himself into the bathroom for a cold shower which, by then, was very necessary.

Hermione tugged his sleeve. "Earth to Severus! Are you aware you look rather nice when you are asleep?" *One dare down, one to go.*

Severus sat on the edge of the bed. "When did you reach *that* conclusion? I believe *I* was watching *you*."

Hermione smiled as she put her coffee on the bedside table. She toyed with the buttons of his shirt. "It was ages ago, after we left the Shrieking Shack and discussed the magical abilities of phoenix-kind. I nodded off, woke later on, and found you in the front room. It was a shame to wake you. You looked so peaceful."

"I remember," Severus mused, rubbing the scars on his neck.

Hermione reached out to cover his hand. "Do they hurt?"

"A tinge every now and then," he admitted, allowing Hermione to pull his collar aside and examine the marks closely. "As you can see, Nagini did not leave me any more disfigured than I already am."

Hermione lightly cuffed his ear. "Don't be ridiculous! You are not disfigured now or ever." Her eyes narrowed playfully. "Were you fishing for compliments?"

"I never fish," he protested loftily.

"And you have never heard of drying charms. Your hair is still wet," she scolded teasingly as she ruffled him into a more familiar state of disorder.

With a loud *pop*, Kingsley's Patronus interrupted Severus' retaliations. Hermione exchanged a worried glance with him as the silver lynx flattened its tufted ears and arched its back to emphasise the urgency of its message.

Kingsley had received a signal from Petrus. He and Oriens had gone down to the vaults into a scene of great agitation.

Arawn had taken the 'other Llygad' and he had not acted alone. Through chattering teeth, Petrus said something had followed the Unspeakable. He described it as a 'wraith from the valley of the shadow of Death'. Whatever it was drank the warmth from the air, and Petrus was sure it would 'devour the living light of the soul'.

A Slightly Arduous Mission – part 1

Chapter 12 of 32

Thanks to the centaurs' sharp eyes, something has been seen loitering outside the wards. Severus takes Hermione on a slightly arduous mission. Toby gets bored and has some curious encounters.

A/N's

Bacon buttie bacon sandwich

"Never learned 'owt" did not learn anything

When Toby switches to Mancunian, he pronounces the 'g' in words ending in it. When he uses his adopted 'Strayân' (Australian) dialect, he drops them along with most of his aitches.

Canon characters are the property of J.K. Rowling. I make no money from them.

Special thanks and bravery awards to TeaOli for beta-magic in spite of natural disasters. Historical thanks to Justice, who read this chapter long ago.

Concealing a Dementor from detection was an energy-sapping process, but well worth the effort. Arawn felt the creature's interest in the Llygad a deep, aggressive yearning for the power within the disc of blue crystal as soon as the stone chest was opened. The Dementor's hunger throbbed in Arawn's veins alongside his own excitement, enhancing his sense of surety that the Llygad was worth a lifetime of pursuit.

For a moment, he released the Dementor from its concealment, allowing it to roam freely around the vault. Using senses Arawn could not begin to understand, the Dementor examined the Llygad closely and attempted to touch it. Arawn jealously forbade it, feeling a flare of resistance from the Dementor as it slowly retreated. The Dementor turned its attention to the vault's gargoyle. Arawn assumed this was merely a fit of pique at being denied the Llygad. He had seen the gargoyle so often that its existence had ceased to register. He assumed it had been carved out of the rock when the vaults were made: some long dead stonemason's way of saying, "I was here". The gargoyle itself certainly wasn't worth anything more than passing curiosity.

Back in his office, Arawn removed the Llygad y Ddraig from a small leather pouch and held it up to the light. Having extensive knowledge of how artefact clearance procedures were constructed, it had been an easy, though painstaking, task to override them and remove it from the vault.

After all this time, he was sure he would soon master the artefact's secrets secrets concerning Merlin himself. Why else would Voldemort have valued it? Now, Arawn needed Snape to come out of his fortress, willingly or not, and place the Llygad y Ddraig in the hand of the statue of Myrddin. Arawn was certain this would be the action that would unlock the Llygad's power. He dropped it back into the pouch and shivered with feverish anticipation. "I will leave this place shortly," he told the Dementor waiting quietly in the corner. "What is the news from Hogwarts?"

Heavily guarded. Strong walls block our senses. We cannot reach him.

"The Death Eaters keep watch?"

They watch. They wait. His movements are unpredictable. He is never alone.

Arawn clenched his teeth. "Very well. You know where to find me. Dismissed."

The Dementor retreated through the old Floo connection. It followed a well-known path down into the sewers. It sent a call only its own kind could hear down the warren of

dark, dripping passages. Within minutes, the foetid air thronged with the creatures. They paid close attention as important information was conveyed.

Upon Toby's arrival at the castle, and while showing him his rooms, Minerva-of-the-pointed-hat gave multiple warnings that, at Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry, magic was a matter of course: he would just have to get used to it.

Relying on Oriens' reassurances, Toby braced himself for an unavoidable expedition into the unknown. Still, on Saturday morning, it had been something of a shock to discover that his unspoken hankering for a bacon buttie with brown sauce had materialised into edible reality while he was in the shower. Furthermore, someone or *something* had made his bed, cleaned the grate in the fireplace, and replenished the fuel. His clothes had also been attended to, with a missing button replaced and a frayed cuff meticulously mended. Toby, who had never ironed anything in his life, noted they were pressed to perfection.

Soon after breakfast, he had received a visitor: an elderly, no-nonsense witch who insisted he address her as Poppy and insisted on calling him Tobias. Poppy did not enlighten him with respect to his unseen attendant, saying she had only stopped by to see how he was doing. She took his pulse at three points on each wrist and counted the number of breaths he took in one minute. She informed him that he showed some minor signs of stress probably brought on by exposure to unusual circumstances.

No kiddin', Toby had thought, keeping still as Poppy waved her wand around, muttered strange formulations, and hummed in satisfaction as she stated that unlike most males, he was doing a reasonable job in looking after himself. She produced a square, green bottle from her apron pocket and instructed him to take one teaspoonful of its contents after every meal. She assured him it contained no alcohol and it would help him "settle down".

Nearly twenty-four hours later, Toby had to admit he was in better spirits. Suspended between dread and intrepidity, he watched his empty breakfast bowl intently. The porridge it had contained was by far the best he had ever eaten, and he wanted a second helping. He manfully downed the rest of his pumpkin juice, thinking it would benefit from a touch of ginger syrup, and silently dared the magic to happen right in front of him.

A soft fluttering against the windows caught his attention. For a moment, he watched autumn leaves swirling as the quickening wind blustered and moaned against thick stone walls.

Toby looked back to his bowl. "Flamin' bloody 'eck!" he gasped, more exasperated than startled. The second helping of porridge had appeared while he wasn't looking.

Hermione paced in her room, as she had been doing for a greater part of the night. Soon after Kingsley's message, Severus departed to the Ministry for what turned out to be a marathon of meetings and discussions. As night fell, Severus sent a Ministry owl to let her know he did not expect to be back until the early hours of Sunday morning. He assured her he would not renege on his promise to listen to another rehearsal of the arguments she would present to the Wizengamot on Petrus' behalf, and invited her to come to his rooms at her earliest convenience.

With her innate understanding of priorities, Hermione put her time to good use. She was also sure that Severus would not have specifically mentioned Petrus without good reason. Laying out her parchments on any available flat surface, she checked and re-checked her main points, thankful for Hagrid's guidance in bringing the more esoteric components down to Earth.

She tried placing herself in the role of Wizengamot cross-examiners and made an exhaustive list of the questions they might ask. Finally, she timed herself while she treated Crookshanks to a dry run, during which the half-Kneazle disobligingly went to sleep.

Deciding to skip breakfast, she hurried to the Guest Wing, giving a shout of delight as she found Severus pacing outside his rooms, apparently waiting for her. It was not until she woman-handled him inside for an intensive greeting that she noticed his formal Ministry robes and his newly-minted Emblem of Office, which bore the symbols of the department he would soon officially lead. Severus would accept no delay to the intended salutations, which quickly took a turn for the heated and exploratory.

"Gods," he growled, reluctantly letting her go. "I actually missed you. What *are* you doing to me, witch?"

"Nothing you appear to object to," she ventured, examining the emblem and running her fingers over the embossed symbols. "Eolh, the rune of vigilance, and Tyr, the warrior's rune. Severus, I think those runes were made for you," she said.

"They were. Odin himself summoned them for me from the Unseen. Did Ancient Runes teach you nothing?" he demanded. Shaking his head in a parody of despair, he shrugged out of the robes and hung them in his wardrobe. "We have much to discuss. Have you eaten?"

"No, I wasn't hungry until a few minutes ago," Hermione answered, wondering if she should offer to help him out of his frock coat. Not that he was having any trouble, but his precise, fluid movements were certainly stirring more than one kind of appetite. To her temporary disappointment, he relocated to the bathroom.

"When Arawn entered the vaults, Petrus first thought he had come alone," he continued over the sound of running water. "Then Arawn cast some incantations, and something fitting the description of a Dementor came out of his shadow."

"Out of his *shadow*?"

"My sentiments exactly. According to what Petrus saw, the Dementor was very interested in the vault Llygad it hovered around it and tried to grasp it, but Arawn would not permit it. Then, Petrus said the Dementor came and examined *him*. He said he went cold all over, and he felt like he was being... tasted. Petrus is certain he only escaped further attention by going deep into his inanimate state. I have never heard of Dementors paying any sort of attention to *charm-animated* gargoyles."

"We know Petrus was regarded as something out of the ordinary when he was incarcerated," Hermione mused. "Dementors don't seem too interested in animals either. Sirius avoided their attention when he escaped Azkaban in his Animagus form. Do you know if they attack other beings, centaurs or Merpeople, for example?"

Severus reappeared, freshly shaved, with a towel slung over one shoulder. He scowled as bitter hatred flashed briefly in his eyes. "If Azkaban had Lethifolds as well as Dementors, the flea-farm may not have been so lucky."

He tucked his thumbs into the pockets of his waistcoat and focussed his energies on academic assessment. "From what we know, Dementors have never kissed centaurs or fauns, before they were persecuted into extinction. Veelas are on the menu, but leprechauns, trolls, and gnomes are not. There is one record of a Selkie being kissed into oblivion in the Shetland Isles. Notably, the Selkie was in her human form at the time and on dry land. I do not think Dementors are disposed to intrude in watery domains, which may account for the lack of Merpeople in the list."

Hermione experienced a prickling of alarm. "It sounds like they *prefer* to feed on... prey... that are, or resemble, humans."

Severus gazed at her steadily. "It is an idea amenable to further research."

"But Petrus doesn't look human at all! Why would a Dementor be interested in him?"

"Perhaps it had never encountered anything like Petrus before and wanted to find out if he was suitable for consumption. If so, it suggests that Dementors are not beyond trying something new.

"However disquieting the events in the vault may be, they do provide you with some factual ammunition in that a Dementor tried its wiles on Petrus, thereby supporting your premise that he is not charm-animated. He is as much a Being as any other sentient and has every right to a fair hearing and, ultimately, freedom. The audience is this Wednesday, correct?"

Hermione felt a swarm of butterflies take frenzied flight in her stomach. "Correct," she said in a small voice.

Severus drew her into a firm embrace. "Oriens sends his apologies; he will not be able to attend as originally planned. He has gone to Java to see what the Sacred Scrolls have to say about Dementors. Finding the right Buddha will only be part of his challenge." He grinned at Hermione's perplexed expression. "Oriens said the Sacred Scrolls are kept on the highest platform of Borobudur, each with a guardian Buddha. He must find the guardian, convince it of his good intentions, and give a perfect recitation of the correct sūtras to win access to the scroll. I hope he topped his class in ancient Sanskrit."

Hermione hung her head pensively. "You will not be able to attend either, will you?"

With a gentle hand, Severus tilted her chin so that she looked at him again. "Unfortunately, I cannot. As we heard from Kingsley's Patronus, Arawn has absconded and taken the vault Llygad with him. A Dementor is currently under restraint in the Department of Mysteries, not that anyone has the faintest idea what to do with it. *Two* of the creatures got through the wards into St Mungo's, not just the one I expelled. Kingsley believes they were originally after Dolohov, whose testimony says they were definitely pursuing him."

"Originally?"

"Kingsley thinks the second Dementor sensed the power of the *other* Llygad and went after it instead of finishing off Dolohov. It entered the room through the ceiling. Oriens held it at bay until the guard Aurors came to assist. What Petrus witnessed in the vaults supports Kingsley's idea: An aura of power seems to draw them as well as vulnerable souls."

Hermione chewed her lower lip. "Do you recall what Gawain said two Death Eaters handed themselves in to escape Dementors?"

"Yes. I also recall what you said about Umbridge claiming to have *sent* Dementors after Potter."

"She's in Azkaban, though... which might mean..."

"Someone else knows how to direct Dementors to a specific target."

"Arawn." Hermione shivered. "If he can smuggle those things around the Ministry, it has to be him."

"And, in addition to an unknown number of Dementors, he now has what he thinks is a source of tremendous power. Merlin, I hope the vault Llygad really is a fake."

Hermione placed her hands on his chest. "Please be careful. Both Llygads, fake or not, are connected to you. If Arawn wants its power, and he can use Dementors, he may target you. If he has sent them to round up Death Eaters, I don't think he intends to hand them over to Aurors." She slid her arms around his waist as he brushed a stray curl out of her eyes. "Oriens had suspicions about you, didn't he?"

"Initially, yes, he did. He was most apologetic, even though I told him I would have reached the same conclusion had our positions been reversed."

"Well, that explains why he was gathering information about you. Minerva was right; *someone* in the Ministry was worried about you being Voldemort's successor that someone was Oriens. By all the Powers, we did well to keep you hidden."

"We did indeed." Severus released her, folded his arms, and frowned. "Oriens and Petrus reached some interesting conclusions relating to my familial connection with the Llygad, based largely on a similar antiquity between its estimated age and the historical extent of the Prince family. Further, Arawn not only mentioned my name, but my half-blood status. They propose Riddle's plans to access the Llygad's power may have been the reason I advanced in his ranks despite a lack of blood-purity not simply my shared heritage of outstanding Dark Arts practitioners as I had thought. I must admit, the same idea crossed my mind quite recently."

"Voldemort wanted the Llygad, but he needed you to use it for him *because* you are of the Prince bloodline?"

"So it would seem." Severus paced slowly to his desk, his features grave. "Investigative Aurors have been compiling the sequence of Arawn's movements leading up to his sudden departure from the Department of Mysteries. He spent quite some time sorting through historical archives of title deeds, all of them detailing lands owned by the Prince family. The deeds go back to A.D. 755, a villa in the upper Tywi Valley."

He watched the Ravenclaw Room's animated painting for a moment. His lips twitched into a brief smile as the owl-person drew and coloured a merlin. "Curiously, Arawn did not cover his tracks when he accessed the archives, which suggests he was not entirely sure what he might find, if anything." Severus scowled at the floor. "Arawn seems to be a methodical searcher. If he did decide to investigate physical locations, he would have started at the beginning the place in the upper Tywi. Considering his sudden absence, I propose that he visited the site and did indeed find something significant there: something significant enough for him to take the Llygad and vanish. The ruins may be worth a visit of our own."

The owl-person's merlin launched from its painted page at the touch of painted light.

Hermione sighed heavily. "There's something else. Minerva gave me two messages to deliver to you. One you may be pleased with, the other... you may not be so happy to hear."

Severus rolled his eyes. "I have my suspicions, given Kingsley's excessive diplomacy on the subject of... Tell me the pleasing one first."

"Minerva would like you to teach all the staff the alternative method of defence against Dementors. Professor Shultz will then pass it on to the senior students in Defence Against the Dark Arts classes."

"At last, progress." Severus gave an approving half-smile. "I shall teach *you* privately. It is not Dark magic. It is very old magic which, to those who prefer superstition to intellect, often equates to Dark. While not quite as powerful as a Patronus, it is still very effective and does not demand so much energy. What is the unfavourable message?"

Hermione took a deep breath. "Tobias is under protection here at Hogwarts."

Severus' whole body stiffened. His eyes blazed dangerously, then slowly cooled to a glacial contempt. "I thought as much. Does his presence within these walls have a precise location?"

"Minerva declined to reveal it. She did say he is confined to his own rooms, so he is not wandering around the castle. A house-elf is in attendance, but is under instructions not to show himself."

Severus turned on his heel and strode to the window, where he stood glaring coldly at the distant hills. Hermione quietly sat down and gave him space to process the news as he would. If he wanted her to leave, he was going to have to say so. She leafed through a Potions journal to pass what she knew would be an unknown amount of time.

She had nearly finished three articles when she heard him sigh irritably. She looked up to see him bury his hands in his hair and shake his head. When he glanced in her direction, she gave him a small smile. He responded with a hesitant shrug and came to sit beside her.

"I did not fully explain why I cannot attend your audience with the Wizengamot," he said evenly. "Under orders, I am scheduled to meet with Lucius in Azkaban. I had planned to do so in my own time. Regrettably, the recent escalation of events has made picking Lucius' brains a matter of urgency. Kingsley will be with you, as will Minerva and Hagrid. You will not be alone."

Hermione nodded sadly, looking away to try and hide her disappointment.

Severus tried harder. "I have every confidence in you."

Hermione continued to look unconvinced.

"If I were marking even your second draft, I would call it Outstanding." He held a warning finger to her lips. "Do not even *think* about telling me I am biased because I happen to be in love with you." *Success!* he thought, as Hermione rewarded his efforts with a smile like a sunrise. "I recommend breakfast and a change into some old clothes. I would like you to come on a slightly arduous mission with me. It involves crawling through some of the oldest, most decrepit tunnels in Hogwarts."

"Crawling? Through tunnels?"

"You'll see," Severus answered mysteriously, looking for a moment like a boy intent on mischief.

Toby was bored. Being used to open spaces and the liberty to come and go as it suited him, he found confinement wearisome.

After lunch, Poppy had visited again and told him that he looked a lot better. He asked her what was in the green bottle she had given him, and she settled comfortably in a chair to chat for half an hour.

She told him that Severus had brewed it for the Infirmary a few weeks after the students had arrived. As a result of the war, some students were experiencing panic attacks and extreme mood swings. She explained that the usual remedy, a Calming Draught, was a little too powerful for prolonged use by children who had already suffered enough during the war and did not need an addiction to add to their difficulties.

As a solution, Severus had located a recipe from a compendium of herbal remedies dating from the tenth century. The brew contained valerian, chamomile, passionflower and blueberries. Severus had improved the mixture with the addition of lavender extract, kindly supplied by the Beauxbatons Academy of Magic. Poppy told Toby that in adult witches and wizards, the effect was not as pronounced as what he had experienced, but it was very safe for the children though, for some reason, it made the first-year boys quite sleepy, so they could only take it at bedtime.

After Poppy bustled back to the Infirmary, Toby aimlessly traced the outlines of the stones forming the walls. As he ran his hands over them, admiring the precision of the construction, he heard a soft *click*, and the door swung slightly ajar. Drawing his knife, he issued a challenge, but nobody answered. For want of a better explanation, the door had unlocked itself.

Pushing it open, Toby surveyed a wide hall with a barrel-vaulted ceiling. Apart from a few scattered portraits, whose subjects had been painted while they were sleeping, a still-life featuring bottles and fruit, and two suits of armour, there was nothing to catch his interest. Finding a small flight of stairs, he wandered into a narrow passage dimly lit by a single tiny window.

From the shadows, he heard someone sigh unhappily. As his eyes adjusted to the gloom, he discerned a heavy oak door at the far end of the passage, beyond which came more sighs and fragmented laments. Before he could determine the wisest course of action, a girl in school uniform floated *through* the oak panels and, had Toby not uttered an inarticulate exclamation, would have passed through him as well. The ghost froze with a soft gasp and hovered barely five inches in front of him, a doleful luminosity in an indoor twilight.

"You're not a wizard..." She squinted at him from behind thick lenses. "You're a Muggle!"

"And you're a ghost," Toby countered, ignoring a surge of adrenalin as the girl wailed and backed away. For a moment, he thought she might burst into tears. As her expression turned to one of indignant anger, Toby could only hope ghosts could not work magic. If they could, he was done for. Before he could construct an apology, she circled him and regarded him curiously.

"What are you doing here?" she asked.

Toby saw no reason not to give her at least a partial answer. With another glance at the girl's school uniform, he supposed that a spot of strategic name-dropping would be a wise move. "I'm under protection, I s'pose you could say. *Headmistress* McGonagall, among others, explained why, but gettin' explanations and understandin' 'em are two diff'rent animals."

The ghost nodded sympathetically. "You're not afraid," she commented after a moment.

Reckon I am. Just not doin' anythin' about it. "Should I be?"

The spectral student considered this. "Most Muggles would be."

"Well, I reckon I'm not most Muggles. Besides, I've met a ghost before and 'e saved my life."

The girl stared at him, open-mouthed. "Really? How?"

Mustering all his nerve, Toby made a decision. "If I'm gonna tell the story, who would I be tellin' it to?"

The ghost wrung her hands and wailed again. "*Everybody* calls me *Moaning* Myrtle." This time, she really did seem to cry, though no tears were evident.

Toby shuffled awkwardly. *God's Teeth*. "Um... Miss Myrtle?" He flinched as she emitted a deafening shriek, flew through the wall, and re-emerged through the floor. She floated furtively. "*What* did you call me?"

Toby forced himself to speak. "Didn't mean to offend you or nothin'. I figured yer first name weren't Moanin', unless it's somethin' similar like Mona, f'r instance." To his surprise, Myrtle began to giggle.

"Oh, I wasn't offended. Nobody has called me Miss*anything* since I died," she said. "It's rather nice. What is your name?"

"Toby Snape."

Myrtle frowned suspiciously. "Are you related to Professor Snape? You look a bit like him, but you're *nothorrible* like he is."

Toby stifled a snort. "I've 'ad my moments, believe me. '*Horrible*', is 'e?"

"Yes, he is! He banished me from *my* bathroom and *my* toilet for *no good reason*," she hissed wrathfully. "*I'd* been haunting it long before *he* came to Hogwarts!"

Toby whistled. "Yeah, that *is* a bit rough, comin' between a lass and 'er bathroom. I wouldn't be game to do it."

Manifestly satisfied with Toby's commiserations, Myrtle settled in mid-air, tucking one foot under herself as though lounging in a spacious armchair. "It's *dot* rough." She tossed her head and smiled coquettishly. "Please tell me about the ghost you met the one who saved your life."

Thankful for her distinctly Muggle clothing choice of old jeans, heavy cotton shirt, and hiking boots, Hermione scrambled after Severus as he picked his way through a partially collapsed section of a tunnel. It was, as he had intimated, old and decrepit. *And disgusting. And damp. And slimy. And downright dangerous* Hermione silently groused.

Accessed via a flagstone at the back of a disused store room deep in the cellars, Hermione could only guess at how Severus had found it and what he had used it for. She would soon find out, but still...

"I wish you would tell me where we are going," she grumbled, pulling her right foot out of a particularly sludgy puddle Severus had blithely missed.

He turned and balanced on a massive block of dressed stone which had fallen to the floor from a bulging section of wall. Gripping the edge of a carved arch with one hand, he reached for Hermione with the other. "I told you, you'll see." Smirking contentedly, he hauled her effortlessly onto his perch and into his arms.

Smug git! Hermione thought, blissfully embracing him. She laughed as she squeezed him, feeling his muscles tense as he resisted having the air forced from his lungs. "What a place for a quick cuddle!" Savouring the warmth of his body, she raised her illuminated wand and looked at what lay ahead of them, her heart sinking as she beheld a jumble of wreckage enshrouded in black, dripping slime. "We're going through that," she stated flatly.

"We are indeed," Severus answered as he jumped lightly down and assisted Hermione to miss another puddle of sticky ooze. "There is a crawl space along the left hand side."

"Which, by its very nature, necessitates crawling," Hermione observed, coming to an abrupt halt.

"Obviously. I believe I mentioned it," he purred. "Coming?"

Mentally cursing, she followed him into a ragged, tapering gap. Cringing against the remorseless seep of cold water, Hermione dropped flat on her stomach and used her elbows and hands to drag herself through an increasingly narrow cavity. *This would have been harder for Severus to get through he's bigger than me. Therefore, if he could do it, so can I*, she told herself. *O inventor of the sports bra, thank you!* "You didn't say anything about it being wet."

Severus' voice drifted back to her, embedded in the sounds of a laborious climb and a growl of effort. "Have you not heard of Drying Charms?"

Hermione could not help grinning as her jibe from the previous morning was adroitly returned. *No doubt he's thoroughly pleased with himself. Insufferable wizard!* With a final heave, she pulled herself free of the confined space and flopped on her back with a sigh of relief. "Severus Snape, you are *very* lucky I love you," she gasped, looking around for him.

"Yes, I believe I am," he concurred, sitting high atop a disastrous pile of stone which had once been a spiral of stairs.

"Otherwise, I would hex you."

Standing, Severus casually tossed a blob of slime in her direction, smirking as she wandlessly deflected the soggy missile. He traced a rune on one of the stones above his head. With a slow, grating rumble, it slid to one side, revealing a gaping maw of palpable darkness. "Here we are," he said as Hermione clambered up to join him. She could feel exhilaration pouring off him, and his eyes shone with something unspoken. With enviable ease, he pulled himself through the opening, then reappeared to grasp her hands and lift her bodily into an inky void.

"I reckon you should just go on in and ask. Poppy seems straight enough, but I wouldn't give 'er any cheek." Toby glanced uneasily at the semi-transparent hand confidently tucked into the crook of his arm. Escorting a ghost was an entirely new and decidedly unsettling experience.

"I won't," Myrtle answered thoughtfully. "I really think I was helping Draco, until Harry Potter barged in and ruined ~~everything~~. Then Professor Snape..."

"The same Potter who's been hoggin' the front pages?" Toby knew the answer was in the affirmative. While reading numerous editions of the *Prophet*, he had recognised the moving photograph instantly. His question was purely an evasive tactic.

"Oh, yes, he's everybody's favourite, but he should have been expelled at *least* five times a year for the things he did. Draco would call him 'Saint Potter' because ~~he~~ *never* got punished. I *used* to talk to Harry," Myrtle sniffed. "He stopped coming to see me. To think, I even offered to share my toilet with him!"

"That's, um, generous..."

"I know!" Myrtle giggled. "But I *really* enjoyed joining him in the prefects' bath! Wizards are so cute when they are all wet and soapy."

Crikey!

"Well, Tobias, I shall bid you good day. I have things to attend to. Thank you for the story." She removed her hand and floated out over a broad staircase.

"No worries."

She turned to go, then looked over her shoulder and winked at him. "And for escorting me safely to the stairs." With a girly squeal, Myrtle departed through the walls.

Brazen. Absolutely brazen, Toby thought, shaking his head. *What the...?* He quickly moved back against the wall as the unmistakeable sound of hooves on stone echoed from the dim light of an intersecting passage to his left. Holding his breath, he listened. What was a horse doing in the corridors of a castle?

Trying not to think of what else it might be, Toby made a quick series of assessments. Unshod, not in a hurry, and reasonably large not as heavy as a Clydesdale, but it was no lightweight either. There was something unusual about the gait. It was also heading in his direction. Feeling sure it would continue on past the stairs, Toby waited in silence. *It might be purple with white spots* he cautioned himself, trying to prepare for the unimaginable.

What came around the corner was more unimaginable than he could have imagined. The simple fact that he knew what it was overrode an instinctive desire to flee. Years before, while working for a group of organic orchardists, Toby had devised a means of protecting their avocado trees from marauding possums without the use of poison or traps. Grateful for an environmentally friendly solution to their problem, the artisans among them had offered to hand-craft a new leather belt for him, as his old one was beyond repair. Having cajoled his date of birth out of him, they had cast the buckle in bronze using quaintly bronze-age techniques. The casting featured a galloping centaur wielding a bow at full draw, arrow at the point of release.

The real centaur noted it with a slight widening of intensely blue eyes and a swish of his tail, then scrutinised Toby with one white-blond eyebrow slightly raised. Toby made several unsuccessful attempts to speak, finally managing a slightly shaky "G'day."

"Good day," the centaur answered in perfect English, after which he continued appraising Toby as though waiting for the human to make the next move.

Toby leaned against the wall, trying to quell the sudden trembling in his limbs. He noted an arm-band, depicting the Hogwarts crest and some other symbol, covering the centaur's right bicep. "Um... do you live 'ere?"

"My home is in the Forbidden Forest. Within these walls, I teach Divination," the centaur replied. "Though perhaps not in the sense you may understand it," he continued, eyeing the bronze depiction of his species again.

"I don't follow that stuff," Toby hastily explained. "It were a gift from some people I done a few jobs for. Real live New-Age nuts, they were. Crystals, dream catchers, ley lines, star signs, you name it, they were into it. I never gave it any mind load of cobblers, I reckon." He scratched his head and stared at the floor. "Then again, I used to say the same 'bout... magic. Got that wrong, didn't I?"

The centaur smiled. "Knowing when you have been wrong will help set you on the way to being right. Ley lines should not be lightly dismissed. I treat them with respect whenever I encounter them. I am Firenze. You bear some resemblance to Severus Snape. You are related to him?"

Toby gulped. "Um... yeah." Firenze continued to watch him impassively, the muscles in his equine shoulders rippling as he shifted position. Toby realised that the centaur expected a proper answer. Furthermore, there would be no getting out of giving him one.

Toby shook himself and took a few deep breaths. "I'm... He's... Sev'rus is... I..." He dug deeper, dragging the fact up through a shroud of belief that he had long ago lost the right to claim any sort of kinship with Severus. He looked Firenze directly in the eyes. "Sev'rus is my son." As soon as the words were spoken, Toby felt a great knot of tension loosen and vanish.

The centaur gave him a benign smile. "You are Tobias Snape."

Toby nodded. "How'd you know?"

"Severus' second name."

A Scottish accent abruptly coloured the air. "Firenze, there you are! I have been searching for you!" Minerva appeared at the foot of the stairs. "Do not try to do a bunk, Tobias. I know you are up there too."

Toby shot Firenze a besieged look. "Last time I were in trouble wit' 'eadmistress, I were fourteen, in t' school, an' a day shy of being thrown out. Never learned 'owt anyway," he muttered, unconsciously lapsing into his native Mancunian dialect.

"Magorian sent a message," Minerva puffed as she climbed the stairs. "He spotted something moving near the wards while patrolling the Forest boundaries, but it was gone by the time he got closer. He says there has also been unauthorised human activity within the Forest itself. He found a makeshift camp last used two days ago, by his reading of the ashes." She gave Firenze a pointed look, and the centaur bowed and took his leave.

"I shall seek out Magorian and report back to you before nightfall, Headmistress. Tobias, no doubt we shall meet again," Firenze said, sidling past Minerva.

"Ley lines tell you that did they?" Toby called after him.

Firenze looked over his shoulder as he broke into a slow trot. "The planets told me. Your birth-sign confirms it," he answered smoothly.

Minerva placed her hands on her hips and glared at Toby crossly. "You, sir, should not be gallivanting around the castle. Merlin help you if you had run into Peeves instead of Firenze! How did you get out?"

Toby shoved his hands deep into his pockets. "I weren't gallivantin'. Who's Peeves?"

"Peeves is a poltergeist with an occasionally nasty sense of humour and a penchant for temper tantrums."

"Oh." Toby frowned as the other name Minerva had mentioned prompted a surge of scepticism. "Merlin? As in the King Arthur stories? Don't tell me 'e was *real*."

Minerva tutted as she brusquely grasped his upper arm and ushered him back to his rooms. "'Oh', indeed! Of course Merlin was real, many centuries ago." She sternly pointed Toby into his rooms and followed him in. "Now, how did you... *Tocky!*" The exclamation was directed at the strangest creature Toby had ever seen.

A Slightly Arduous Mission - Part 2

Chapter 13 of 32

The arduous mission concludes with one or two surprises. Toby has another curious encounter. Minerva contemplates staff diversity and other nigglesome aspects of being Headmistress of Hogwarts. The centaurs are on high alert.

A/N's

The Washington Irving/Irving Washington confusional device is borrowed from the novel *Catch-22* by Joseph Heller, 1961.

When Toby switches to Mancunian, he pronounces the 'g' in words ending in it. When he uses his adopted 'Strayân' (Australian) dialect, he tends to drop them along with most of his aitches.

Pugsley Addams is the property of the cartoonist Charles Addams. I make no profit from his character.

Canon characters are the property of J.K. Rowling. I make no money from them.

Thanks are due to TeaOli, who commenced beta-reading this chapter, and to Linlawless, who very kindly finished the cleansing process.

Hermione stood still as she looked around. "Where are we exactly?"

"Underneath what is now a series of low hills just beyond the castle walls. We are still within the wards," Severus explained, opening a wooden box on the floor. "This used to be the foundations of a defensive tower within a previous configuration of Hogwarts' fortifications." He took a conical flask out of the box and placed a brown bottle and a phial of clear liquid on the floor. "It is quite dry in here, so I assume it was used as a temporary store for items destined for the upper levels." He picked up the brown bottle and inverted it several times before pouring a small amount into the conical flask. Adding one drop from the phial, he swirled the contents gently. As the mixture began to glow, he set it in a niche on the wall and watched as it brightened enough to fill the room with light.

Hermione sleeved her wand, noting with dismay that she was mired from head to toe in Merlin-only-knew-what. Her dismay turned to amusement as she noted Severus was in an equally disreputable condition.

Severus picked a strand of sticky slime from her shoulder. "Microbial biofilms," he said, examining the substance as he rubbed it between his thumb and forefinger. "They thrive on sulphur deposits in volcanic rock. Fortunately, these are the less acidic variety. Pugsley calls them 'snottites'."

"Charming."

"Very. These humble aggregations of bacteria may well hold an alternative cure for dragon pox. Pugsley and I have run several infective trials using blood agar treated with extract of snottite. Initial results are most promising." He watched Hermione survey her promising passengers with mixed revulsion and awe. "Could I interest you in a cleansing charm?"

Hermione scowled at him. "We'll duel for it if you're up to a challenge. Seven paces, turn and cleanse."

She flashed a wicked grin as Severus raised a sardonic eyebrow, prowled to the middle of the floor, and drew his wand with his right hand, she furtively noted. Pressing her back against his, she could not help an exploratory wriggle. *Very nice*, she thought, enjoying the feel of a lean, angular physique with firm muscles in all the right places.

"Diversionary tactics will not save you, Hermione. Begin!"

Hermione counted seven paces, then whirled and ducked into a low crouch, nimbly dodging to her left as she fired off a cleansing charm. She gave a shriek of indignation as Severus' charm washed over her in a wave of purification, while her own was deftly blocked.

"Too easy," Severus airily informed her before giving in to laughter. "The look on your face... Priceless..." he managed, bracing his hand against the wall for support.

Hermione pursed her lips and waited for exactly the right moment. *Let's see... Using wand hand wand in situ to hold himself up. Not looking because he can't do it without laughing himself breathless now that, Severus, is priceless. Other hand wiping eyes... Gotcha! One pristinely clean wizard. Damn! I don't think he even noticed*

At length, Severus regained his decorum and sleeved his wand, giving Hermione a knowing smile as he surveyed his spotless hands and clothes. "Now for the real reason I brought you here. Treasure."

Hermione gaped at him. "What kind of treasure?"

Severus approached the far wall and counted a number of stones up from the floor. Pressing one, he stood back and waited until it swung slowly outwards. He retrieved a cloth-wrapped object from the revealed cavity.

Intrigued, Hermione watched as he unwrapped what appeared to be a miniature trunk. Severus knelt on the floor and tapped it once with his wand. The trunk enlarged to its full size. Peering over his shoulder, Hermione read *S. Snape* painted on the top, partially obscuring an older, fainter mark *E. Prince*.

"This was your mother's school trunk?" Hermione asked, running her fingers over its heavily scuffed edge.

Severus nodded. "When I left for Hogwarts, there was no money to buy a new one." He busied himself with the straps and lock, then raised the lid. "Look," he murmured, taking her hand.

Hermione did and gasped in appreciative wonder. Hundreds of books, each shrunk to the size of a matchbox and sorted into corded bundles with colour-coded tags, filled the trunk to capacity.

"Do *not* touch the ones with red tags; they are Dark Magic tomes of extreme potency. They will hurt you if you don't know how to handle them properly." Severus took out a gold-tagged bundle of ten tiny books and restored them to their true size. "If I remember rightly, the book I need is in here," he muttered as he sorted through them. With a sudden grin of pure pleasure, he seized one and handed it to Hermione.

"As if *you* would forget where you put anything," Hermione snorted, handling the book with reverence. It was certainly an antique.

"When I stored them here, my circumstances were... difficult," Severus replied. He gazed at the labelled bundles nestled in the trunk, remembering the day he had hidden the most precious things he owned while wondering if he would ever see them again. Hollow-eyed from lack of sleep and wracked by constant tension which spat corrosive fire through every strangled nerve in his body, he had been alone utterly alone: the newly appointed headmaster of a school which reviled and distrusted him.

Albus' portrait had talked to him with civility, even kindness, but Severus could not escape the vision of the old wizard's final moments. Until he cast the killing curse and ended Albus' life, Severus had dared to hope he was not beyond redemption. He would not have felt genuine anguish upon seeing Albus' hand withered and blackened from Gaunt's ring if he was truly lost to the Dark. He would not have carefully tended the cursed flesh and tried to make Albus comfortable. He would not have sought to remedy, with potion, charm, and counter-curse, the evil things he had done in Riddle's service. He would not have tried to save lives whenever it was possible. As he sealed his books away in their stone tomb, Severus very nearly wept as he thought of his vows to protect Lily's son. Albus had reduced those vows to years of wasted effort.

Mercilessly adding to Severus' distress, Albus glibly sliced him to the bone, asking him how much death had he seen: how many men and women had he watched die? Very rich indeed, coming from the same man who raised Potter like a hand-fed pet, fattening the boy's loyalty, trust, and foolhardy arrogance before sending him off to be slaughtered. It seemed that to Albus, the "very best" of Severus Snape was merely a means to achieve an end.

When Severus stood before the Veil, he heard what he considered to be the sum total of Albus' opinion of him: "Poor Severus." There had been no remorse in Albus' tone, no concern. There never had been. Severus heard only a passing regret over the inconvenience of something useful being no longer available.

Hermione's ecstatic yelp brought him out of his reflection, and he looked into a pair of brown eyes brimming with love and admiration, all of it for him. "Severus! Do you know what this is? Of course you do, but... This has to be one of the most valuable books in the world!"

Severus gave a half-smile. "I see you have found the frontispiece."

"Yes! Look at it! This is incredible!"

"I have seen it before, Hermione. And I've also seen it in real life the gates of the Salem Witches' Institute," he said, stretching his legs out in front of him and leaning back on his hands as she insinuated herself onto his lap. With quiet pride, he looked at the illustration again. It showed ornately wrought, open gates whose gateposts were adorned with Watchers a pair of oversized black cats.

As Severus and Hermione pored over the illustration, the cats lazily leapt down from the posts and exchanged places. "The real Watchers do the same thing. When I last visited Salem, I saw them change places," Severus affirmed.

Hermione read the gilded words of the title page and sighed euphorically.

"Restored Recipes and Remedies Information for Wizards and Witches,

by Richard and Elyse Van Tassel, A.D. 1695

"It's not only a copyright edition; it says right here look, Severus! it's the very first book published by the Salem Underground Publishing House."

Severus raised his eyebrows as he did as he was told. "So it is."

"This would have been produced soon after the darkest years of the Salem Trials," she whispered, frowning at the grievous events which had sent so many to an undeserved and invariably brutal death.

Severus nodded. "May those who died find peace beyond the Veil. It was only through the efforts of people like the Van Tassels that so much knowledge was saved and an exponential increase in ignorance avoided."

"We nearly had the same thing happen here. Umbridge pretty much strip-mined anything we had on defensive magic. If she'd got her own way, I think she would have expanded her operations to other disciplines and slowly taken us back to the Stone Age."

"She did the same thing in the Ministry. We still have not fully evaluated the extent of the losses."

"Then your books truly are a treasure, for a number of reasons." She smiled as one of the cats began to wash its face. "I wonder if they named the cats back then."

"I don't know. They've been known as Washington Irving and Irving Washington since 1800."

"I've heard of them; Salem's Triwizard contestants said they're the size of mountain lions. Nobody has yet worked out which one is which." Hermione examined the frontispiece again. "This one definitely looks more like an *Irving* than a *Washington*," she laughed, tapping one of the cats.

"Cats are contrary creatures; the one who looks like Irving Washington is probably Washington Irving."

"Contrariness considered, any self-respecting cat would recognise the principle of reverse psychology and seek to confound it."

"Therefore Irving Washington really is Irving Washington and Washington Irving is Washington Irving."

"Exactly. Oh dear," Hermione added as the cats sprang from their gateposts and engaged in a wild, tumbling chase around the page. By the time they settled, each to a gatepost, it was impossible to recall which cat had been dubbed Irving Washington, and which one Washington Irving.

"I didn't see them do *that*." Severus paused as Hermione set the book aside and straddled his thighs. "I heard that they were both carved..." He allowed himself to be silenced to enthusiastically participate in an unhurried, searching kiss. "From a single block... of black granite," he murmured, using one hand to undo the buttons of her shirt.

It stood before the fireplace, the fire poker and a cleaning rag in its large hands. It was a little over two feet tall, with spindly limbs protruding from a tattered pillowcase. It stared fearfully at Toby with enormous, grass-green eyes and twitched a pair of ears resembling limp bats' wings.

It was the *fear* that drove into Toby like a knife through his heart. Fear. He had seen it in Severus' eyes as the boy fled from the house at Spinner's End, not yet strong enough to defend himself or his mother. Back then, when the drink roared through his blood like a horde of demented demons, Toby saw fear as a deadly provocation and would respond accordingly. Years later, and staunchly sober, he had looked into the terrified eyes of a traumatised mare ready to fight for her life and, for the first time, he had realised the enormity of what he had done.

He snapped out of the flashback when the creature emitted a high-pitched howl of distress and began beating itself over the head with the fire poker.

"Bad Tocky! Tocky is not to be seen. Tocky is thinking Mistress Headmistress took Master Tobias away! Bad,*bad* Tocky!"

"Tocky! Stop this *at once*," Minerva commanded, seizing the poker and wrestling it from Tocky's grasp.

The house-elf moved quickly, dodging around the Headmistress' skirts to grab another object.

With a flick of her wand, Minerva transfigured a paperweight into a sponge as Tocky's hands closed over it.

Doubling back, Tocky snatched a candlestick from the table. "Foolish Tocky!" he wailed, raising the candlestick over his head. "Tocky has broked the rules..."

Toby seized the other end of the candlestick, lifting it and the struggling house-elf into the air.

Minerva clamped her hand over her mouth to stifle a hearty laugh at the sight of a house-elf dangling from the end of a candlestick, eye to eye with Severus Snape's incredulous Muggle father. It was definitely a memory for her Pensieve.

"Tocky is disgrace," Tocky whimpered. "Tocky is to be punished..." A large tear rolled down his nose and dripped onto the floor.

"You are *not* a disgrace," Minerva intoned severely. "The self-punishment ceases as of now. Is that understood, Tocky? House-elves within this castle have no need to punish themselves," she finished in a milder tone.

"Yes, Mistress Headmistress. Tocky understands," the house-elf responded through a wince-inducing, burbling snuffle.

"Good. You may put him down now, Tobias." She evaluated Toby's movements as he carefully let the house-elf find its feet and put the candlestick on the window ledge. If the Muggle was distressed by a less-than-dignified introduction to house-elves, he did not show it.

"Ma'am?"

"Yes, Tobias?"

Toby nodded towards Tocky and mouthed the words: *'ouse-elves?*

"Yes, Tocky is a house-elf. He came to us from the Crabbe family, all of whom are now either dead or in Azkaban. He has no family left to serve, you see, and a house-elf can pine away with grief if there is no service to perform."

"They're servants? Are they paid for it?" Toby asked, his working class allegiances coming to the fore.

"Oh, no, Master Tobias," Tocky squeaked. "It is a house-elf's pleasure to do what is needing to be done. Tocky is most happy to serve Mistress Headmistress and Master Tobias. Masters Crabbes were not good to Tocky. Many beatings. Tocky's elfcestors has their heads cut off and stuffed. They has glass eyes and stares down from wall in billiards room."

Toby paled and sat down. "That's barbaric."

"Tocky's elfcestors did not think so. It was great honours to have head cut off and stuffed!" Tocky shook his head and grimaced. "Tocky is not agreeing with elfcestors."

Toby gave Minerva a wary glance. "You don't do that 'ere, surely?"

"Certainly not! The Crabbes were loyal to Voldemort and allied to the Dark Arts for many generations. For them, and an unfortunate number of other so-called pure-blood families, house-elves were little better than objects to be mistreated as they saw fit."

"Mistress Headmistress is kind to Tocky. Tocky is most grateful," the house-elf affirmed, brandishing his cleaning rag.

Toby fingered the recently replaced button on his shirt. "You're the one who's been doin' the domestics," he said.

Tocky nodded hesitantly. "Is Master Tobias displeased with Tocky?"

"You've been doin' a top notch job, mate. Much 'preciated."

"Which means he is very pleased with you," Minerva interpreted for the puzzled house-elf, who clapped his hands together in rapture. "Master Tobias also looks a wee bit hungry. I believe roast beef and Yorkshire pudding is on the menu this evening?"

"Yes, Mistress Headmistress, with gravy and green peas!"

Toby was immediately interested. "*Real* gravy? Made wit' pan drippings?" he asked, switching from Australian to Mancunian for the second question.

"Aye," Minerva snorted, going very Scots at the unthinkable prospect of gravy being made any other way. "Off you go, Tocky; dinner is required and you need not hide yourself anymore."

When the house-elf vanished with a *crack*, she turned to Toby with a very serious expression on her face. "Whatever you do, Tobias, do not give him clothing. That includes rags, cloths, towels..."

"And pillowcases, by the look of it. Applies to all... 'ouse-elves?"

"Absolutely."

Toby got up and passed his hands over the same stones he had been examining when the door mysteriously opened. "I was muckin' around like this when the door opened. There weren't no-one there either."

Minerva intently surveyed the stones. She drew her wand and cast a series of revealing charms. "I thought perhaps there was a hidden trigger to open the door," she said, frowning. "It seems there is not." She paced slowly, considering the possibility that the castle itself had unlocked the door. Such events were known to happen from time to time.

She turned to Toby, who was thirstily emptying a tankard of... '*Pumpkin juice*? Tocky was supposed to bring you orange juice!"

"It's orange," Toby pointed out, indicating the colour. "I'm startin' to like it. Besides, I 'eard once it's good for yer liver. Reckon mine might need it. Not a word to Tocky, okay? Poor little bugger'll start beltin' 'imself again if 'e thinks 'e got things mixed up."

"As you wish," Minerva sighed, raising her hands in capitulation. "Your liver might need it? Frogs'*feet*! Poppy said you are in excellent health!"

"Preventative measures," Toby retorted, saluting her with the empty tankard. He moved closer to the fire and rubbed his arms. "God's Teeth, it's cold. I don't remember it bein' this cold in Manchester."

"We are in Scotland, Tobias. It's a couple of cloaks colder up here. Speaking of cloaks..." She went to the wardrobe and sorted through the items Tocky had placed there. She drew out the mentioned garment and handed it to Toby. "This should fit. There is a Warming Charm interwoven with the fabric; it activates as soon as its wearer starts shivering."

Toby handled the thick, warm wool and gave Minerva a baffled glance. Guardedly, he allowed her to drape it over his shoulders and fuss with the fastenings. "I must say," she said as she stood back to assess him, "Prussian blue is your colour you look rather dashing." She laughed as he rolled his eyes and scowled. *Oh, I am going to have some fun with this one.* "Don't worry," she said reassuringly. "I am not setting my cap at you."

"I should think not," he mumbled, evidently discomfited.

"Tocky will return soon. I shall leave you in peace. Oh, by the way, it may have been the castle that let you out. These walls do have a certain level of awareness."

"I'll keep it in mind," Toby answered, perusing the stones of the walls with renewed suspicion as the Headmistress left the room.

Hermione stirred reluctantly. Futons even those hastily transfigured from a handkerchief were ridiculously comfortable. Even more so with someone warm to wear. She smiled contentedly, running one hand over Severus' bare shoulder. He lay half-sprawled over her, sound asleep. She stroked his hair, admiring the sharp contrast of jet black against pale skin. *Merlin, he's magnificent*, she concluded. Her breath caught as she added, *And he is mine*.

It was a fair assumption, she reasoned. Severus had, after all, claimed her *ashis* seconds before succumbing to the "*petite mort*" Hermione had read about as a curious adolescent. She traced the muscles of his upper arm, then shifted to prop herself on one elbow, all the better to enjoy the view. Severus mumbled a protest and pulled her closer. Hermione waited until she felt him relax again, then continued her explorations, memorising the texture of skin and scar, as well as the rise and fall of every contour she could reach.

"Feel something you like?" he murmured languidly.

"I see someone I love," she said, her heart swelling as he half-opened his eyes and rolled onto his back.

"Hmm, coincidence. So do I." He sat up, blinking as concern furrowed his brow.

"Did I hurt you? I am not the most experienced... If I hurt you..."

Hermione pressed her fingers over his lips to silence him. "You didn't hurt me any more than what I had prepared myself for. That bit was unavoidable, but it won't happen again. You surmounted the obstacle very nicely," she finished with a mischievous smile.

Severus gave a short laugh and shook his head. "*Sumounted*? Hermione, that's *terrible*!"

"I thought it most enjoyable, especially as you exercised such restraint and looked after me first."

Severus reddened a little. "I read somewhere... for a woman... the first time or any time for that matter is more... erm... enjoyable... if she is ready." He scowled. "There are potions to achieve the same response. As with Love Potions, the results are a mere imitation of a real, sincerely felt attraction."

"What we have is real," Hermione assured him, marvelling at the way his black eyes softened with a compelling depth of unspoken communication. "It seems both of us have done some independent research," she said, smoothing the fine hairs lightly decorating his pectorals and sternum. She indicated Severus' obvious readiness to delve into the subject matter again. "It would be a shame to waste an opportunity to engage in more practical applications of our findings. I would really like to compare notes with

"Ye-es," Severus gasped, bucking gently as her hand began exploring more sensitive parts of his anatomy. "But I think... perhaps we should let you recover?" He rubbed at a faint smear of dried blood on Hermione's thigh.

Hermione weighed her options. "Well, there is a piece of theoretical research I have just recently re-considered. I will need your participation," she said, pushing him flat on his back and pinning him down with her hands on his shoulders which provided him with a highly distracting view indeed.

"How may I be of assistance?" he asked through a thickening fog of lust.

"Feedback. Your considered opinion. A constructive critique. I intend to make my own preliminary additions to the method I am about to try."

"Very well..." Severus began, his words morphing into a low growl as Hermione claimed his lips in a wanton kiss. "I shall endeavour to..." he writhed as his witch placed a slow, suckling kiss at the base of his throat. He guessed it would leave a distinctive mark. "...provide you with..." Hermione placed a second mark a little further down his chest. "...as much feedback... as you require... to achieve... the desired result." By the time she marked him just above his navel, it dawned on him that she was following the position of his coat buttons. *Buttons! They lead down to...*

He willingly surrendered to a wave of devastating pleasure.

Having acted on Firenze's report and taken every precaution she could, Minerva stalked through curfew-deserted corridors, muttering quietly to herself while she evaluated the events of the insanely early morning.

As soon as Severus had returned from his emergency meetings with the Ministry, he had chosen to mercilessly bombard her. Before she had even poured her first cup of tea, he had strode into her office official robes billowing and proceeded to tell her how to solve her staffing problems. As if having a ghost, a half-giant, and a centaur on staff was not enough of an unusual situation, it looked as though she would soon employ a gargoyle as well.

She lowered the pitch of her voice to a dismal imitation of Severus' finest-dark-chocolate-wrapped-in-black-velvet baritone. "I heard you, Minerva, with my own ears. You said you would consider employing a gargoyle as assistant librarian." He had even provided her with four feet of parchment backing up his entire argument with facts and statistics. Libraries full of magical books could be very dangerous places if not rigorously maintained, and Severus presented irrefutable proof that Irma needed an extra pair of hands. If the pair of hands also came with a pair of wings, fluency in four languages, and enough mathematical nous to navigate through the Library's cataloguing and sorting systems, so much the better, Severus had opined.

Where was the Room of Requirement when it really was required? Minerva desperately wanted to transfigure something into a likeness of Severus Snape and throw a great many things at it. Of course, he was absolutely right. The advertised position of assistant librarian had not drawn a single response. Petrus would be the much needed solution to a slowly festering problem if the Wizengamot would agree to release him.

Convincing Irma would be another issue altogether. "Do not fret, Minerva; I have a plan for that too. *You shall* have a gargoyle to add to the staff menagerie. If you will excuse me, I have someone to meet," Minerva mimicked again, folding her arms across her chest and trying on a Snape-ian scowl for size.

She huffed irritably. "Yes, you have a plan. *You always* have a plan, you insufferably smug, full-of-yourself, smarty-robed... So help me, if you remind me that I mentioned the Giant Squid, I shall hex you into haggis!" Her tirade faded as she remembered that she really was quite fond of him and Hogwarts would be in a much worse position had he not stepped in to help her.

She continued on her way, mulling over another strange event. Poppy had dropped in for a cup of tea and reported that Moaning Myrtle had offered to assist with bereaved students who needed companionship and a listening ear. *Moaning Myrtle!* The same ghost who made a point of wallowing in her own misfortune! Minerva had unreservedly given permission, for the Infirmary needed any help available. The reason for Moaning Myrtle's sudden interest was equally astonishing: a certain Muggle had told her a story about his timely encounter with a miner's ghost who had a legendary reputation for saving lives. Moaning Myrtle had found the idea quite inspirational.

Tobias "Houdini" Snape, Minerva thought wryly. *What else have you been up to, laddie?* She turned into a side passage and followed the broad, shallow stairs leading down to the cellars.

Then there was the *other* development in her staff. On a quick diversion to the staff room to retrieve a forgotten scroll, she had walked in on the Muggle Studies and the Defence Against the Dark Arts professors engaged in some rather compromising activities. She would never have expected the prim and demure Madeleine Poppins to be so... uninhibited. Only the sight of Fergus Schultz's bare torso, dreadfully scarred from the torture he had endured at the hands of Umbridge's lackeys, had prevented Minerva from reading the riot act.

Fergus, a Muggle-born with experience in the Ministry's Auror Training Division, had been a prime target for the Muggle-born Registration Commission. Alastor had rescued him in the nick of time another hour, and Fergus would have died from his wounds. Minerva had noticed the loving compassion in Madeleine's eyes as she looked upon her half-Irish, half-German paramour and had decided that they could only do each other good. Minerva had left them alone, quietly stating that they would be well advised to get a room *other* than the staff room.

She tensed as she heard a low voice and an answering feminine laugh. She quietly crept to a shadowed arch to see who it was. She shook her head in disbelief, making a mental note to check the castle's water supply for Amortentia and any other illicit substances. Severus Snape had Hermione Granger backed up against the wall. They were snogging and groping like a pair of desperate fifth-years.

So. You had "someone to meet", did you?" Severus. Hermione."

The two pulled apart with a growl and a gasp. Hermione blushed furiously, while Severus placed himself between her and Minerva with an expression of relaxed insolence.

There was something in his movements Minerva had never seen before. The wizard was actually swaggering. *Oh, my, that can only mean one thing... Did they?*

"Yes, Minerva?" Severus' posture conveyed a silent challenge as Hermione came to his side and slipped her hand into his, giving him a look of heated adoration.

They did! "Please, if you two are going to be intimate, find a private room, will you?" Minerva shook her head. "This school is turning into a bear garden," she stated.

With perfect timing, a gruffling complaint announced the arrival of the Potions master in Animagus form. Pugsley looked at them beseechingly, then reared up and gave a frustrated shrug.

"Aauurrowwwrrgimme a break!" he grumbled, transforming into his human shape as he spoke.

"Give you a break from what, Pugsley?" Minerva asked crisply.

"Cyclops has gone missing. I've looked everywhere for the little nuisance, but I can't raise him. I can smell him, but every time I think I get close, I lose the trail again."

Minerva folded her arms. *Oh, Merlin. What now?"* Cyclops?"

"Little Malicia's Puffskein. Morgan chose it for her herself."

Minerva considered Morgan Addams' unique abilities in her Transfiguration classes. The boy always managed to produce something distinctly out of the ordinary. Minerva had no doubt that Morgan's choice of Puffskein would trend towards the somewhat mutated especially if it was a gift for his younger sister. "I assume that Cyclops is not your standard Puffskein."

"Damn right! He's black, and he has three heads."

"Black is quite rare! Why Cyclops, then, if he has three heads?"

"Each head has only one eye."

Minerva raised her eyebrows. "I see. Severus, have you encountered the Bloody Baron lately? Perhaps he could be enlisted to search between the walls and, I would suggest, have a word with Peeves. I suspect our poltergeist may be able to assist with enquiries."

With concentrated effort, Severus steered his mind away from the row of "buttons" Hermione had left on his skin. "I have. You will find the Bloody Baron in the cistern room at the end of the thirteenth corridor in the dungeons. Be careful of the well-caps; they have a tendency to disappear from under one's feet."

Toby lay awake, watching the moonlight inch across the floor in a pool of frost-blurred silver. Scowling, he got up and pulled the cloak around his body, grateful for the warmth it gave as he padded across the floor. He rummaged through his discarded clothing and retrieved the remnant of an unknown story.

Lighting a candle, he read it again. "Myrddin," he said, trying the name out loud. He rubbed his jaw, thinking intently. "Myrddin... Merlin... Nah, no way." He sighed as he made a note on a sheet of parchment to say he had woken during the night but did not feel any compulsion to retrieve the Llygad y Ddraig from where he had left it in the bathroom. It was part of the "artefact separation procedure" which had to be followed even if no bonding was detected. "Administratium," Toby snorted, recalling a witty article which poked light-hearted scorn at all forms of bureaucracy.

In the bathroom, the Llygad's crystal disc shimmered faintly. Within its facets, a pale blue light briefly flickered and faded.

Severus sat up suddenly, wand in hand, as he scanned the room for danger. Hermione shifted sleepily beside him, then joined him in silent, armed vigilance. Finding nothing to cause alarm, Severus relaxed his guard, feeling a little foolish.

"A dream," he said. "I'm sorry I woke you."

Hermione's concern was visible in the shadowed moonlight. "Was it a warning? Minerva said the centaurs are patrolling the Forbidden Forest armed and ready. They don't do *that* without good reason."

Severus frowned as he wondered what was coming. Whatever it was, it all seemed to centre on the Llygad y Ddraig and himself. He turned to Hermione, who waited impatiently for an answer to her question. "It did not have the same feel as the dreams warning me of Nagini. In those dreams, I felt as though I was physically there. This dream was different. I was simply an observer."

He could feel Hermione's curiosity, even though she restrained herself from asking. "I could see an ancient ruin. What it had been, I could not tell, though it had once been opulent and spacious. There was something... a taste in the air that warns of something not quite right. There was a mosaic on the wall above a massive fireplace. I have never seen a design like it."

"What was it?" Hermione urged.

"On one side, it depicted a castle of stone and timber with mighty fortifications. On the other, a steep hill clothed in forest, and over both of them... It was like something a standard-bearer would carry into a battle charge a red dragon on a gold field."

"It sounds like something from a coat of arms. I'm sure we could track it down."

Severus shook his head. "Somehow, I doubt that will be possible. The dragon was in no formal heraldic position. It was depicted flying free and proud. It represented no species of dragon I know of." He shrugged and gave a half-smile. "We may search for it after your session with the Wizengamot. Save your energies for them."

Hermione groaned as she lay down in the circle of his arms. "Did you have to remind me? Now I have butterflies again. Actually, I think they just turned into hyperactive Acromantulas."

Severus held her snugly. "Then I shall play Evil Wizengamot Questioner for you tomorrow morning, as you do not have classes until after lunch. Do not forget, Hermione, adrenalin may be uncomfortable but it also means you are ready."

At the edge of the Forbidden Forest, Bane watched intently. All was quiet, but even if the planets had not already warned him, he could sense all was not well. His flanks twitched as he backed and sidled.

At least Minerva had taken the centaur herd's relayed information seriously. With Filius, Pomona, Pugsley, and Firenze, she had meticulously checked the wards again and directed Aurors to the watch-towers. He turned to the assembled herd waiting behind him. "Ronan, Magorian, come with me. The rest of you split into threes and search the Forest. Our strategy is the wandering quarter. Hone every sense you have. Keep an arrow on the string."

A Deepening Shadow – Part 1

Chapter 14 of 32

The centaurs tell of signs in the heavens. Severus confronts his father and sees something unexpected. Toby takes a gamble, but keeps his thoughts to himself. Oriens researches a dangerous scroll and receives an offer of allegiance.

A/N's

Aurochs an extinct species of wild cattle. The bulls' horns were around 80cm (31 inches) long and 20cm (roughly 8 inches) in diameter at the base.

The chapter in *The Lord of the Rings* which fired Toby's imagination is: The Ride of the Rohirrim Chapter V of Book V in *The Return of the King* by J.R.R. Tolkien, 1955.

"Good oil" trustworthy information.

Vānara (Hindu mythology) an ape-like humanoid with magical powers.

Kali Yuga the last of four ages the world goes through before being renewed. Described in the Indian scriptures as the 'Age of Vice'.

The historical character 'Subāhu' is borrowed from the Indian epic, *The Ramayana*, as is his ability to cause a rain of blood and mangled flesh. I have altered the circumstances of this delightful entity and his *modus operandi* for the purposes of this fic. No disrespect is intended towards the storytelling traditions of India... or any *rakshasa* who might be reading over someone's shoulder.

Pugsley Addams is the property of the cartoonist Charles Addams, and I make no profit from his character.

Canon characters are the property of J.K. Rowling. I make no money from them.

Linlawless bravely beta-read this chapter. I thank her profusely, and I also convey my gratitude to Minikitty for not hissing when Lin opened the document.

Bane led the way, placing each hoof with practised care as he stealthily moved between the mist-wreathed boles of ancient trees. Behind him, Ronan and Magorian scanned to the left and right, occasionally looking back along the way they had come. Skilfully mingled with the night noises of the Forest, call signals from patrolling centaur triads slid through the mist and the dark the hoot of an owl, the bark of a fox, the growl of a Thestral, the nervous snort of a unicorn.

An unseen drift of leaves rustled softly ahead of them. Bane sent his own signal: the guttural hiss of a weasel. There was no countersign. The three centaurs halted. Bane and Ronan drew their bows. Magorian held an arrow loosely nocked to his bowstring with one hand and reached down to touch the aurochs horn slung at his side with the other.

Bane held his breath and listened. The faintest whisper of a sound reached his ears: the furtive friction of cloth on skin.

Bane reared and pivoted in an explosive burst of motion, shooting his arrow at the source of the sound. A bolt of green fire passed through the space his chest had recently occupied and seared into a tree, sending shards of smouldering bark in all directions.

Ronan covered Bane's flank and loosed his arrow before the green light faded. A muffled grunt of pain and a heavy thud confirmed Ronan's arrow had found its mark.

Magorian charged after the retreating footsteps of a second trespasser, swerving as a hex narrowly missed his upper arm. Without breaking stride, he aimed and shot, then cursed as he heard his arrow deflected into the ground. His quarry kept running. Magorian raised the aurochs horn to his lips and used the combined force of his human and equine lungs to bring a sound to the Forbidden Forest that had not been heard for over nine hundred years.

Ronan reared and pawed the air with a savage yell of exultation as the horns of the scattered centaur triads sounded in answer.

Bane quickly secured the writhing, wounded prisoner. He took a parchment-wrapped cylinder from his quiver. Looking up to make sure no tree branches were in the way, he violently threw it to the ground and leapt clear. Just as Firenze had assured him it would, the cylinder detonated with a dazzling flash and sent a dense column of bright orange sparks high into the night sky.

Severus bounded out of bed as an unearthly sound rolled over the castle in a wild, primal challenge.

Clawing her way to wakefulness, Hermione wrestled into a winter-weight bathrobe, pushing another such garment into Severus' hands as she moved to stand beside him.

Gratefully accepting the insulation, Severus backed away from the window when a jet of orange sparks shot skyward from the depths of the Forbidden Forest, hidden behind the sloping shoulder of a low hill. "One of Pugsley's flash-bangs," he commented automatically, still trying to gauge the nature of the disturbance.

The shadowy forms of Aurors on brooms swooped from the watch towers and converged on the source of the sparks.

Severus mentally probed the wards. "It seems the castle is not under direct attack," he affirmed. Hermione nodded warily. Both had their wands ready. Another volley of sound poured into the air in a sonorous harmony of tone and pitch.

"What *is* that?" Hermione breathed, feeling her magic respond to the resonance in a series of powerful surges.

"Horns, of some kind," Severus postulated, his own magic throbbing restively in his fingertips. "My guess is that they are being sounded by centaurs. Nothing else in the Forest has that kind of lung capacity. That is, nothing else *we know of*." He quirked an eyebrow at Hermione's suddenly wistful expression. She turned to him with her eyes brimming with tears.

"They sound... so free, fierce, and indomitable. I am ashamed of myself, Severus."

Mystified, Severus grasped her shoulders and searched her eyes. "Whatever for?"

"When Parvati told me Firenze was teaching Divination, she asked me if I regretted ditching the subject. I told her I wasn't too keen *ohorses*."

Severus could not hide his surprise at the admission. "I assume that was a throwaway line? You, of all people, would not deliberately deploy a personal slight on Firenze."

"But I did! I used a throwaway line, never thinking I was applying it to a proud race with their own traditions and history *and dignity*. I was no better than anybody else who treats them with suspicion and scorn!"

Severus quickly dispensed with the idea of saying he felt another S.P.E.W.-like symptom coming on. Hermione was deadly serious and, by the fire in her eyes, was considering a whole new cause to fight for. Before he could think of a suitably sensitive response, the Floo in his study activated. Minerva's sleep-burred brogue drifted up from the ashes.

"Severus? Sorry to wake you if you are not awake already after that extraordinary commotion. The centaurs have apprehended a Death Eater. He is wounded, and the Aurors are taking him to..."

Severus scowled with apprehension as the message abruptly ceased. He raised his wand to summon his clothes, quirked an eyebrow when he found that Hermione had already done it for him and was nearly dressed.

The Floo activated again. This time, Minerva sounded wide awake and very alarmed. "They had him... Travers, it was... Dementors... They attacked... Drove the Aurors back. The Aurors counterattacked with Patronus Charms... There were too many Dementors. One of them ate Travers' soul. The centaurs..."

"Severus, come to the Great Hall at once! Bring Hermione; I assume she is with you."

Wrapped in his warm cloak, Toby silently cursed at the lack of vantage point from his window. He could not see where the sound had come from, or what had made it. As he gazed out into the darkness, a flickering orange light, like the glow from distant fireworks, illuminated the sky somewhere to the north. His blood jumped in his veins when he heard the sound again.

Some years before, he had read *The Lord of the Rings* in its entirety, simply because it was too bloody hot to do much else. Even as a boy, Toby had not considered imagination as a thing worth his indulgence, yet he had lost himself in the book's pages something he would never have thought possible. His favourite chapter described the arrival of the Rohirrim at the siege of Minas Tirith. At the time, Toby had wondered what the massed war-horns of Rohan might have sounded like as six thousand cavalry thundered into a furious charge.

He now considered that he had his answer.

"Tocky? You around?"

The house-elf appeared, holding a large, brown teapot from which steam slowly curled. "Yes, Master Tobias. Tocky is always knowing when Master is awakes."

"D'y know what that noise was?"

"Tocky is not being certain. Tocky only knows it is coming from the Forbidden Forest. Tocky has not heards it before."

Toby scowled thoughtfully. He made his way to the bathroom and picked up the Llygad. Noting the time, nearly four in the morning, he dismissed the idea of more sleep. "Merlin," he said out loud, weighing the object in his hand as the giggling ghost of an idea resumed its haunting with fervour.

Tocky paused in his pouring of tea. "Merlin, Master Tobias?"

"Yeah, Merlin. Can you tell me anythin' about 'im?"

The house-elf blinked in astonishment. "Tocky can if Master Tobias is requiring it."

"Ta, mate," Toby said, accepting a mug of tea. "I's o-fficially requirin' the good oil on this Merlin bloke."

Poor Tocky was completely perplexed. "Good oils...?"

From the shade of the enormous main *stupa*, Master Vu, Sage of Borobudur, listened as Oriens recited the most difficult *sūtras* known to Eastern magic.

Standing before one of the sixteen smaller, perforated *stupas*, Oriens chanted with perfect pronunciation, unlocking the power held within the words until his magic pulsed around him in a halo of light. On the final syllable, he positioned his hands to match those of the Buddha seated within the *stupa*. A section of stone rippled and vanished. With a flash of white light and a *crack* like distant thunder, a scroll appeared in the statue's lap. Entering the *stupa*, Oriens sat at the Buddha's feet. He took the scroll and began to read.

Master Vu slowly exhaled. Oriens had been one of the most adept pupils he had ever taught, and the venerable sage had great confidence in his skill. However, the Scroll of the Downward Spiral was a dangerous work to study. Oriens would need all of his objective detachment to read its contents without being drawn into the Spiral himself. Master Vu would stay and watch, ready to act if his aid was needed. Summoning a *Vānara*, he politely requested a pot of ginger tea and two jade cups and settled down to wait.

With Hermione close behind him, Severus stepped through the Floo into the Great Hall, coming to an abrupt halt as he beheld the completely unexpected. He gave a startled grunt as Hermione cannoned into him, drawing the attention of a great number of temporarily re-housed portraits, a small assembly of Aurors, *two* armed centaurs, and a frazzled headmistress.

He recovered himself quickly and included the stern-faced Bane in a general exchange of courtesies. Bane stared at him for a moment, then turned to whisper something to Firenze. The palomino centaur listened solemnly, then signalled to Minerva, Severus, and Hermione to follow him out of earshot from the Aurors.

"We need to confer in private," he said. "What the planets have revealed cannot be held silent. We waited for signs to tell us when to speak now we have them. Headmistress, please send for Minister Shacklebolt." Firenze waited until Minerva's silver cat streaked away with its tail at maximum bristle. "I need your permission to bring Tobias to the counsel we intend to give."

Minerva raised a hand to her throat and glanced uneasily at Severus. "May I ask why he should be present? I mean..." She searched for words. Severus narrowed his eyes. Minerva could feel the raw edge of his power as he folded his arms. "Would it be advisable?"

Firenze regarded them both seriously. "Advisable or not, he needs to be here."

"Why?" Severus' question snarled between them like an angry predator.

"Tobias is one of the signs," Firenze answered, completely unperturbed. He looked from Minerva to Hermione and Severus, and back again.

Minerva adjusted her shawl. "Severus, I have some idea of your opinion on..." She steeled herself. "Are the centaurs asking too much?"

Severus glared at the floor, a sullen fire lurking in his black eyes. "At least you have the courtesy to ask me, Minerva. Albus would have gone ahead and done it regardless of *anybody's* opinion." He saw Hermione watching him anxiously and, with an effort, recovered his impregnability. "If you must. I assume I have to be present?"

Firenze nodded an affirmative. "Headmistress?"

Minerva spoke hesitantly. "Very well. I shall go and fetch him."

"That will not be necessary, Headmistress," Firenze stated. "I will bring him here. The portraits gave me detailed directions as to his whereabouts when he went exploring yesterday." The centaur raised an eyebrow at Severus' scowl of irritated disbelief. "Perhaps Severus should accompany me."

Ignoring Minerva's shocked silence, Firenze moved towards a side exit and passed through without a backward glance. After a moment, Severus swore under his breath and strode after Firenze, leaving hastily vacated portraits and trepidation in his wake.

Hermione took a suddenly pale Minerva's arm. "Do you need to sit down?" she asked.

"I didn't think Severus would take up *that* offer," Minerva whispered, allowing Hermione to lead her to the Hufflepuff table.

Hermione shook her head as she chewed her lower lip. "I know things were far from good between Severus and his father. I should go with them or follow at a distance in case I'm needed."

Minerva placed a restraining hand on Hermione's shoulder. "Not this time, Hermione. I know it isn't the most fashionable thing to say these days, but sometimes men should be left to sort out their differences in their own way. Great Merlin! I don't know what Firenze is thinking, but I hope he has not misread or underestimated either of

them."

Master Vu stood as Oriens carefully rolled the Scroll of the Downward Spiral and placed it in the Buddha's lap. The mid-afternoon sun poured a relentless assault of stifling heat over man and beast, tree and stone, yet Master Vu knew his former pupil would be chilled to the core by the knowledge gleaned from the Scroll. As Oriens emerged from the *stupa*, the stonework restored itself and the Scroll faded from sight.

Oriens' pale gold eyes focussed on the waiting sage. "Master Vu," he said, pressing his palms together in the traditional gesture of acknowledgement for a revered teacher.

Master Vu smiled and pointed Oriens in the direction of the main *stupa*. Oriens wearily obeyed and allowed his body to sink onto a soft, woven sitting mat. After some moments of simply breathing, he vaguely realised that Master Vu, with attentive ceremony, was pouring two cups of ginger tea.

"Master, it is /who should be serving," he stated, sitting forward in protest. "You are the Sage..."

"One who would lead must know how to follow. One who would command must be content to serve," Master Vu interrupted amiably, his almond-shaped eyes briefly disappearing as his face crinkled with a beaming smile. He handed Oriens a cup of fragrant tea. "The Scroll of the Downward Spiral drains yang energy; this will amend the deficit." He signalled that Oriens should drink, but there were some traditions the Unspeakable would never relinquish.

Oriens placed the full cup on the mat. "After you, honourable Sage," he said, joining his palms once more.

The sage raised his cup and saluted Oriens. He sipped the hot liquid and sighed in contentment. "Ah, that is better. My bones insist on telling me I am beyond one hundred and twenty years old. Catching chickens is not as easy as it used to be."

Oriens blinked at this unexpected disclosure. "You were catching *chickens*?"

Master Vu shrugged casually. "At heart, it seems I am still a village boy from the mountains of Vietnam. I will catch chickens anywhere, anytime, no problem. Besides, they needed to be returned to their true form." He chuckled heartily. "A spell went awry in Defence classes this morning, and five first-year Initiates suddenly found they had a different embodiment to the one they were accustomed to. I cannot blame them for panicking; a black eagle chose that exact moment to have a rest on the window ledge."

Drinking gratefully, Oriens closed his eyes as yang heat vanquished the chill of the Scroll and swept away the shadows which threatened to depress both mind and magic. As his thoughts cleared, he cast a wall of silence around himself and the elderly sage. "During my time here," he began, "I learned of the three great powers which shape and move the world and everything existing in it. These powers are always in complementary motion: creating, sustaining, and dissolving."

At the sage's silent nod, Oriens continued. "The Downward Spiral is a path to destruction. At first seductive and compliant, it draws into itself sentient beings who seek to control the power of dissolution beings who hold the mistaken belief that the power of *dissolution* is stronger, and more inexorable, than the powers which create and sustain.

"In such beings, the dance of the three powers falters, and becomes warped and tortured. They become cold, cruel, incapable of empathy, murderous, and remorseless: their souls enslaved to the Spiral's energy. As they descend in the Spiral, they seek to pull others down with them. They begin to desire absolute dominion. The will to destroy overtakes them and this is what they do to anyone or anything that does not unquestioningly yield to them. As their souls weaken and fade, they draw on the energies of those who follow them in an attempt to fill the growing emptiness within."

Oriens swallowed another mouthful of tea. "Many times, the Downward Spiral has taken such blighted souls to their final place. At the very end of the Spiral, souls beyond help and healing are consumed, eaten by the creatures inhabiting that place. Master Vu, what happens to a soul after it is eaten?"

"That question has bewildered the wise since it was first asked. Some think the soul may be re-born after a time. Others say it becomes merged in the Unseen, never to appear again. Some of my peers in western lands suggest that eaten souls become more of the creatures doing the eating Dementors, as they call them. But I do not think your mission began with a question about the destiny of souls."

Oriens pensively shook his head. "The Scroll told of events in history where acts of terrible ignorance caused profound disturbances to the motion of the three powers on a much larger scale. The resulting turmoil, sometimes lasting many decades, could be large enough to create rifts in the very substance of the world.

"The Scroll documents the first appearance of the soul-eaters, more than ten thousand years ago: 'Subāhu, servant of Dark powers, gathered his army to stand against those who defied him. With a curse that brought crippling agony to all who heard it, he caused blood and flesh to rain upon his enemies the blood and flesh of their own children.

"So dreadful were the words he spoke, the three powers recoiled, convulsing and writhing in pain. A great rift appeared, grey and dull, disgorging a wave of paralysing cold. Through it came beings untouched by light or love, denizens of the darkest depths of the Downward Spiral. Sightless, speechless, and deathless, they gave fealty to Subāhu in return for the souls of his captives.' We know that Voldemort had a similar arrangement with Dementors."

"As did many other despots desirous of dismantling the very fabric of life and rebuilding it according to their own emaciated perception. None of them considered the inextricable danger of associating with the creatures. Reports come in daily of Dementor sightings. How many did Voldemort have in his army?"

"A number between one hundred and three hundred. But the tallies of the sightings over the past month suggest greater numbers perhaps seven hundred or nine hundred. More than could be accounted for by confounding factors, such as double counting." Oriens took a deep breath of blood-warm air already heavy with the building moisture that would sluice down in welcome torrents when the gathering clouds could hold no more. "The Scroll contained detailed information on the circumstances in which rifts occur... *Created* is not the word for them: they are the results of unbridled destruction."

"You propose that another rift has recently come into existence. Movement of Dementors into our world is occurring unchallenged."

"I have found much to support the idea in the Scroll. Splitting a soul into pieces, as Voldemort did, is not enough in itself to cause a rift to form. But when *piece* of a soul enslaved by intensely powerful Dark Magic passes through the Veil, this would be enough. The laws of Nature are broken, the powers stumble, and the barrier fails. Dementors cannot be destroyed, can they?"

Master Vu tucked his hands into his sleeves. "They are *in* our world, but they are not *of* it. They exist within laws that are fundamentally different to our own and so they cannot be destroyed. We may defend ourselves against them, certainly, even contain them as one would a contagion. Memory tells me there is another possibility mentioned in the Scroll."

Oriens immediately knew what Master Vu referred to, but it seemed impossible. "Send them back where they came from. Master, that would only be viable if they were massed together. The description of the magic needed to assemble them, let alone to open a rift and force them through, is power beyond my comprehension. Then the rift must be closed..."

"As you have read, Oriens, it has been done before. Only once but it has been done. It can be done again, though not necessarily by the same means. Another rift need not be opened when one is already in existence a saving of energy and effort if one has a mind to look for an advantage. Of course, not every Dementor in the world can be sent back. I'm afraid they will be represented among Earth's inhabitants until the end of the *Kali Yuga*, whenever that may be." The sage stood up. "When it is time, contact me. Borobudur will be ready to assist, as will Angkor Wat."

Severus followed Firenze at enough of a distance to make conversation impossible. He was quietly relieved that Hermione had not come along. He was completely unsure

as to what the outcome of his centaur-provoked mission would be.

He tried not to be attentive as Firenze approached a broad staircase and ascended easily enough there was a rumour that Firenze had a charm to make staircases centaur-friendly. Severus supposed that if such a charm existed, it was only applied to the more challenging, steep and narrow constructions. Firenze passed through a scone-lit hall, then turned into a broader hall with a barrel-vaulted ceiling. Still at a distance, Severus halted when Firenze knocked at a recessed door. A house-elf appeared and, after a short, inaudible exchange, bowed Firenze into the room.

Severus waited.

In an unexpectedly short time, the door opened and Firenze reappeared, Tobias and the house-elf close behind him. Severus glared at his father, willing him to dare to meet his eyes while wishing the Muggle would just go away.

It seemed that Tobias was not about to do either. He pulled on a sheepskin jacket and knelt to address the house-elf. Severus heard the words: 'See you later, Tocky', and could stand it no longer. As the house-elf popped out of sight, Severus strode to the middle of the hall.

"*You!*" he hissed, slicing the air with a single word.

Toby slowly got to his feet and stared at his son. A cold ripple of fear ran through him as the reports he had read about Death Eaters and their activities came back to bend his thoughts. He took a step back and bumped into Firenze, who moved between him and Severus. Among other strange snippets of information which seemed to make no sense at all, Firenze had also told him Severus was in the immediate vicinity. At no time had the centaur given any indication that violence was on the cards.

Toby surveyed Firenze carefully. Either centaurs were unreadable to an incredible extent or Firenze still did not believe that Severus was about to kill, maim, or otherwise destroy. He decided on a perilous gamble. "Firenze, go on ahead. I'll meet you at the bottom of the stairs."

Firenze calmly raised an eyebrow. "Are you sure?"

Toby squeezed his eyes shut. *God's Teeth! I just made me bloody mind up and then y' ask a question fit to unsettle a body all over again!* "Yeah."

The centaur gave both humans a dignified half-bow and departed, leaving them to assess each other.

Toby was the first to break eye contact. He had forgotten how closely Severus resembled Eileen, but he had not forgotten the ferocious intensity in Eileen's eyes as she created the *thing* that still haunted his occasional nightmares.

Severus had the same intensity but his was darker, deeper, and laced with restrained fury. Toby resisted the urge to retreat or plead. Somehow, he knew these actions would aggravate Severus to a point beyond reason and neither of them needed the results of *that*. Steadying himself, he chose his words carefully. "I won't fight you, Sev'rus, if that's what yer 'ere for."

Severus stiffened, then relaxed into what Toby recognised as a pre-combat stance. "Why ever not? Afraid to attack someone who can fight back?"

"Fear's got nothin' to do with it. I'm not gonna raise a finger against you 'cause it's somethin' I should never 'ave done in t' first place to you or yer mother. The drink was no excuse."

Severus gave a sarcastic snort. "Don't try to tell me that you are at all penitent. You are no*evolved* enough to comprehend such a sentiment..." he sneered. With sudden strides, he approached Toby and stood in front of him. "...let alone experience it," he concluded.

Close up, for they were now less than an arm's length apart, Toby could feel the sheer force of Severus' presence. Every hair on his body stirred in response. He held his ground. "Don't bet on it."

With a lightening-swift movement, Severus drew his wand and pressed the tip hard into his father's throat. After a moment, he gave a sinister smirk. "This is not a toy, I can assure you," he said, giving the wand a slight twist. "I wonder if you fully appreciate how easily I could pay you back, welt for welt, pain for pain..." His eyes flared ominously. He seized Tobias roughly by the front of his jacket and slammed him back against the stone wall.

"I know what a wand is: I seen one before," Toby gasped, instinctively gripping his assailant's wrist. Sensing a split-second pause in Severus' momentum, he pressed on. "I saw Eileen usin' 'ers one day. Only once. I gave 'er an ear-full about it 'cause..."

He flinched as Severus pressed the tip of his wand even harder into his throat. "'Cause I thought magic was trickery and games nothin' that'd ever put food on t' table, or get a job done. That's when she fessed up about... about bein' a witch and stuff about a wand bein' some kind of focussin' tool. I didn't believe what I saw. Didn't believe a word she said. Told meself I'd seen and 'eard *nothin'*."

"And?" Severus let the question hover a scalpel poised over exposed flesh.

"Since then, I've 'ad some *bloody* good reasons to change me mind. Are you gonna change yours?"

Severus lowered his voice to a threatening growl. "Do. Not. *Dare* to assume *anything* concerning my intentions."

"Are you gonna kill me or not?"

"There are worse things than death," Severus snarled. Without taking his eyes off Toby or relaxing his hold, he silently pointed his wand at one of the suits of armour. The armour began to glow dull red.

Toby could feel the heat emanating from it as the glow brightened to yellow-orange. The metal slowly changed shape, distorting as though left too long in a forge.

"*Finite Incantatem*," Severus intoned. "I can do the same to the marrow of your bones," he said matter-of-factly.

"Yeah. You could." Toby stared at the deformed armour, but the only thing he felt was a profound regret mingled with sorrow. "I said I won't fight you. If you want revenge, I can't stop you."

"No. You cannot." Severus studied him disdainfully for a moment, then abruptly released him. "Move," he ordered, indicating the staircase with his wand *Revenge levels the balance; it pays back what is due*, he thought bitterly as he followed a moment later. *But it does not replace that which was destroyed, nor does it go back in time and undo a misdeed.*

Severus had noticed his father's reaction to the sight of plate armour slowly melting in response to an effortless onslaught of magical power. He had not seen fear, or shock, or defiance. He had seen something much deeper. Something he himself was familiar with. Years of remorse and guilt left very distinctive scars.

Minerva could have wept with relief when Firenze entered the Great Hall with a noticeably dazed, but unscathed, Tobias. Firenze gave her a placid glance and a slight nod, a vague communication to indicate the absence of bloodshed. She wondered if some sort of confrontation had occurred, deciding that it had when Severus acrimoniously stalked through the door.

Any informative expression he might have worn was hidden behind his hair. He did not look at anyone. As if moving on autopilot, he went to stand beside Hermione. The two exchanged a quiet word and a fleeting touch of hands.

Minerva sighed and turned to Kingsley. "We shall adjourn to the Room of Requirement to hear what the centaurs have to say, now we are all assembled and, thankfully, in one piece."

"Looks like Firenze knew something you didn't," Kingsley replied, referring to Minerva's anxiously related misgivings about Tobias' safety in the company of an unrestrained Severus.

"Maybe," Minerva mused discreetly. She glanced at Hermione and Severus, who were now standing so close their bodies were nearly touching. "Or Severus knows he has something too valuable to risk damaging for the sake of settling a score."

With a series of succinct orders, Kingsley sent the Aurors back to guard duty on the watch-towers, then followed Minerva, Severus, Hermione, Tobias, and the centaurs into the Room of Requirement. Bane and Firenze headed for a sward of soft grass on one side of a wide table. The humans took their places in carved chairs on the other.

Everyone except Severus looked expectantly at Firenze, who held his hand out to accept an animal horn of huge proportions from Bane. "It has been many hundred years since these horns were sounded. Bringing them out of hiding was not an easy decision to make."

Out of habit, Hermione partially raised her hand to ask a question, then changed her mind when Severus gave her thigh a warning squeeze under the table.

Bane stamped a hoof to claim everyone's attention. "We detected intruders in the forest not long ago. As far as we know, there were two of them. Ronan will wait at the site until daylight to examine the ground for tracks. Of the two, we wounded one. The other fled and was pursued by Magorian, who curtailed the chase to avoid being led alone into a potential ambush.

"As planned in the event of a capture, we signalled the Aurors, who arrived promptly. They identified the prisoner as a Death Eater known as Travers." Bane paused and fidgeted, the muscles in his flanks twitched fitfully. "A Dementor came from where we could not tell. It went straight for Travers. The Aurors cast Patronus charms, but more Dementors arrived, perhaps fifty in all." He nodded to Firenze, who continued the report.

"Our herd assembled quickly when we heard Magorian sound his horn. We arrived to find the Aurors repelling Dementors with Patronus charms. As quickly as one Dementor was thrown back, another arrived to take its place. We arrayed ourselves with the Aurors; then, I called upon the horn-bearers to sound them in unison. We did so, and true to the legends of our forbears, all the Dementors retreated immediately. Unfortunately, in the preceding confusion, one of them had succeeded in eating Travers' soul."

"Thereby rendering him useless as a source of information," Severus muttered.

"The same thing happened to Barty Crouch... Junior," Hermione added, knowing that she and Severus had just reached the same conclusion. "A Dementor had been assigned as a kind of bodyguard for Minister Fudge. Crouch could have provided evidence as to the truth of Voldemort's return. Neither Fudge nor his foul toady, Umbridge, wanted to hear of it," she explained for the centaurs' edification. "Their denial of the growing danger was absolute."

Bane's expression of unyielding distrust finally changed. "Umbridge," he snorted in disgust, pawing the grass with a fore-hoof. "We were glad to be rid of the shrieking fiend."

"She is in Azkaban, where she belongs," Hermione said. She glanced at Severus, catching his eye while wondering if she should make her next statement. She felt his reassurance slip into her mind. "We... Severus and I... think Umbridge ordered the Dementor to attack Crouch to keep him quiet."

"Well," Kingsley mused, addressing both Severus and Hermione. "That suggestion fits with your ideas on targeted Dementor attacks particularly the incident in Little Whingeing. What I find very disturbing is that *someone* else knows how to do it and *that* someone is not an inmate of Azkaban."

"Do you have an idea as to the *someone's* identity?" Minerva asked, looking around the table.

"We have sound reasons to suspect an absent-without-leave Unspeakable," Severus answered. Aware of the sensitivity surrounding high-level accusations, he turned the discussion back on the centaurs. "What do the planets have to say?"

An evaluative silence followed, then Firenze spoke again. "Not since Merlin's time have we seen such patterns in the planets and in the smoke of sacred herbs.

"Jupiter, harbinger of power, shines brightly in the sign of the archer and begins his transition to Capricornus. Saturn, in the aspect of devourer, stands before the celestial void in opposition. Neptune, keeper of mysteries, hangs in the sign of the balance. We heard word, from a land far away, of a red dragon blazing across the night sky. We went to the stone circle and burned the herbs, interpreting these signs in smoke and ash."

"Will there be another war?" Minerva interrupted, her voice thready with concern.

"Mars lingers in Pisces," Firenze answered. "The prospect of battle could go one way, or the other." He swished his tail and handed the aurochs horn back to Bane. "A great magic has lain hidden, its power unused for centuries. It has been discovered and now it begins to stir. The time for its use draws near; for good or evil, we could not tell.

"From beyond the lightless depths, another force is gathering. It follows the hidden power, hungry to command it, and hungry to consume it. We burned the herbs again, using our most ancient rites. In the smoke, we beheld again the sign of power. Then another sign obscured the first: a centaur wielding a bow. We wondered if one of our own might hold a great secret. We conferred among ourselves, but none knew of it." He gazed steadily at Tobias. One by one, everyone including Severus stared at the Muggle.

Toby glanced nervously at Kingsley. Kingsley nodded once. Without a word, Toby drew the Llygad y Ddraig out of hiding and placed it on the table for all to see.

"It was not a centaur we sought, but a human born under the sign of the archer," Firenze concluded, cancelling the charms he had placed around Tobias to mask the aura of the Llygad's power.

"The power that shines brightly," Bane murmured. "And devouring entities from the unknowable void do indeed circle us."

Hermione frowned and shook her head. Divination, in any form, made very little sense to her. She remembered Severus' description of a dream in which he saw a red dragon depicted in a mosaic. "But how do all these signs tie in with the red dragon crossing the sky?" she asked, trying not to sound supercilious.

"We do not know," Firenze answered, his hooves making muffled thuds as he walked across the grass, brow furrowed in thought.

Never try getting sense out of a centaur, Severus thought jadedly, echoing Hagrid's grumbled sentiments. He *Accio'd* the Llygad and held it in his hand. Sensing Kingsley's scrutiny, he looked up and raised an eyebrow questioningly.

"Have another close look at it, Severus. See if you can garner any useful information," the Minister said. "And if you see that ruffian boy again, try some Legilimency on him!"

With a half-smirk, Severus nodded and settled himself. Using the same method as he had before, he allowed his awareness to merge with the flow of power within the Llygad. Despite his preparedness, the twisting, dropping sensation caught him off guard...

A Deepening Shadow - Part 2

Chapter 15 of 32

Severus sees something he did not expect. Tobias has reached his own conclusion, but plays his cards close to his chest. Arawn sets a snare. Lucius has vital information.

A/N's

Descriptions of a certain cave are consistent with Mary Stewart's depiction in her books *The Crystal Cave* (1970), *The Hollow Hills* (1973), and *The Last Enchantment* (1979).

Canon characters are the property of J.K. Rowling. I make no money from them.

Many thanks to linlawless for beta-reading, explaining how to use hyphens to modify wizards (ah, punctuation such ~~power~~), and a whole lot of comma-wrangling. See you back at the ranch, Lin!

With a growled oath, Severus caught his balance and opened his eyes to complete darkness. *Lumos*," he whispered as he drew his wand. He looked around, frowning through the lancing pain which flickered behind his eyes.

He was back in the cave where he had seen the boy, but the entrance was sealed with boulders and stones: blocked by a landslide, perhaps. The bronze mirror no longer adorned the wall. Severus approached the spot where the mirror had once stood. The toe of his boot caught on something in the thick layer of rock dust which coated the floor. Crouching, he rubbed the dust away and revealed a corner of tarnished, pitted bronze. *So this is definitely the same cave*, he thought, staring at a clot of shadow near the sealed entrance.

He nearly gasped when another figure soundlessly appeared out of thin air. Severus' eyes widened as he looked upon the newcomer, who was as unaware of his presence as the black-haired boy had been.

The wizard for he quickly illuminated his wand and established the fact also had black hair, which he wore loose about his shoulders and fashionably untidy. Severus caught a glimpse of obsidian eyes, and eyebrows that reminded him strongly of his mother. The wizard's dress sense was cavalier bordering on piratical. Soft leather riding boots, close-fitting hose, and a quilted scarlet doublet sewn with an extravagance of gold thread were revealed when he threw back his cloak of black wool. Severus quietly snorted at the lace adorning the wizard's collar and cuffs, then scrutinised the rapier hanging from an elegantly crafted sword-belt. Judging by wizard's precise, graceful movements, there could be no doubt that this strange character knew how to use the weapon.

The wizard dropped his cloak, then divested himself of sword-belt and doublet. Drawing a silver knife, he slit one of the doublet's inside seams and drew a small, vellum-wrapped package from within it. Silently, he cast *Reparo*, and the seam mended perfectly. Worriedly shaking his head, he picked up the package and moved to the rear of the cave. With an agile jump, he caught hold of a ledge high on the wall. After a brief scramble, he disappeared from view. Severus watched with eyebrows raised as a faintly musical note echoed from what he assumed was a hidden entrance to another part of the cave. The wizard emerged and dropped, catlike, to the ground. Donning his doublet, weaponry and cloak, he reached under his shirt and withdrew an object Severus now knew on sight...

His stomach in turmoil, Severus blinked and focussed on his concerned audience. His wand was drawn and illuminated. He allowed his gaze to rest on the Llygad y Ddraig and thought of the wizard in the cave. "Nox. I saw... " *I think I saw one of my ancestors* "I saw a man. A wizard," he said at last.

"A grown-up version of the boy?" Kingsley prompted.

"No. It seemed a few centuries had passed since the boy's time. The wizard I saw had *early sixteen-hundreds* stamped all over him. He had this with him." Severus held up the Llygad.

"Was he using it?"

"He looked as though he was about to do something with it. The... vision... ended before he enacted his intentions."

Minerva studied her former teaching colleague carefully and exchanged a worried glance with Hermione. "Severus, did you see something disturbing?"

"Not exactly," Severus answered, reaching for Hermione's hand under the table. "I believe I have seen evidence that the Llygad y Ddraig truly is an heirloom of the Prince family." He scowled. "The word 'heirloom' does not fit the thing."

"An object of such power is not a trinket. Nor is it a 'thing,'" Bane said evenly. "It is an *inheritance* both it *and* the responsibility of its use and safekeeping."

Firenze approached Severus and laid a hand on his shoulder. "*Your* inheritance. It was kept hidden from you and yet kept safe until the time came for you to claim it."

Toby watched his son's eyes grow blank and expressionless. He could only wonder what Severus was thinking. For a long time, Toby had suspected that the Llygad y Ddraig was connected with the fragment of a tale he had salvaged from the fireplace so many years before.

Tocky had only managed to tell him a little about Merlin before Firenze came to tell him he was required for some 'important revelation'. According to Tocky, all reliable physical descriptions of Merlin had faded into obscurity. There was certainly no *documented* evidence of the great wizard's appearance. However, Tocky had been able to confirm Merlin's Welsh origins the house-elf even gave Toby the Welsh pronunciation of the name *Myrddin*. Dropping his reedy voice to a conspiratorial whisper, Tocky had told of a fact long forgotten and, more often than not, overtly denied by wizards and witches: Merlin's father was a Roman *Muggle* of high military rank. It gave Toby a serious case of as he called them the heebie-jeebies.

Toby was convinced that the boy featured in the mysterious paragraphs was Merlin himself but what right did he, a Muggle, have to make such a declaration? To his present company, it could well be worse than heresy. Toby sighed quietly and held his tongue between his teeth. Several times during the meeting, he had been on the verge of revealing his conclusions.

When Kingsley had asked Severus to examine the Llygad, he had also told him to use Legilimency on a "ruffian boy" if he saw him again. "Again" could only mean that

Severus had seen the boy before in a "vision" like the sixteenth-century wizard he had reported seeing in his most recent inspection of the Llygad.

Wonder what the lad looked like: was 'e black-'aired and black-eyed? Toby pondered. He decided to pick Tocky's brains some more. He also decided that if Tocky's information did not discount the idea, Severus should be the first to know of the possible connection of the Llygad with the legendary Merlin. For better or for worse, Toby resolved to tell Severus himself.

From the roof of the gymnasium, Arawn stared out over the concrete decay of Pripyat. At least Travers had been silenced in time though it had been a very close call.

Strategic cooperation between centaurs and humans was an obstacle he had never expected to encounter. Such a thing had not occurred for centuries. He discounted the centaurs' participation in the Battle of Hogwarts. By all descriptions, they had made an impulsive decision and intervened at the fifty-ninth minute of the eleventh hour a clattering, disorganised rabble.

This time, they had been highly coordinated. Their systematic patrols in the Forbidden Forest had exposed the covert surveillance Arawn had charged his band of Death Eaters to perform. He ground his teeth. Centaur patrols were not supposed to happen! Nor were centaurs supposed to *summon* Aurors and close ranks with them. Arawn fancied he could still hear the wild, defiant notes of the centaurs' horns. Apparently, so could the Dementors. A small group of them huddled near the edge of the roof. They were still manifestly restless. Arawn could feel their agitation at encountering unexpected resistance.

Arawn clenched his fists. As far as he knew, centaurs had no need for *any* form of defence against Dementors. Dementors did not regard them as suitable prey. Yet centaurs *did* have a defensive strategy, and it was a highly effective one. Arawn snarled quietly. Never in his life had he imagined he would be chased by a centaur and narrowly avoid being shot down by the galloping star-gazer.

Star-gazer! Arawn considered the implications. *If the centaurs have seen signs in the heavens, perhaps this explains why they were patrolling and armed.* He took the Llygad y Ddraig out from under his robes. Of all the ancient artefacts he had seen as Curator of Unidentified Antiquities, it was the only one to truly captivate him. Maddeningly, its power flowed so teasingly, voluptuously within reach, yet it eluded him like a Siren calling him to a sensuous, irresistible death.

If the Llygad y Ddraig is told of in the movements of planets and the patterns of stars, it must have more significance than I first thought. I know it holds some great secret, and it has to be a secret concerning Merlin himself. I know it holds a potent, ancient magic the impenetrable defences alone tell of its worth and peril. Never have I seen its equal. Circe! The heights that could be reached if such power were directed by a strong will.

A Dementor approached him. Its voice slid into his mind. *What could be done with such power?* There was a stealthy taunt in the creature's tone. A shrouded challenge.

Arawn did not need to look at the Dementor. He could feel its proximity as though it were an extension of himself. Its voracious hunger goaded his obsession and forged hidden ambition into a lethally sharp focus.

"Do you know how many magical artefacts lay forgotten in the vaults?" he asked out loud. "All of them *had* some purpose. All of them still *have* a potential use." He turned and approached the Dementor, no longer feeling its bone-chilling cold. "It has been too long since magic advanced in any meaningful way. We have followed the same rules and learned the same methods which become more ineffectual and insipid by the day for centuries!" Arawn paced, disgusted. "Magical power needs to grow and develop. It needs to breach new territory and conquer the weak, inane laws put in place by puling idiots who are afraid of their own shadows! It cannot do so when there is no discipline, no reverence, no exactitude." He held the Llygad in the palm of his hand, then closed his fingers over it. "Perhaps, with the power I hold in my hand, I could take magic to a higher incarnation a renaissance!"

You shall call it into being. We will help you as you have helped us

Arawn faced the hovering creature. *I need Snape to waken the Llygad's power. He must place it in the hand of a forgotten god in the first home of his ancestors.* He considered the problem of cornering the wizard. The fact that Snape was never alone when he exited the wards of Hogwarts or the Ministry was no doubt a response to his ex-Death Eater status. There were some in wizarding Britain who would never regard Snape as worthy of anything beyond warming a cell in Azkaban or an assassin's curse.

The Dementor's shroud fluttered as a fitful breeze skittered over the abandoned city. *We must retreat for a time. We must watch from a distance*

Arawn had a sudden inspiration. "I shall give you memories of every place even *remotely* connected with Snape from the ruins of a Roman villa to the squalor of Spinner's End. Place our spies in these locations. Contact me at once if he makes an appearance. Detain him if you can. Do not harm him."

If he has company?

"Detain them, too. If Snape feigns ignorance of the Llygad y Ddraig, or proves uncooperative, hostages will be useful bargaining tools."

Severus groaned appreciatively. "Where did you learn to do this so well?"

"Do *what* so well, Severus? You have to be more specific. Are you referring to my ability to brew an outstanding Muscle Relaxing Ointment, or to the unparalleled excellence of its application?" Hermione warmed a little more of the ointment in her hand and smoothed it over his lower back.

"Both," he purred, stretching blissfully as Hermione kneaded a particularly stubborn knot out of his left erector spinæ.

"I had a Potions professor who did not compromise his extremely high standards for anyone. Some would have called him... difficult, but I found his classes to be a welcome challenge and a constant source of inspiration."

"Inspiration?"

"Inspiration to achieve *outstanding* results, both as a personal goal and as a means of irritating the hell out of him without being disrespectful."

"Oh, *really?*"

"As for the application technique: remember when I said I told Parvati that I wasn't too keen on horses?"

"Yes."

"Well, when I was around ten years old, I wanted to try riding one. I soon found out that staying in the saddle was not as easy as I had thought. I took a bad tumble and needed three whole months of physiotherapy and remedial massage to get proper movement back in my shoulders."

Severus thought for a moment. "No doubt you plagued your long-suffering therapist with incessant questions until you had enough material for a conference...*Ow!*"

"That's one of the *ashi* points," Hermione said. "They are usually quite tender. Some refer to them as the 'Ah, shit!' points because that's the usual response from patients receiving treatment."

"Your *therapist* told you *that*? When you were *ten*?"

"Nope. It's what I said when she applied pressure to it, thereby prompting a full explanation. Luckily, Mum didn't hear me. How does that feel?"

"Much better," Severus replied. "Who would have thought preparing you for the genteel methods of Wizengamot cross-examiners would be so stressful?"

Hermione swatted him playfully. "You enjoyed it thoroughly! Vintage *Professor* Snape in mega-snark, terror-of-the-dungeons mode. I'm the one in need of a massage after such a ruthless grilling. And I had classes afterwards!"

"Vintage? Witch! I will have you know I am not yet in my dotage. Far from it," he added silkily.

"An afternoon spent demonstrating alternative Dementor repulsion techniques on a Boggart seems to have left you a little ragged around the edges."

"After which Fergus and I engaged in a bout or two of amicable duelling."

Hermione pointed her wand at the fireplace to renew a somewhat neglected blaze. "And an amicable pint or two of double stout."

Crookshanks lazily rolled away from the hearth in response to a wave of whisker-creaking warmth, then curled up to concentrate on another eight hours of sleep.

"Severus?"

"Hmm?"

"The business with the Llygad... and your mother's family..."

"Is building up to something manifestly dangerous," Severus finished for her.

"You seem to be front and centre in whatever is going to happen. I'd be lying if I said I wasn't worried about the kind of danger we might face. It's like a shadow approaching the sun. It's not yet upon us, but it *is* growing and deepening. And so soon after the war."

"Hermione," Severus entreated, pulling her into an embrace. "We are as prepared as we can be with the knowledge that we have. Oriens will be back at the Ministry on Thursday morning. He has been in touch with Kingsley and has some information for us to consider. I have yet to speak to Lucius and you, my witch, need to make sure you will be at your best for the Wizengamot." He rubbed her back gently, allowing his hand to stray to her hips. "Now look what you've done! I have a surfeit of tension again."

Hermione appraised his nude form candidly. "So you do, but it is only in one particular muscle group. Your present condition will require a very specific form of massage, with a simultaneous application of heat."

"What do you mean by 'heat'?" he enquired, pinning her down with his weight. *You* are being far from specific."

"Let's see..." Hermione gasped as Severus nipped her earlobe. She moaned and grappled with him to exchange a fiercely passionate kiss. "As much *heat* as you can handle."

"I do hope that does not involve *literally* setting me on fire," Severus murmured as he tasted his way down her body.

Lucius Malfoy was not one to express excited anticipation, but he was sorely tempted when he recognised Severus' voice in quiet conversation with the warder. With a flamboyant clanking of keys and a gruff announcement of his visitor's identity, the cell door opened, and a familiar black-clad figure strode through. Forgetting all pretence at poise, Lucius leapt to his feet, pleased to see that Severus still greeted him with a small, dignified smile. To his astonishment, the warder gave Severus a deferential salute and left them both alone, closing and locking the door behind him. Lucius arched a sleek, platinum eyebrow. "They trust you enough to leave you alone with me?"

"Evidently, though they are taking the same precautions with me as they do for every other visitor to Azkaban." Severus raised his right arm, revealing a metal band around his wrist. "It binds the wearer's magic," he explained. "I am also wandless."

Lucius' eyes traversed Severus' robes, coming to rest on a rune-embossed silver emblem decorating the younger wizard's chest. Lucius gave a smile that was both rueful and pleased. It was too late for him to make a new life as a free man, but he did not begrudge Severus his obvious success. "There's room there for your Order of Merlin," he said, indicating an unadorned patch of finely tailored cloth. He laughed as Severus rolled his eyes. "I can tell you are close to jubilant, however much you try to hide it." Lucius picked up the *Daily Prophet* and waved it like a flag. "Order of Merlin First Class! Now you can tell Voldemort ~~and~~ Dumbledore to go and dine on Flobberworms."

"Flobberworms are far too useful for such a fate," Severus commented, allowing himself to smile properly. He looked around the cell, quirked an eyebrow as he noted some meagre home comforts in the form of seat cushions, a coffee table, and an empty crystal decanter. "I heard inmates are now allowed the *Prophet* and *The Quibbler*. Are decorative freedoms also allowed?"

"We may personalise our cells to some small extent," Lucius answered. "I hope to build extra collateral with, as one could phrase it, judicious advice." He sighed as he surveyed his cell. "I have a long way to go before I can offer you civilisation in the form of a comfortable chair and a glass of wine." He looked Severus in the eyes. "You are here for information."

Severus nodded once. "I am." He slowly paced the floor with his hands clasped behind his back. "Before you begin negotiating your price, think on this: there was an eyewitness to proceedings at Spinner's End on the night Riddle had my parents executed."

Lucius frowned. "Oh?"

"A Malfoy was verbally identified as one of the perpetrators."

Lucius steepled his fingers. After some silent minutes of deep thought, he gestured to a second chair. "Sit down, if you will." When Severus complied, Lucius regarded him seriously. "A Malfoy was there. My father, Abraxas." A troubled look crossed his aristocratic features. "No doubt you recall, when Voldemort told you of the execution, he claimed he had rid you of those who had neglected and misused you as a *favour* to you. I was under the impression you were indifferent to their demise."

Severus nodded. "I am aware Riddle was also testing the strength of my loyalty." He ignored Lucius' oblique probing for the reason behind his present enquiry.

Lucius folded his arms. When he looked at Severus again, his features were drawn and melancholy. "When you first came to Hogwarts, you were barely civilised by *anybody's* standards, let alone a Malfoy's. Yet my father ordered me to watch over you, to provide an example of what a wizard should be, and to give you direction in the ways of Slytherin House. At first, I wondered what I had done to deserve such a burden. A half-blood guttersnipe was hardly my choice for an adherent. But academically, you showed great promise from the first day even if you did spend most of your time going moon-eyed over the Evans Mud... girl.

"Mercifully, you were a quick study when it came to table manners, deportment, and elocution. When I was instructed to bring you to Malfoy Manor for the holidays, I began to suspect there was more to my designated mentoring than ensuring the sanctity of Slytherin's behavioural standards. By then, Severus, I truly considered you a friend."

"I gather your suspicions were confirmed," Severus observed as a shadow of unease darkened Lucius' countenance.

"I think so. I don't know for certain, but what I do know is that the Dark Lord did not converse with his three most trusted followers without significant reason. On the night your parents were executed, I brought you to the Manor."

"I remember."

"I asked you to wait in the drawing room; then I went to tell Father you were present. I heard them talking Voldemort, Father, Rookwood, and Crevan. They did not see me. I hid behind the suits of armour at the top of the grand staircase." Lucius reached for a glass and a pitcher of water, his hands trembling slightly as he poured a measure and downed it in one gulp. "Father was telling Voldemort about the last moments of a Muggle and a blood traitor. Then they began arguing about a half-blood: a new recruit on the verge of taking the Mark. I knew they were talking about you. That was why I eavesdropped."

Severus was the picture of calm acceptance. "What did their argument reveal?"

"Rookwood was against you from the start, as were many others who dared to harbour doubts about the Dark Lord's plans. Voldemort must have been feeling generous that night; he did not carve little slices off Rookwood and force him to eat them. Voldemort said I remember it word for word: 'I will judge the time to hand it to him. I will judge when he should be told its history. I will command him to use it. Then, I will claim its power. With that power, and with the Elder Wand, nothing will challenge me ever again and I will take magic to its next magnificent incarnation. You may do as you will with him after that time. Until then, keep the half-blood close.'"

"You spoke of this to no-one?"

"I couldn't. Voldemort placed *Consultatio Obsaepio* on 'all who have heard'. Unwittingly, he had also cast it on me. This is the first time my thoughts on the matter have been decipherable even to myself, let alone made the transition to speech." Lucius pulled up his left sleeve, revealing a small, round scar as the only remnant of the Dark Lord's Mark. "The vanishing of the Mark and my loose tongue are welcome assurances that he is truly gone."

Working on the assumption that "it" was the Llygad y Ddraig as carried by Crevan, Severus quickly collated the information with everything else he knew about the artefact. The fit was too precise to be a coincidence. "Did any of them mention what I was supposed to be commanded to use?"

"No. They all seemed to know of it without mentioning anything specific. Did you have something in mind perhaps in the form of an educated guess?"

Severus smirked. "Lucius, really! Have you no higher price to claim than *more* information which, I might add, could be pure speculation and completely unreliable?"

"Unreliable? From you? Preposterous! But I do have something in mind as payment." He waited until Severus silently prompted him to continue. "I want Narcissa to have visiting rights."

"Visiting rights', as in...?"

"Severus, don't make me go into details!" Lucius frowned in exasperation. "I need her, Severus. Not just physically... I love her. Oh, I know our marriage was arranged in accordance with centuries of tradition, and actually falling for each other was highly unlikely and deemed unnecessary but that is exactly what happened. If Voldemort had found out..."

"He would have seen it as an infringement upon the loyalty he claimed as his due. He would have eliminated the interference."

Lucius nodded weakly. "I never realised how much I valued her until we were forced apart. I didn't even acknowledge that I loved my own son until his life was forfeit." He waved his hand in a broad acknowledgement of his surroundings. "I wonder if this place is a blessing or a curse. I have too much time to think and reflect."

"I shall see what can be arranged," Severus said, unwilling to be drawn into a philosophical debate.

"Thank you, Severus. There is something else you should know about."

"In exchange for what?"

"I believe you have already paid for it by protecting my son's soul."

"I acted under a wand oath to Narcissa."

"I don't care *how* it was done!" Lucius exclaimed. "The only thing I am interested in is the fact that *you* were there, and *you* stood between Draco and multiple avenues to damnation!" Lucius paused to catch his breath, flushed and intent. "An Unspeakable paid me a visit some time ago the exact date I cannot be sure of. Time blurs and warps here. If not for the deliveries of what passes for newsprint, I would not know the day of the week, or even the month. The Unspeakable was asking me for specific memories of Death Eaters yourself included."

Severus narrowed his eyes as a cold thread of foreboding crept up his spine. "Go on."

"The subject of the memory had to be in an emotionally charged state: one filled with anger, or hatred, at the point of losing all self-control. I had plenty of memories to choose from scenes from Revels, infighting, rivalries but you were my masterpiece." Before Severus could respond, Lucius continued. "I did not betray you. I produced a fine concoction of a false memory. I took the image of you duelling Mulciber to an insensible pulp and substituted your entirely justified wrath with Voldemort's vicious blood-lust. The others I cared nothing for; the Unspeakable was welcome to true memories of *them*."

"What did this Unspeakable look like?"

"A little taller than me, heavily muscled, irritatingly well-featured. Picture a Swedish Flying instructor and Quidditch hero the kind vapid witches like to swoon over and you'll have the picture. His eyes are the most noticeable thing about him."

"In what way?"

"As unpleasant a task as it may be, consider Dolores Umbridge."

Severus considered, then duly curled his lip. "Soulless eyes? You saw the same thing in the Unspeakable?"

"Oh, yes. Perhaps I am jumping to wild conclusions, but I wonder if Umbridge and the Unspeakable have a close association with Dementors as common ground?"

Severus raised both eyebrows in surprise. "The Unspeakable in question was Chief Administrator of Dementors before they defected to Riddle."

Lucius was now deathly pale. "You know of him already. That's good. There's more. When the Unspeakable dropped in for a chat, I suspected he was not alone."

It was all Severus could do to restrain himself from demanding the entire story instantly. "Someone under a Disillusionment Charm?"

Lucius shook his head. "His shadow was... unusual. I swear I saw it shift on its own. Furthermore, it was not his real shadow." Lucius placed an ink pot in front of a lit candle. "His *real* shadow fell true, like the shadow of this ink pot. The other shadow did not. It was slightly off to one side and darker. I would not have noticed had I not been staring at the floor trying to think of ways to guard your back."

"I thank you for it. Was there a discernible drop in temperature?"

"In here? None that I could feel. Azkaban is always cold." Lucius cupped his hands around the candle flame to emphasise his point. "I assume you are thinking along the same lines as I am: the Unspeakable had a Dementor concealed in, or as, his shadow."

Severus nodded thoughtfully. His musings followed a sinister logic and reached a disturbing conclusion. "He wanted the emotionally charged memories *to feed* to Dementors, thereby giving them a means of tracking a specific target. Clever. Though I cannot fathom *how* such a method would work."

"Clever and dangerous. Even Voldemort could not control those creatures completely. I have no idea what the Unspeakable wants with Death Eaters or those soul-sucking vermin, but whatever it is, you can be sure the Ministry would not approve. Be wary, Severus. I had the distinct impression he will not give up easily."

Severus folded his arms as he considered his next move. "I shall have a word, or many, with Augustus Rookwood... What is the matter?"

"Rumours. I hear snippets in the corridors. There's something wrong with Rookwood." Lucius ran his hands through his hair. "Gods, what I would not give for a shot of Old Ogdens." He turned to face Severus. "I hear he has the look of a man who is not entirely present. Word is that he has... gone. Not to any place in particular, or sickened with any known affliction... just... gone."

"As though his soul has been eaten?" Severus suggested.

"If that is the case, he hasn't been *thoroughly* consumed." Lucius shivered.

Severus scowled. "Perhaps his soul has been, under orders from our Unspeakable friend, *partially* devoured."

Five Arrows - Part 1

Chapter 16 of 32

Crookshanks gives Severus an advisory paw. Hermione has some good news, and Minerva enlists a new staff member. Dementors are patrolling. Tobias provides a stop-gap solution and gives Hermione an important message. Severus maintains order during some interesting revelations.

A/N's

This chapter will be presented in three parts.

French English

Certainement: certainly

mon ami: my friend

en petit: a little (as in describing something as small in size)

Palais des Papes: the Palace of the Popes in Avignon, Southern France

C'est magnifique: it is magnificent

Australian Slangue English

Galah: a foolish person (in the context of this fic. Otherwise, a type of parrot)

Sanger: shortened form of 'sandwich'

References to Macsen's treasure are consistent with Mary Stewart's depiction in her books *The Crystal Cave* (1970), *The Hollow Hills* (1973), and *The Last Enchantment* (1979).

Pugsley Addams is the property of the cartoonist Charles Addams. I make no profit from his character.

Canon characters are the property of J.K. Rowling. I make no money from them.

Many thanks and a great many blessings to TeaOli for beta-reading and giving this chapter a detailed polish.

Petrus waited silently in the prisoners' dock, resisting the urge to test the strength of the glowing bonds encircling his wrists and ankles. Instead, he concentrated on *not* flattening his ears at the sound of the cross-examiner's incisive, condescending discourse. Keeping his head respectfully bowed, he sneaked a sidelong glance at Mademoiselle Granger as she answered questions and countered arguments with courtesy, intelligence, and gravity. She was, indeed, a remarkable young witch. *Monsieur Severus, you are a most fortunate wizard*, he thought, sending a silent prayer of well-wishes for the couple.

His attention was arrested by a murmuring movement from the assembled Wizengamot. A gavel clacked noisily. The Chief Warlock stood with tremulous difficulty he was, after all, a very old man. Petrus cocked his head and squinted up at him. Elphias Doge reminded him of an old priest in *Cathédrale Notre Dame de Paris*: a kindly old soul who had gone a bit strange in his final years. The blissfully confused priest had started blessing everyone from gypsy children to pigeons and, eventually, any gargoyle he could reach. Petrus swallowed as he remembered the frail, withered hand resting on his head while the priest's wavering voice made fervent entreaties on behalf of his soul.

"The Wizengamot will adjourn for due considerations in this... most unusual... case," Elphias announced. The high benches slowly emptied. Not a word was spoken. Kingsley stealthily looked down and caught Hermione's eye. He gave her a reassuring wink.

As soon as the last robed figure vanished from sight, Hermione gave a great sigh and plonked into a hard, wooden chair. "I wonder what they mean by 'due

considerations'," she muttered.

"Most likely, a lively debate on the surrounding complications which *may* pertain to the eventual reaching of a decision," Minerva stated primly. "As lively as *that* lot get, anyway," she added, rolling her eyes.

Hagrid leaned over and patted Hermione's shoulder. "Yer doin' a fine job, 'Ermione. Complications, nothin', Minerva! 'Ermione didn' need ter 'ear tha'. Perfessor Dumbledore could not 'ave argued a better case..." Hagrid's voice cracked as he mentioned Albus' name. He pulled a large, spotted handkerchief from his pocket and delicately dabbed his eyes.

Petrus turned slightly, searching out Hermione as uncertainty surged through his mind. She gave him a small smile. Minerva held up crossed fingers. Hagrid gently thumped the left side of his chest in a universally understood conveyance of a single word: *Courage!*

Severus let himself into his rooms and allowed his agitated weariness to manifest by way of an undignified collapse onto the sofa.

He grimaced and rubbed his eyes. His visit to Rookwood or what was left of Rookwood had been very unsettling. Legilimency had revealed a ragged-edged void where memory and the vibrant sparks of thought should have been. Rookwood's appearance echoed the ruin of his mind: gaunt, grey-skinned and blank-eyed. When Severus greeted him, Rookwood simply stared back at him without recognition. It was also obvious that the ex-Unspeakable did not know or even care where he was. When questioned, he would only repeat his name over and over again in a hoarse, clumsy bark better suited to an Inferius than to a man who still had a pulse.

Severus concluded that his guess as to what ailed old Rookwood was correct a Dementor had *partially* kissed him. Part of his soul had been consumed, and like a tree whose roots had been severed, Rookwood's mind had withered, died, and crumbled. It was the only explanation Severus could offer to the anxious Healer who had accosted him on the way out of the prison.

Back in the Ministry, Kingsley had taken Severus' grim news calmly enough. He ordered Head Auror Robards to send out another team to search for Arawn. He also gave the necessary permissions to activate international contacts. Only then did the Minister reveal how troubled he really was it showed in the movement of his eyes, the pitch of his voice, and the restless movements of his body. Curiously, the only reassurance Severus could offer was to himself: Kingsley trusted him enough to reveal a perfectly human moment of vulnerability in a very uncertain and increasingly insidious situation.

Sprawled on his back, Severus looked around the darkening room and wondered what stage of deliberations the Wizengamot were currently engaged in. He scowled to himself, then scowled at Crookshanks when he noticed the half-Kneazle watching him accusingly.

"And what is *your* problem, if I may have the privilege of asking?"

Crookshanks flicked an ear, glared at the fire-less grate, huffed into his whiskers, and stared pointedly at Severus while allowing his nictitating membranes to slide over his eyes.

"By that little display, I assume you're trying to convince me that you're sickening from cold and neglect. Fortunately, I have a remedy at hand though I warn you, it tastes terrible."

Crookshanks moaned petulantly. He faced the fireplace and hunkered down into what Hermione described as "roast-chicken-posture".

"Or it *could* mean that you want the fire lit so you can spend the rest of the evening in a coma of moderately singed warmth."

Crookshanks glanced over his shoulder.

Severus could have sworn the furry beast rolled his eyes. Hiding a smirk, he obliged the animal before he could be placed on a vengeance list.

Trying not to think of Riddle's unknown and unexecuted plans, ancient hidden powers, mysterious ancestors, centaurs' divination rituals, unhealthily obsessed Unspeakables, secret caches of aurochs horns, and an uncouted swarm of Dementors busily herding and possibly snacking on Death Eaters, Severus growled his way to an upright position and poured himself a glass of wine.

There was one situation he knew he really did have to give some thought to. It was unavoidable. He could not examine the Llygad y Ddraig again without *some* form of interaction with his father. At least he had not harmed the Muggle during their last close encounter. Severus was quietly pleased with himself for showing restraint. He did not explore the reasons as to *why* he had let Tobias go with little more than a flea in his ear and a demonstration of power.

Of course, questions had been asked as to how a suit of armour ended up in such a noticeable state of distortion. To hope that the headmistress would not notice it as she and Firenze escorted Tobias back to his rooms would have been a pointless daydream.

The loitering portrait of an Irish balladeer fitted Minerva's brief inquest to song and so passed it on to Phineas Black. Phineas Black, having apologised for being unable to sing, told Severus half-way up the stairs to the guest wing.

As the story went, Firenze was not fazed by Minerva's scalding annoyance. He quietly stated that he had not been there, had seen nothing, and was not in a position to offer enlightenment. Tobias, when questioned, gave the armour a disinterested glance before shrugging and telling Minerva, 'It were like that when I got 'ere'. Minerva had grumbled about 'the solidarity of miscreants', and admitted she did not have the time to investigate further: she had a hearing to get to, and the Wizengamot waited for no-one. In a gesture of surrender, she summoned Smithy the house-elf overseeing the repair of metallic objects and instructed him to have the armour restored to its original configuration.

Severus watched the snoozing half-Kneazle, admiring how the flickering light turned Crookshanks' fur into burnished copper and molten bronze. An unexpected idea slipped into his mind. He weighed it incredulously but felt only a soft pressure. Crookshanks' claws were completely retracted. Human eyes met feline eyes. Crookshanks' There was only one way to find out...

"You have a reputation of being an astute judge of character." Severus was glad nobody else was in the room. He felt more than a little foolish attempting conversation with Kneazle-kind, let alone asking one for an opinion. He shook his head and scowled. "I suppose it is impossible to judge the character of someone you haven't met, even for one with Kneazle heritage."

Crookshanks sat up and stretched, then turned his back to the fire and tucked his tail safely away from the flames. After a head-splitting yawn, his eyes and ears focussed on Severus with alert attention.

Severus decided to experiment anyway. "If I mention the name 'Tobias Snape', do you experience an urge to claw someone's eyes out?"

Crookshanks padded over to Severus and helped himself to a vacant cushion. Sitting bolt upright, he raised one front paw as though to wash it.

With a speed that caught Severus completely off-guard, Crookshanks sprang forward. His paw shot out and came to rest on Severus' hand. Severus belatedly recoiled, expecting the sting of five curved needles but felt only a soft pressure. Crookshanks' claws were completely retracted. Human eyes met feline eyes. Crookshanks' expression was one of calm assurance, emphasised by the curling hook in the tip of his tail.

"Does that mean 'No'?"

Crookshanks purringly oozed onto his favourite wizard's lap and butted him affectionately.

A companionable silence followed, during which Severus' thoughts turned solely to Hermione. He idly smoothed Crookshanks' fur and pretended he was *not* clock-watching. Crookshanks pretended to doze, one ear betraying his wakefulness by occasionally straying towards the door.

All pretensions ceased when Crookshanks sat up and briskly washed his face, seconds before Severus felt his wards lift. Schooling himself into a neutral frame of mind so he would be ready for any news Hermione might give, he settled the excited animal in one arm and opened the door. His first thought was of how utterly exhausted his witch looked though an animated brightness hovered in her eyes and a smile played hide-and-seek on her lips.

Hermione briefly forgot sore feet and fatigue as her familiar stretched out his front paws to reach her and Severus welcomed her inside with a look of ardent adoration. *This is what 'coming home' should be all about*, she thought, nestling happily in a dual embrace of heavy, black wool and soft, ginger fur.

"They agreed to give Petrus his freedom," she whispered. "I can hardly believe it. He's with Kingsley and Minerva, signing the parchments for release and the three-year probation here at Hogwarts." She pushed back from her wizard to look him in the eyes. "You *have* been busy, haven't you?"

Severus kissed her tenderly. "I am always busy; only the intensity varies."

Hermione carefully disengaged her dress-robos from Crookshanks' insistently questing claws and enthroned her delighted pet on a usually-forbidden-footstool. "Minerva told me of your recommendations for the position of Assistant Librarian, but she still has some doubts as to how Madam Pince might be persuaded to agree to it." Hermione rested a hand on Severus' shoulder as she eased off one of her shoes. "Owww... Relief with a capital 'R'."

Severus took the high-heeled shoe from her, raising one eyebrow as he appraised her wonderingly. "These look like instruments of torture. Why on Earth...?"

"To make me look taller." Hermione winced as she took off the other shoe and flexed her toes. "I needed as much presence as I could get. I was so absorbed in the minutiae of debate, I kept forgetting to renew the cushioning charms."

"Surely your *presence* of mind and intellect far outweighs..."

"It's alright for *you!* Merlin, Severus, you just have to walk into a room and you *command* everyone's attention without even trying."

"Hardly due to stature alone," he countered.

"No, but I am sure it helps. First impressions are usually visual ones and I'm afraid I don't look... impressive."

"Enough, witch! I find you most impressive. In a great many ways." He scooped her into his arms, carried her to the sofa, and deposited her there. Pouring another glass of wine, he pressed it into her hands.

Hermione took a long, grateful sip of wine and sighed blissfully when Severus rested her feet in his lap and gently rotated her ankles. "Now, shall I tell you about..." She bit her lip and wriggled as Severus pressed his thumbs into the aching muscles along the arch of each foot. "Gods! That feels amazing!" The proceedings of the Wizengamot fled from her consciousness as he methodically restored movement and sensation. "Second only to making love," she breathed.

"An interesting observation, my dear, though I suspect it is a subjective one. I would find an *objective* comparison far more engaging."

Minerva peered over her spectacles as Severus and Hermione Floo'd into the office fifteen minutes later than requested. *Oh, look what the Kneazle dragged in* she observed, giving them both a terse glance of reprobation. Their sentiments of apology were offset by a certain smug satisfaction, which hinted at the reason for their uncharacteristic tardiness. Minerva shook her head. *Too much information.*

Irma caught her eye, subtly nodded towards the couple, and arched her eyebrows. Minerva took the librarian aside to impart intelligence while the late arrivals converged on Petrus to offer their congratulations.

"Yes, they are an item," Minerva whispered. "I never would have predicted it and when I found out, I did have one or two reservations. However, after some *discreet* observation, I think they will do very well together."

"It is a surprise, certainly." Irma replied, frowning as she reflected. "Though I believe you are right. They will be good for each other. It's nice to see that Severus has left the Evans girl behind. To think, he held a flame for her all those years and nobody knew it! An unhappy situation, but it looks like it's resolved now."

Irma's eyes clouded with remembrance. She gave a fond smile as she brought herself back to the present. "While it was none of my business, I did wonder at Hermione's choice of the youngest Weasley boy. I'm sure he is brave and loyal, but he is not the brightest candle in the castle. He was in the library so rarely, I think I would have forgotten what he looked like if not for compulsory meals in the Great Hall. I suspected all along that it wouldn't last." She watched Severus indulgently. "Hermione is always in the library, just like Severus when he was a student. Do you know they are the only ones to consistently return books in a better condition than when they were loaned out?"

"Really?"

"My word, yes. Further, it did not escape my notice: Hermione chooses the same secluded nooks as Severus used to when he wanted to read in peace."

"It was meant to be, then," Minerva concluded dryly. *A match made in library credits.*

"Tell me, Minerva, what do you think Severus' *intentions* are?"

Minerva leaned closer to give her *certain* opinion on what news *might* be heard at some time in the future. "Well, I have good reason to think he will..."

"*Sh!*" Madam Pince, in the time-honoured fashion of all true librarians, nipped further whispers in the bud as the subject of their exchange approached them.

"Madam Pince." Severus bowed as he greeted the elderly witch. He raised an eyebrow when she took his arm and possessively steered him to the far end of the room.

"Severus, it's good to see you looking so contented." Irma looked over her shoulder. "I understand this is your idea," she whispered, nodding towards Petrus, who was engaged in an excited exchange with Hermione. "Normally, I would implicitly trust your judgement where the library is concerned... but, Severus... a *gargoyle*?"

"I understand your concerns, which are based I venture to suggest on appearances?" Before Irma could respond, Severus played the first of two cards. "You have reviewed the results of the academic exercise I assigned for him?"

"I have, but..."

"If those same abilities were demonstrated by a *human* applicant, would you consider that person for the position?"

"I would, but..."

"You fear that a taloned, winged Being of stone might not physically be capable of handling valuable, and at times irascible, tomes with due care and dexterity?"

Madam Pince's pursed-lip silence gave Severus the opening to play his second card. He produced the single volume retrieved from his hidden treasure. "What do you make of this?" he challenged, handing it to her.

Irma held the book in her hands and looked it over with professional scrutiny. Turning to the frontispiece and title page, she gave a gasp of wonder. "This is *the* very first book to be produced by the Salem Underground Publishing Company. Severus, you *do* know how valuable this is? Collectors and museums all over the world would be clamouring just to catch a glimpse of it!"

"Yes. I know," Severus intoned regally. He held out his hand, and Irma reluctantly surrendered the book. "Petrus, a word, if I may?"

"*Oui, Monsieur Severus, certainement!*" Petrus made his way across the room, pausing momentarily to look at a glass cabinet housing replicas of the Relics of the Four Founders. "Ah!" he breathed, "these four items, they remind me of the tale of Macsen's treasure. There was a sword and a cup there, also the great sword, Caliburn, and a Grail most Holy. But, *mon ami*, the treasure of Macsen had a spear and... What is the word...? A platter, or perhaps a shallow bowl not a locket and *en petit* crown for a beautiful lady." Petrus paused and surveyed his audience with the look of one who was about to tell a dramatic tale. "It was said, many hundred years ago, that the *true* spear and the *true* platter, they are yet to be found. I heard the scholars and the priests arguing about them in a gathering most secret. Under a decree from the *Palais des Papes*, they desired to expunge the mysterious relics from history." He eyed the book in Severus' hands with curiosity. "But the legend so powerful is not easily buried. They did not succeed entirely."

Severus casually handed Petrus the antique item. "I think one week should be sufficient for you to examine this book in its entirety." He could feel Madam Pince staring at him in disbelief.

Appearing to move on the promptings of an internal autopilot, Petrus approached a phoenix-shaped lectern. Resting the book on the lectern's outstretched wings, he examined it thoroughly. There could be no mistaking the deep reverence with which he handled the age-yellowed pages and murmured over the beautifully illuminated margins. He turned to Severus, his eyes glowing mineral-silver. "This is a great privilege, Monsieur Severus. I will guard it with my honour and my life."

Irma looked at Minerva and shrugged. If Severus was prepared to trust Petrus with a book worth a king's ransom, she could probably trust the gargoyle with Hogwarts' collection. She decided to start him with the First Year general reference books purely as a precaution. Producing an ibis-feather quill, she summoned the parchment describing the service conditions and agreements for Hogwarts' Library. She signed her name and beckoned to Petrus to add his signature. Minerva witnessed the procedure while Severus gave Hermione a conspiratorial half-smile.

"Well," Minerva sighed in satisfaction. "Welcome to Hogwarts, Petrus." She sent the parchment into a meticulously re-ordered filing drawer. "I shall call a full staff meeting for tomorrow afternoon and make the official introductions." She eyed him thoughtfully. "I think that, like Professor Firenze whom you shall meet tomorrow *robes* are not quite your style." With a wave of her wand, a white silk band appeared around Petrus' upper right arm. Embroidered on it, the Hogwarts crest shone in resplendent colour above a neat array of books. "White means you are officially in training," she explained. "When you have mastered your duties, it will turn black."

Irma observed her new charge as he lovingly wrapped Severus' book in a square of soft velvet thoughtfully provided by Hermione. Her deep-rooted resistance subsided as she considered how much easier it would be to have an extra pair of eyes keeping vigil over an immense number of books, though she did wonder how Petrus would manage when it came to supervising students. *Time enough to prepare him for that*, she told herself. She sighed away a faint shadow of nostalgia. Change was always a challenge, but in her heart she knew that the library had become too much to handle on her own.

"Come along then, Petrus. I will show you around the library and sort out your accommodation. Minerva suggested you might enjoy having access to the outdoors. There is a small annexe which may prove very suitable. It used to be a staff reading-room before it fell into disuse one hundred years ago. It has a snug indoor area for inclement weather and a balcony for those rare days when the sun is out."

A long, informative walk later, Petrus gazed at the vast expanse of book-filled shelves in silent awe. Clasping his hands together, he turned to Madam Pince and whispered, "*C'est magnifique!*"

"Yes. Yes, it certainly is," Irma answered, looking around at her life's work: her pride, passion, and joy.

"Aha! Another win for me!" Filius happily drew a line through four tally marks on a piece of slate. "I have increased my lead in the competition," he announced, underlining his name with a flourish.

"By two games," Toby pointed out. "There're four more to go it ain't over 'till the fat lady sings." He swiftly cleared Filius' dartboard and arranged the elegant missiles on the table, grinning as his newest acquaintance celebrated his lead with a vigorous attack on a bowl of peanuts.

On his fifth day in the castle, Minerva had recruited Filius into what Toby suspected was "Muggle-watching duty". It had not taken long at all for an easy camaraderie to fall into place between Toby and Filius, aided by a common interest in darts and chess.

"You've met the Fat Lady *already*? Goodness, you *did* go on an escapade," Filius said, dispatching peanut shells into the fire with a snap of his fingers. "Between you, me, and these walls: I would rather *not* hear the Fat Lady sing. It is quite agonising." He tucked his thumbs into his waistcoat pockets. "For the remaining games, we could try a moving target," he offered a little too innocently.

Toby acknowledged the challenge with exaggerated and blatantly false reluctance. "Oh, I dunno... magic and all." He shook his head. "Nothin' good'll come of it."

"Hm. Perhaps you are right. There would be tears before supper, I'm sure," Filius needled through a badly concealed chuckle.

"Not from *me*, there won't." Toby shook hands with the Charms professor. "You're on!"

Four games later, Filius stared at the randomly roaming dartboard. Toby's last throw had resulted in a draw. The two contestants looked at each other and shrugged.

"Our scores held equal during the last ten throws," Filius mused, his brow creasing with the onset of a new inspiration. "Tobias, I simply *have* to teach you how to play Gobstones!"

Two Dementors patrolled through the ruins. From a low, sullen sky, persistent drizzle spattered over cold stone, pooling on the floor wherever a crack or depression offered opportunity. The pools grew a skin of brittle ice as the Dementors passed by, their dull shrouds blending with the grey of misty desolation.

Only one source of vivid colour slashed through the prevailing monotone: above the fireplace, the mosaic had been washed clean of dust. Given an illusion of movement by merging rivulets of water, the red dragon leapt and shimmered against its golden background.

The Dementors ignored the mosaic. It had no significance for them. They passed through the derelict hall, finding nothing to report to their human contact.

Toby shivered and turned up the collar of his sheepskin jacket. The mid-Autumn breezes of Scotland inspired him to re-define his assessment of "bloody cold" to "'effin' cold."

"Are you sure you don't want your cloak?" Filius asked.

"Nah, not me," Toby growled, not wanting to reveal the fact that he thought he would look downright stupid in such a garment. Wearing it indoors was fine... but outdoors? Where he would be *seen*? He balked at the very idea.

Filius glanced up at him cannily. "Warmth before *vanity*."

"*Whaat*? Oh, fine. *You* wander through... I dunno... Piccadilly bloody Circus in your robes and stuff. See 'ow many strange looks you get."

"In Piccadilly Circus, I expect I'd get a few strange looks no matter *what* I chose to wear," Filius replied reasonably.

Toby gave an apologetic shrug he had ceased to notice Filius' vertically challenged state. "Yeah, I s'pose you would." He changed the subject. "Those bloody painted people kept followin' us on t' way out."

"Only because the portraits have not seen a Muggle in the castle before. They're curious about you especially since they found out who you are."

"Uh huh. Best not give 'em any reasons to be even more curious by wearin' gear that's made for *wizards*."

Filius rolled his eyes and cast a waterproofing charm over his shoes as the stone stairs gave way to damp grass. "Hullo! There's some commotion over by Hagrid's hut."

Toby surveyed the 'commotion' warily. He spotted Severus immediately, engaged in earnest discussions with a heavily built wizard in teaching robes. He did a double take as an even bigger form appeared from behind a rustic, round hut. "I seen t' Granger lass before. Who're t' others?" *Who or what*, he added to himself.

Filius was delighted to expound. "The large, hairy one is Rubeus Hagrid, our Care of Magical Creatures professor. Everybody calls him 'Hagrid'. He's a half-giant. Next to him is Pomona Sprout, professor of Herbology. The bearish-looking wizard is our Potions master Pugsley Addams."

"What's that lyin' on t' ground?" Toby asked, shielding his eyes as a keening wind swept a scant veil of sleet down from the high hills.

"I can't tell for certain," Filius answered. "Come on: we'll go in for a closer look."

As they approached, Toby could tell it was trouble. Pomona stood back with one hand covering her mouth. The half-giant shook his head despairingly, while Pugsley and Severus turned in response to a shout from the Forbidden Forest.

Two centaurs emerged from the tree-line, flanking what at first looked like a white horse though Toby had never seen such a pearly hue on any creature's coat. Stumbling against the centaurs, the creature let out a groan of agony and tossed its head. It was not a horse at all.

"That's a *unicorn*!" Toby gasped.

"Why, yes," Filius affirmed, momentarily forgetting that Toby had never seen one in the flesh before. He then added with a concerned frown, "Two unicorns in a great deal of distress."

Forgetting that unicorns were supposed to be mythical creatures, Toby closed the distance between himself and the unfolding incident. The unicorn's pained cry had a familiar note one to which he instinctively responded.

Filius called out as Hermione spotted them and raced across the grass, her brown hair an untameable wilderness of curls.

"Professor Flitwick," she gasped, "I don't know if charms can help, but please, come and see if there's anything you can do! It's colic. Hagrid has put warming charms in place to try and ease the pain, but..." She paused as she fully registered Toby's presence. She opened her mouth to speak, then suddenly guiltily seemed unsure of what to say.

"Miss Granger," Toby said, automatically moving to take off his hat before realising he wasn't wearing it. He morphed the gesture into the kind of salute rural people use to acknowledge each other in passing.

"Mr Snape," she answered, recovering a precarious formality which collapsed entirely when the second unicorn dropped to its knees in spite of the centaurs' best efforts. "Hurry!" She pleaded, running back to the group.

Filius' urgent movement called Toby back to attention. *Colic*. Out of necessity, he had experience in treating several forms of the ailment. In places where the nearest vet might be eight hours or more away, keeping an afflicted horse alive held the same level of importance as any form of human first-aid. Shelving his misgivings about Severus' reaction to his presence, Toby cautiously followed Hermione to where she knelt beside a stricken beast.

"D'you know what kind of colic it is?" he asked, keeping a respectful distance and not directing his question at anyone in particular.

"It'll be from their food," Hagrid answered, without taking his attention off the unicorn. "They need grype-nuts, but there's none ter be found. I'm tryin' not to let 'im roll; if 'e does, 'e'll twist 'is innards an' that'll be th' end of 'im. Little Moondancer... not yet three year old..." He watched Pomona warily approach the second unicorn. "Shanando, too..."

Filius gave a frown of comprehension. "This is not a cure, but it will help lessen the danger of intestinal damage while we work out what to do next," he said. Quickly adapting a charm he had devised in response to injuries witnessed during the Battle of Hogwarts, he spoke the words that would hold 'innards' in their proper alignment. He then excused himself to repeat the process from a safe distance on Shanando.

"Spasmodic, then," Toby thought out loud. "Y' 'ave *somethin'* for 'im, surely?" He was vaguely aware of Severus and Pugsley tossing ideas back and forth in a welter of multi-syllable words and complicated descriptions of procedures. Their debate did not sound encouraging: they kept returning to the number of hours it would take to "brew" whatever they had in mind. The unicorns might not last the distance without immediate help.

"Normally, unicorns prevent colic themselves," Hermione offered in a small voice, beckoning to him to come closer. She winced when Moondancer groaned again. "During the autumn and winter, they switch from grasses and herbs to any kind of browse they can reach. If the winter is very harsh, they will even eat bark and dig up roots. Some of the browse contains some fairly nasty irritants. They counteract the irritants by eating grype-nuts."

"Which 'ave some supply problems?"

"Since Voldemort's return, yes. His Death Eaters introduced a form of sooty mould to the Forest. It targeted the grype-nuts and spread quickly. The few patches left uninfected were in natural clearings, where there was enough light to keep the mould at bay. Of course, the unicorns were attracted into the clearings and the Death Eaters could easily kill them. They would take the blood for their master you probably don't want to know why. While we were all distracted with the lead-up to the war, the mould spread right through the Forest. Professor Sprout has recently tried a number of neem-based sprays, but the mould is very resistant.

"If there are any grype-nuts left at all, there will not be enough. Severus and Professor Addams are looking for a substitute, but it will take time that I don't think we have. There's no quick way of brewing a remedy."

Looking to Hagrid for permission, which the half-giant granted distractedly, Toby reached out and stroked the unicorn's neck. Moondancer's flesh felt hot and damp, quivering and twitching as spasms tore through his body. Toby pressed an ear to the unicorn's heaving side and listened intently. "These unicorns, 'ow similar are they to 'orses in the guts, I mean."

"Close ter identical, I'd say," Hagrid rumbled, looking the Muggle over with bluff curiosity.

"Then there's summat we can try." Toby stood up and looked back towards the castle. "Tocky!"

The house-elf appeared with a *crack*, his ancient pillowcase partially obscured by the tattered remains of a knitted scarf. "Master Tobias?"

"I need beer. A good, strong lager'll do it, I reckon."

Tocky gasped and wrung his hands. His ears drooped and his eyes filled with tears. "But Master Tobias is telling Tocky he *isn't* drinking..."

"Not for *me*; for t' unicorns! Does it come in barrels?"

"Yes, Master Tobias, wooden..."

"Find one around a third full and bring it 'ere. Quick as y' can, lad."

Toby turned to find himself the subject of several questioning stares and one excoriating glare.

"Beer?" Pugsley asked, his accent cueing Toby to think of Harley Davidson motorcycles and Chevrolet engines.

"Yeah, beer. An old trick, but it's got a beast or many out of trouble only use it on spasmodic colic, though. It'll 'old the fort until you and Sev'rus come up with somethin' better. I 'ope it will, anyway." He looked away before Severus could scowl him into the next century. Thankfully, Tocky reappeared, staggering under a barrel several times larger than himself.

"Is not very heavy; is very awkward shape," Tocky explained as Toby appropriated the barrel and lugged it over to Moondancer.

"Right-e-oh. I need a shallow bowl."

Hermione transfigured a flat stone into the required receptacle and handed it to him. Toby allowed a little beer to run into the bowl and held it near the unicorn's mouth. Hagrid took hold of the creature's horn to prevent any accidental skewering.

"Come on, soldier," Toby entreated, dipping his fingers in the beer. Moondancer snuffled suspiciously. Toby slipped his fingers under the unicorn's lips, murmuring encouragements when a muscular tongue caught the taste and searched for more.

"Will ye look at tha'," Hagrid whispered as Moondancer began slurping noisily.

Having licked the bowl clean, the unicorn half-closed his eyes and twitched his tail, then let out a thunderous belch.

"Better out than in, tha's what I always say," Hagrid affirmed stoutly.

Toby wiped his hands on the ground. "Get 'im up and walk 'im in straight lines, nice and slow. Don't let 'im turn a circle 'e'll want to lie down. Keep 'im warm, too. Give 'im another dose in fifteen minutes."

"Professor Sprout and I will attend the other unicorn," Hermione said. "Shanando is a mare, you see, and... well... adult unicorns prefer *female* humans to touch them that is, if they are going to let humans touch them at all."

Toby nodded. "Fair 'nough. Besides, I'd rather not 'andle this stuff any more than I 'ave to," he said, uneasily eyeing his hands and the beer barrel. As Hermione levitated the barrel and steered it to where Shanando lay, a tell-tale shiver ran through his limbs.

"Oh, shit," he swore under his breath. Temptation flared and stirred a desperate, obsessive longing to down a pint of... *No!* He clenched his fists and felt the sticky residue of the substance he spent every day avoiding every day *not* picking up the first drink that would drag him back into a hell designed especially for him. Shutting his eyes, he sent his memory back to the *thing* Eileen had created from air, water, earth, wood, fire, and blood. Re-living the terror of that night had always succeeded in blocking the merciless summons of addiction.

He yelped when a cool, moist sensation washed over his hands and completely removed the scent and feel of torment. He opened his eyes. Severus stood a short distance away, wand pointed in his direction, black eyes diamond-hard and staring right through him. Realising what had happened, Toby managed a quavering "Thanks."

Without a word, Severus gave what might have been the smallest sign of a nod and tucked his wand into his sleeve. He turned to watch a small army of witches approach across the grassy verge, a tartan-fortified headmistress leading the way.

"Thank you, Pomona, for your timely message," Minerva gasped, adjusting her cape against another biting gust of wind. "Miss Lovegood, perhaps you could take Professor Sprout's place? I think she'll be needed elsewhere. Hagrid, I have excused these students from classes and this evening's curfew to assist you with unicorn emergencies. Severus and Pugsley, I understand a remedy may be brewed within six hours?"

The two wizards voiced an affirmative.

Luna made her way to Shanando's side and relieved Pomona from her bowl-holding duties. Hermione shrugged as Luna tapped the beer barrel and gave a meaningful smile though what meaning it had, only Luna knew for certain.

"It *could* make sense, you know," Luna said. "There are several historical accounts of captive Demiguise being successfully treated with beer dregs when they went off their food."

Hermione made a conscious effort to keep her attention on the position of Shanando's horn. "Accounts? You mean there are *written* records of beer being used to treat magical creatures?"

"Oh, yes," Luna replied distantly, "But I had to translate them from thirteenth-century Korean. It was quite difficult at times, mainly because the scribes used the Chinese word for beer in one scroll, and the Russian word in another."

Hermione signalled Bane to assist with getting Shanando on her feet. "Yes, I suppose that would make cross-referencing a bit tedious."

"Just a little," Luna mused, making soothing noises as Shanando leaned heavily against Bane's flank.

Aware that time was of the essence, Severus took charge of the next phase of operations. "Pomona, we will need you in the Potions laboratory to help prepare ingredients: specifically, sassafras root, camphor laurel, and opium poppy. Pugsley will brew a carrier potion while I work on the active reagents. Filius, when you have a moment, kindly put *him*" he sent a curt gesture in Toby's direction "back where you found him." Black robes billowing, he strode back to the castle.

Pugsley followed at a slower pace, having offered his arm to Pomona. "I left Mr Longbottom and Mr Malfoy down in the lab. I'm sure they can put their New-And-Improved-Skelegrow project under stasis for a while and give us a helping hand. Once we have the potion ready to treat immediate cases, Severus and I are pretty sure we can incorporate it into an edible pellet. Getting the pellets to smell and taste like grype-nuts... Well, ma'am, we might just sign that over to you."

In need of a distraction after his close brush with temptation and Severus' unexpected intervention Toby joined Firenze in the task of walking Moondancer. Hermione, Luna, Minerva, and Hagrid obviously had the immediate situation under control, with the diligent assistance of numerous young witches.

Firenze interrupted his observations. "You have the look of a traveller who is missing his home."

Toby glanced at the centaur over the Moondancer's back. "Yeah, a little." He looked up at the cloud-shrouded hills. "It's warmer, for one thing."

Firenze smiled and deftly shouldered the unicorn into a quarter-turn. "It was well done using beer as medicine."

"I'd've thought these wizards and witches would've known of it. I was told it's been used since the Middle Ages or somethin'." He was reluctant to ask if centaurs ever got colic, and if they did, how did they treat it? Trying to guess how a centaur's digestive anatomy might work made his head spin.

"Many ancient forms of medicine and healing have been left behind and forgotten in favour of the new. I have noticed that, among humans, traditional remedies are often dismissed as ineffectual purely because they tend to be simple and easy to obtain. Severus is an exception in that regard; he is willing to explore even the most ancient elixirs and adapt them for modern use."

Toby ran a hand along the unicorn's flank, which felt dry and warm. The muscle spasms had all but ceased. He saw Hermione talking with Filius and pointing in his direction. Therefore, he was not surprised when she approached him.

"The beer seems to be working." She looked back at the mare patiently walking alongside Bane. "I think there are enough witches here to take care of any further emergencies until the drench is brewed. I suppose it would be some sort of drench, but it sounds a little undignified. I don't think Severus would call it that." She chewed her lower lip and glanced at him. "I'll see you back to your lodgings, if you like. Professor Flitwick has given me directions."

Toby studied her for a moment. He could see there was something on her mind. "Fine by me," he answered. "Besides, there's somethin' I want to ask you."

Hermione's surprise lasted only a fleeting second before she gave a small smile and pointed to the path leading up to the castle. As soon as they had walked far enough to be unheard, she haltingly broke the silence.

"I... I'm afraid it's my fault that you are here..."

Toby kept his eyes locked on the castle walls. "Sev'rus was with *you*, wasn't 'e?"

Hermione inhaled sharply. She knew exactly what he was referring to.

Without waiting for a response or an evasion, Toby outlined his conclusions. "Diesel gave it away, for one 'e knew it was people, even though Eddie and I couldn't see anyone. Invisible people who weren't *bad* sorts; Diesel would've growled if it were otherwise.

"It weren't too long after that, some galah callin' 'imself *Harry Potter* and 'is muddle-'eaded *wombat* of a mate start tailin' me. If that's coincidence, then I'm a sanger short of a picnic.

"After Oriens *introduced* 'imself, I read 'bout Sev'rus bein' left for dead in some wreck of a shack, then vanishin' for a good while. Not a trace of 'im anywhere. Then 'e shows up 'ere," he pointed to the castle, "*after* gettin' a full pardon and where *you'd* set up camp. Oriens told me you an' Sev'rus might be a bit more than friends. But me lights didn't come on until 'e mentioned yer surname Granger.

"Coincidence that Diesel was checkin' out *invisible* people at the *Granger* place? Doubt it. Coincidence that Eddie 'ad met you but couldn't remember any details?" He snorted. "The Missus dropped spells on *me* to make me forget certain things. Been there, done that."

Hermione wondered what to do. Obliviate him? Negotiate with him and swear him to secrecy? The latter option seemed far more reasonable. "Severus and I *are* more than friends," she admitted, colouring slightly.

"That were obvious when we 'ad the meetin' with the centaurs. If yer wonderin' if I plan to tell anyone 'bout you keepin' Sev'rus out of trouble's way, I'm not. I can keep a secret."

"Promise?"

Having put the wild-haired witch in a slightly awkward situation in return for her role in his current predicament, Toby had no need to push the matter any further. "My oath. Besides, I need you get a message to Sev'rus. I'll tell you what it is inside. Not out 'ere, it's too risky."

Hermione decided to trust her instincts. Somehow, they assured her Toby meant what he said about keeping secrets. Restraining her curiosity about the mentioned message, she led him through the corridors and enlightened him on various historical aspects of the castle.

Their progress was eagerly monitored by whispering portraits and shyly observed by the younger students who had not fought in the War. From behind corners and columns, they stole glimpses of a real live war heroine and wondered if the man with her really was a Muggle. Furthermore, was he *really* the father of the legendary Bat of the Dungeons?

It would be disappointing if he was the rumour that Severus Snape had spontaneously arisen from a Gorgon's brew accidentally contaminated with alien spores was far more interesting.

Her mind buzzing, Hermione took the stairs down to the dungeons as quickly as she dared. She played Toby's message over again in her mind, determined not to forget a thing:

When Severus was barley six months old, Toby had come home to find a scrap of a document smouldering in the fireplace. Upon fishing it out to examine it, he had noticed that a brick in the back of the fireplace needed attention. When the fire died down, he set about re-pointing the brick with fresh mortar and noticed that the brick had been tampered with. Prising it out, he had discovered a shallow cavity. Within it was a beautiful piece of jewellery now known as the Llygad y Ddraig.

The next part of the message set Hermione's legs shaking, and she had to concentrate to keep her balance. While Toby would not show it to her, he had told her what was written on the scorched scrap of writing a physical description of a boy calling himself Myrddin Emrys. Toby believed that the boy in the story had something to do with the Llygad y Ddraig. Further, he was convinced that the boy Myrddin and the wizard Merlin were one and the same person. Toby insisted on handing the writing to Severus personally. For what reason, he would not say. At least he did not insist upon Severus being alone.

She entered the Potions laboratory to a scene of high-precision activity. Pomona deftly sliced sassafras root with a blade of volcanic glass. Draco laboured with a mortar and pestle, a smudge of charcoal marking his face like war-paint. He looked up as Hermione closed the door behind her.

"Hermione, I would not have picked you as the *callous* sort," he said, a mischievous spark in his eyes.

"Draco... *What?*"

"You show up when most of the hard work is done therefore, *callus*." With a gleeful smirk, he added an ounce of shredded bezoar to the mixture he was vigorously

grinding to a fine powder.

Rolling her eyes, Hermione looked around, a part of her wishing she had been able to come down sooner.

Professor Addams tended an enormous pewter cauldron, stirring its contents with a sequence timed to a low chant. At the far end of the laboratory, Neville stood watch over an elution column and a five-minute-glass.

Severus presided over a complicated array of distillation glassware, a scowl of concentration in place as he collected distillate into a tiny glass beaker positioned on a weighing-scale. "Did the centaurs bring any more unicorns out of the Forest?" he asked, not taking his eyes off the scale.

"None at the time I left to come here," she said. Tobias' message would have to wait until she and Severus could be alone together. "Moondancer and Shanando appeared to be doing well." She hesitated for a moment. "Though... Tobias... did say beer was not right for all forms of colic. He insisted on a follow-up with the potion you and Professor Addams are working on just to make sure."

Severus lifted the beaker with silver tongs and placed it next to a small, silver cauldron. He nodded as Neville unflinchingly delivered a flask marked: 'Opium extract / wash #3 / 10-min.'

"Sound advice," Severus murmured, causing Hermione to seriously consider the idea of going into shock.

"Well?" Severus gathered his cloak about him and folded his arms. He regarded Tobias with narrowed eyes.

Toby held out a fragment of what looked like very fine leather. "I reckon this belongs to you."

For a moment, Severus considered a silent *Accio*, but Hermione's eyes were on him pleading with him to maintain the tentative truce that wandered in the air like a ghost unsure of its own identity. He decided that the truce should be honoured. After six solid hours of preparing, brewing, bottling, and advising, he had no inclination towards truculence.

With a quiet sigh, Severus manually plucked the item out of Tobias' fingers and scowled at him as though he were a student handing in a perilously late essay. His scowl intensified as he read what was written on it.

Unable to restrain herself, Hermione stood at his elbow, her eyes eagerly devouring words. Her mouth dropped open as she read it again. "It's him, isn't it?" she whispered. "The boy you saw in the cave."

Severus tilted his head as he thought meaning that he was also a little mystified. "The description written here certainly complements what I saw." He turned to Tobias. "You discovered the Llygad y Ddraig as a result of finding this?"

Toby nodded. "Yeah."

"Can you be sure the Llygad was not hidden there long before the rest of whatever-work-this-was ended up in the fire?"

"The brick it were 'idden behind was fine that mornin'. I took the ash out before I left for t' mill. It were untouched, then."

Severus read the description again and paced the floor, evidently weighing the possibility of coincidence against tangible relationship. "The boy seems to be the point of union between the Llygad and this anonymous shred." He held it up to the light. "It is certainly very old. Graphorn hide has not been used as a writing material for at least seven hundred years."

"*Graphorn* hide!" Hermione reached out to touch the singed edges of the fragment in Severus' hands. "Why would anyone use Graphorn hide? Wouldn't it be unworkable? And it shouldn't *burn* like that obviously has, should it? And Graphorn hide..."

"One. Question. At. A. Time," Severus enunciated, holding up one hand to stem the flow of interrogatives. "Hermione, you may find that the answer to your first *question* will suffice as an explanation for all." He raised an eyebrow at Tobias, who was engaged in furtive conversation with a house-elf. Evidently, a Graphorn was being described in helpful detail.

Toby and Tocky soon noticed the deafening silence and the uncomfortable prickling of Severus' intense scrutiny. With a guilty glance at each other, they desisted.

"As I was saying," Severus continued, levelling an extra glare at Tobias for good measure, "Graphorn hide has not been used as writing material for many centuries because of the way it was obtained." He looked Hermione in the eyes, wordlessly daring her to ask a question.

Hermione smiled sweetly at him. She was not going to take the bait. She responded to his thwarted smirk with a slightly wicked wink. She would deal with him later.

"Only the hide of Graphorns that had not yet drawn their first breath was suitable for such a purpose," he said, holding up the fragment again. "An unborn Graphorn would be cut from its dam's womb while her corpse was still hot from her final fight. While still wet, the skin would be rapidly removed and stretched to the thickness of heavy parchment.

"It would be cured in a mixture of tea and wine, then rubbed with Graphorn fat and hung in a cold, dry place. In two years, it would be ready for use. It could withstand anything that dragon-hide can, with the exception of Fiendfyre, but was also supple and light. It would take ink without blurring and hold it like a tattoo."

Hermione clamped a hand over her mouth. Graphorns were not her favourite magical creature, but no living thing deserved such a dreadful, sickening end. Maybe she would deal with Severus another day.

"As you can imagine, this practise nearly caused the extinction of Graphorns. In a remarkable manifestation of forethought, the Ministry of the time outlawed the use of unborn Graphorn hide. With formidable penalties to enforce the law, the carnage soon ceased."

Hermione shook her head sadly before a thought slipped into her head. "It was found in the fireplace at Spinner's End," she said. "But normal fire could not have destroyed it..." She did not want to take the next step in her reasoning.

"I had been told that my mother had experimented with Dark Magic at one time. I was also told that she turned her back on it. Apparently, she retained the knowledge on how to wield Fiendfyre."

"God's Teeth," Toby shuddered. *She knew Dark Magic? 'Ow the shaggin'Hell did I survive bein' married to 'er?* He stared at the floor incredulously. *I married 'er... and I never really knew the truth of 'er. I didn't give 'er much of a chance, I s'pose.*

Hermione coloured indignantly. Destroying a book if the remnant did indeed come from a book was an unthinkable act of treasonous barbarity. Especially if the book was written on the skin of an innocent creature, torn from its mother in an act of double *murder* before it even saw the sun or tasted the air. "I think we should try and find out if it did come from a book," she stated, suddenly determined to at least attempt a salvage operation. "If so, are there any other remnants left?"

She noted Tobias' negative shrug. "Sometimes," she told him, "valuable books would be split up and the parts hidden in different places. It happened during the Viking invasions, the Inquisitions, and the Muggle Reformation. That way, at least some of the knowledge they contained would be preserved if other parts were found and... destroyed."

She chewed her lower lip and fixed Severus with a scholarly stare. "If you're willing to let him look at it, I think we should ask Professor Binns' opinion."

Severus' eyes slid closed. He gave a theatrical snore.

"Oh, *stop* it!" Hermione stamped her foot. "I'm serious! Professor Binns has hundreds of years of memory and experience at his disposal. He just might be able to shed some light on it."

"Professor Binns is being a ghost, for hundreds of years," Tocky supplied to Toby. "Students is saying Professor Binns is very, very boring. Students say they is rather writing many essays on rain gauges than sittings in classroom."

"That's not boring," Toby conspired. "That's bloody lethal."

"Can we all return to the *original* reason for our assembly?" Severus' cut-glass tone commanded instant order and attention. "I believe there were two unresolved assumptions, were there not? The assumption that this remnant of a script more than seven hundred years old bears some relation to the Llygad y Ddraig, and that the boy, Myrddin Emrys, is supposedly the wizard, Merlin."

Arms folded across his chest, he glanced from Tobias to Tocky and back again. "I understand you gained a key piece of... reasoning... from this house-elf."

Toby braced himself. "That's right. *Four* key pieces, actually." He counted them off on his fingers: "For one, Merlin 'ad Welsh origins in Wales, his name was pronounced 'Myrddin' like the lad in t' story.

"Second up, take it or leave it," he challenged, looking the witch and the wizard in the eyes, "Merlin were sired by a Muggle."

He counted a third finger. "A *Roman* Muggle: which fits with what's written there." He pointed to the piece of Graphorn hide in Severus' hand.

"And the fourth?" Severus prompted, eyeing Tocky dubiously.

"Merlin's magic came from 'is mother. A princess from South Wales." He looked to Tocky for confirmation. "What's the name again?"

Tocky climbed up on the arm of Toby's chair and whispered something in his ear.

"Yeah, that's it. Niniane. She 'ad Merlin out of wedlock and spun a tale about some spirit coming to 'er in the form of a falcon. She ended 'er days in a priory, locked away from t' world. Bastard or not, 'er son were a prince."

"Oh," Hermione sighed sadly. *She never saw Merlin's father again?*

"Correct me if I'm wrong," Toby continued, again pointing to the Graphorn hide. "But if Myrddin's father was *unknown*, it follows that 'is *uncle* 'a son of the king', it says was 'is mother's brother, which makes 'is mother a *princess*. That Myrddin lad's a blue-blood."

Hermione frowned and shook her head. "Tobias, none of what Tocky has told you about Merlin has been written down in our lore-books."

"Not *my* fault," Toby muttered.

Severus paced the floor, his hands behind his back. "Nobody said it was." He turned on his heel and fired his next question at Tocky.

"How is it that you know of these unwritten histories?"

Tocky gave a small squeak and backed up against Tobias' leg. "Tocky is knowing, yes, but Tocky is under house-elf law."

"What does the law say?"

"House-elf may never tell wizard or witch the ancient tales of Merlin."

"Who made the law? Why are these 'ancient tales' not to be spoken of? Who entrusted this knowledge *to house-elves*?" Severus fired his questions like counter-curses.

"Tocky is not knowing. Tocky is not asking why, or why not. Not all house-elves is knowing only some. Tocky is heard law, Tocky obeys law." Tocky covered his eyes with his spindly fingers and shook his head. He could not say any more.

"But you could tell Tobias because he's not a wizard?" Hermione asked gently.

"Yes, Miss Hermione. Master Tobias is not having magic. Law says nothing about not telling Muggles when they is asking. Master Tobias is only Muggle *ever* to ask house-elf about Merlin."

Severus watched the quaking house-elf with a glimmer of sympathy. "I will not ask you to break your law, Tocky," he said almost kindly. "We shall manage with our own resources, for now."

I'd better not tell him he really can be sweet when he wants to be Hermione thought as she gave Severus' free hand a squeeze of appreciative affection. *Even if he thinks the rule of one-question-at-a-time does not apply to him.* In that moment, she knew that she loved him more than ever.

Severus returned the contact, then carefully disengaged himself. He subjected Tobias to a stern evaluation. "I propose to examine the Llygad again. This time, I will search it as I would a Pensieve."

Toby was only too glad to escape Severus' presence for a short time. It was like being minutely dissected and put back together, all at the same time. He went into the bathroom and collected the artefact. He gave a small grin. The preceding discourse was the longest speech he had heard from Severus in a great many years. His son's northern accent had been completely subsumed in tones Toby would lately have dismissed as pretentious snobbery another thing he had quickly changed his opinion on. Spoken by Severus, they sounded *right* and fitted him like the well-tailored clothes he wore.

With a sigh that was equal parts pride, apprehension, regret, and acceptance, Toby returned to the gathering, placed the Llygad on the coffee table and stood back to let Severus commence his investigations.

Severus took the Llygad in one hand and focussed his mind on a name: *Myrddin Emrys*. He hissed when a pale flicker of light danced briefly within the blue crystal disc. Thinking it might have been a reflection, he looked again. The light reappeared, elusive as a will-o'-the-wisp. He watched it. It shone brighter and changed colour...

Five Arrows – Part 2

Chapter 17 of 32

Summary: Severus confirms the identity of the boy in the cave. Unexpectedly, the red dragon makes another appearance. Speculations abound regarding the Llygad y Ddraig – and Hermione makes a bold suggestion. A visit to a certain villa in the Upper Tywi Valley is called for. Hermione applies some logic, and Severus discovers a hidden shrine.

A/N's

This chapter is presented in three parts.

The following scenes are adapted from *The Crystal Cave*, by Mary Stewart (1970):

- Uther and Merlin scene: pp 190193. The conversation between the soldiers is my addition.
- The description of Ambrosius: pp 148149
- Ambrosius and Merlin scene: pp 204210

Unaltered dialogue quotes from Ms Stewart's work are marked with an asterisk (*)

The dragon brooch is described in *The Hollow Hills* (1973) and *The Last Enchantment* (1979) as being made of copper, with an enamelled design of a red dragon on a gold field.

'Senior Auror McPhee' is adapted from the character Nanny McPhee in the film *Nanny McPhee*, Universal Pictures, 2005

Canon characters are the property of J.K. Rowling. I make no money from them.

Many thanks to TeaOli for beta-reading, being patient, and being there.

Orange.

Flaming torches flickered orange between the black trunks of dripping trees. From where he stood at the edge of a muddy track, Severus could hear the echoing clatter of horses moving at a brisk trot along a paved road.

Before he could wonder at the lack of discomfort with which his awareness had been drawn into the Llygad y Ddraig, another horse burst through the thicker forest to his right. Clinging to the horse's neck-strap like a cloaked burr, a youth crouched low in the saddle. The animal splashed heavily through a shallow brook and slithered to a halt in the middle of the track. Severus took a step back as it half-reared and whinnied.

Several horses answered from the road. A man's voice barked a command into the night. There was an orderly commotion of champing, snorting, fidgeting, the light clash of armour, and riders' murmured commands.

Severus knitted his brows. *An armed troop?*

His question was soon answered. Two horsemen pounded down the track at a mud-flinging gallop, one of them bearing a torch, the other with his sword drawn. They quickly flanked the youth, who pushed back the hood of his cloak and raised both hands to show he was unarmed.

Severus' heart thudded against his ribs. He recognised the boy from the cave immediately, even though he had the growth of several years and his face showed the planes and angles of the man he would someday be. *Myrddin Emrys.*

Without resistance, Myrddin allowed one of the men to take his horse's bridle and lead him back to the waiting troop at a slow trot. The torch-bearer cast his eyes around, looking for any other potential detainees. Finding none, he spurred his horse after his comrade.

Determined not to waste any time, Severus followed them. He blinked and found that he was already standing on the edge of a straight, paved road. *Courtesy of the Roman Empire and slave labour, no doubt*, Severus mused, watching the three horsemen emerge from the sodden shadows.

One of Myrddin's escorts signalled an all-clear. "There's only one, my lord Uther. He's unarmed."

Uther? Severus turned his attention to the so-named commander of the troop, who sat his restive grey stallion as easily as one would a park bench on a sunny day. Uther raised his visor. Even in the shifting light of the sizzling torches, Severus noted piercing blue eyes that could see into a man and read the warp and weft of his character. Uther's eyes widened as his men led Myrddin to him.

Severus engaged his entire observational capability and waited for what might be revealed.

"It had to be you, of course," Uther growled, as though the youth were the bane of his existence. "Well, Merlin the bastard, what are you doing here, alone, and where have you been?"

Merlin! Gods, what is this? Severus fought off alarm and focussed his attention.

As Merlin-the-bastard gave his excuses, Severus noted a subtle shift in the youth's countenance. *Occlumency. He is using Occlumency or trying to.* Severus scowled. It had taken him nearly two years of concentrated effort to not only use Occlumency effectively, but to hide the fact that he *was* using it. Merlin's attempt was definitely that of a novice on the first or second lesson.

He shifted to get another glance at Uther's face. Severus could tell that Uther was all Muggle and a dangerously perceptive one. Concerned, he watched Merlin closely. As Severus surmised, the young wizard didn't stand a chance.

Uther impatiently curbed his restless mount. "You're lying, aren't you? Why?"

This time, Merlin sat up in the saddle and dispensed with all attempts at disguise. Reading the boy's expressions, Severus suspected that Merlin had not actually *lied* to Uther, but had hidden the truth of why he was out, alone, in the middle of a patrolled forest, with carefully woven phrases and half-told accounts. Merlin gave his story again with a prudent touch of extra detail here and there and enough verbal ducking and weaving to again keep Uther from finding out anything incriminating.

Severus grinned to himself. *Myrddin Emrys, you would make a fine Slytherin. With a little training.*

Uther did not see anything worth grinning about. His blue eyes blazed angrily and locked onto one of Merlin's saddlebags. Following Uther's gaze, Severus noted a sliver of white cloth showing under the dark leather. Uther gave a curt gesture. One of his soldiers plunged his hand into the saddlebag and pulled out a white robe.

Horses snorted and showed the whites of their eyes. Men glanced at each other and made signs against evil.

Severus gasped. He knew a druid's robe when he saw one – moreover, he could almost smell the blood which stained it. *No, Myrddin – not you, too.*

Uther shook out the robe to its full length. "One of *them*, by Mithras!"

Severus stared at the robe in Uther's hand, thinking that there was something amiss about the whole situation. Suddenly, he had it. He estimated Merlin's height, then compared it to the robe. *Uther, you swaggering, bull-shagging idiot. That robe is at least three sizes too big for the boy!*

Uther's temper exploded. "Bastard! Who makes so free with my brother's name and stands so high in his favour – we'll see what he has to say to this. You cannot deny it, can you?"

Merlin sat even straighter. His midnight eyes flashed as he locked gazes with his accuser. "I have not done anything my lord Ambrosius would not like. I will explain this," he gestured to the blood-stained robe, "to him myself."

Severus folded his arms. *So Ambrosius is Uther's brother...*

Uther spurred his horse right up to Merlin's mare. He leaned forward and gripped the youth's cloak hard by the neck and almost lifted him out of the saddle. "Whatever you may be to my brother, you obey me, too." He gave Merlin a rough shake. "Understand, Merlin Emrys?"

As Merlin gave a quick nod, Uther let him go with a violent oath. In the torchlight, Severus could see a streak of blood along Uther's hand. At a signal, a torch-bearer came close, shedding light over Merlin's face.

Severus had the satisfaction of seeing Uther completely thunderstruck and hopelessly wrong-footed. He had taken a sudden and particularly vehement dislike to the man.

"He gave you that to wear? The red dragon?"

At the mention of a red dragon, Severus manoeuvred his way through the vision and spotted a glint of colour at Merlin's throat. Moving closer, he saw that it was a cloak brooch made of copper, the pin of which had scratched Uther's hand. Severus held his breath. The brooch bore a design worked in enamel: a red dragon flying proudly against a field of gold. Severus had seen the design before, depicted in a mosaic in an abandoned ruin – in a dream. He backed away, hanging fire for any information that might tell him what it meant.

Uther's eyes flickered with a light other than wrath as he examined Merlin's face for what seemed an age. "Merlin Emrys..." He laughed, genuinely amused and, at the same time, unyielding as steel.

Two soldiers began to whisper to each other. Using one of his many espionage skills, Severus filtered out the surrounding noise to hear their conversation:

"They say his father was the Prince of Darkness..."

"Run to your nurse's lap! Are you a man – or a frightened girl, addle-witted with superstition? Did you not hear lord Uther? 'Merlin *Emrys*', he said."

"And so?"

"By the faith, Goyle, your *horse* has more brain than you! *Emrys* and *Ambrosius* mean the same thing!"

Severus arched his eyebrows. *Goyle?*

Goyle huffed dismissively. "*Emrys* is a common enough name over the Narrow Sea; it seems every third brat in every village from the Severn to Mona's Isle answers to it."

"True, but have you not heard the slaves at their gossip? They talk of little else but the resemblance between lord Ambrosius and the boy Merlin. They say they are father and son. Why else would lord Ambrosius give Merlin the red dragon – the royal cipher of his house? Hah! Lord Uther has just discovered he is a not-so-proud uncle."

Severus was stunned. *Royal cipher! Merlin has royal blood from both sides?*

"I do *not* rub shoulders with slaves," Goyle grumbled.

"Maybe you should," the other said, leering. "If you lose your lance in battle, you'll spend the rest of your days wishing you had used it more often."

Severus rolled his eyes and looked for another place to eavesdrop. Sudden movement and noise indicated that he would not get the chance.

With dramatic flair, Uther wheeled his stallion and ordered the troop onward. He pointed to Merlin. "Bring him along, and see that he doesn't fall off. It seems my brother treasures him."

The images swam and blurred, then reformed.

Severus stood in a room lit with resin torches. A brazier cast a warm glow over woven rugs and a tiled floor. A table at one end of the room held a pile of scrolls, tablets, and maps. Myrddin, dressed in a dark blue tunic with the dragon brooch pinned at his shoulder, watched a man standing before the brazier with his head bowed. The man straightened and turned. He looked Roman, certainly, but his skin was deeply tanned, and there was something about the fathomless black of his eyes that suggested a shared heritage with the so-called "black Celts". His close-cropped hair was raven dark, as were the heavy brows that barred his features.

This must be Ambrosius, Severus thought, noting a definite resemblance between the man and the young Merlin. No wonder the slaves had been gossiping. He could sense that the two had been discussing important matters. Severus guessed that the business of the blood-stained robe had been dealt with. Whatever revelations and machinations that business had involved, Merlin had obviously retained Ambrosius' favour. In Severus' opinion, they had the look of men whose allegiance was not to be sundered by deed or rumour.

"Do you hate me for the life I gave you, Merlin?" Ambrosius spoke suddenly, though his tone was quiet. His eyes betrayed a softness, a sadness, which seemed at odds with his formidable features.

Severus listened, steadfastly ignoring a tightening in his throat as Merlin explained how he had looked at every man, from king to soldier to servant to slave, and wondered if he might see his father in them. And now that he could see him in the flesh, Merlin told Ambrosius that had he been given a choice as to who his father should be, he would have chosen *him* above anyone else.

Severus folded his arms and stared very hard at the pattern woven into a rug. When he collected himself and restored his observational mode, Merlin was gazing steadily at the brazier. Severus watched, awed, as the boy's obsidian eyes deepened, then clouded like smoke over still water. Even through the vision, or memory – Severus could

not decide which he could feel Merlin's power uncoil like a dragon roused from sleep.

"After all," Merlin said in a voice that was distant, yet strong, "what boy would not want the King of all Britain for his father?"

With an abrupt, nauseating shove, Severus was back in Tobias' room.

Hermione rushed to his side as he barely made it to a chair. "Severus! Talk to me! Say something!"

Severus fuzzily wondered why she was making such a fuss, then decided she was entitled to when he realised he was drenched in sweat and could not speak for shivering. He heard a house-elf squeaking something about hot tea. Another, vaguely familiar voice mentioned sugar.

He felt Hermione guide his hands around a cup and, moved to the core by the concern in her eyes, obeyed her instructions to drink. He shook his head and coughed.

"I don't take sugar," he complained, disconcerted at the effort it took to speak. "How long...?"

"On this occasion, you do," Hermione retorted as she smoothed his hair away from his eyes. "It is necessary, whether you like it or not." She watched him for a moment as he drank again. "See, you look better already," she said. "You were... out of reach for about ten minutes."

"It felt longer." He took another mouthful of tea, relishing the restorative effects of the traditional British cure-all. "What do you mean by 'out of reach'?"

"You looked... like you weren't here. You didn't move, or say anything... and your eyes. I've never seen you do that before."

"Yer eyes went 'ard and blank. The black deepened, then *shifted*, like smoke. Spooked the *B-Jesus* outta me," Toby supplied from his position of relative safety near the door to the next room. "Are y' sure you're okay?"

"Yes. I'm sure." Severus almost smiled as Hermione's eyes filled with questions it was touchingly gratifying to know that his well-being preceded the asking-of-questions in Hermione's *importance* scale. In that moment, he knew that he loved her more than ever.

Of all the things he had seen, he could only articulate one. It filled him with excitement and fear, the energising delight of discovery, and the trepidation that came with voicing a truth others would condemn as sacrilege. He took Hermione's hand and pressed her fingers to his lips. He glanced at Tobias, who leaned awkwardly against the door jamb with a wide-eyed Tocky clinging protectively to his trouser leg.

"There is much that is not told of Merlin in our history. It seems the Llygad y Ddraig contains visual accounts of events that are not recorded in scroll, book, legend or song," Severus said carefully. "The assumption that Myrddin Emrys and the wizard Merlin Merlinus Ambrosius, to use his Romanised name are one and the same..."

He wondered at himself for daring to voice his conclusion. "From what I have just witnessed, the assumption is correct."

Enconced in a portrait-less, triple-warded meeting-room, Kingsley, Oriens, Hermione, and Toby listened intently as Severus told of what he had witnessed in the disc of blue crystal.

When Severus finished speaking, the Minister for Magic leaned back in his chair and frowned thoughtfully. "So this red dragon a royal cipher was worn by Merlin. And you have seen it before in a dream?"

Severus let his hair mask his eyes. "I am aware that it sounds *beyond* ridiculous."

"Not at all," Kingsley stated, sitting up and glancing at Oriens for confirmation. "Over the past seven years, events ranging from the abnormal to the bizarre to the extraordinary have taken place. I've learned not to dismiss *anything* as unworthy of consideration until I have all of the surrounding facts."

"And to have great swathes of information omitted from historical accounts is not a new thing," Oriens mused. "I know of enormous gaps in the ancient histories of my homeland. *What* the omissions originally described, and *why* they were lost, are two parts of the same mystery."

"The *what* may be dependent upon the *why*?" Hermione asked.

Oriens nodded. "And vice versa. I live in hope that pieces of the missing histories may be found and restored to their rightful places, one day." He shrugged ruefully. "I know from experience, they tend to be hidden in unexpected places: that is, if they have not been destroyed."

"Now, what of your house-elf, Tobias? Can he give you any more information?"

Toby shook his head. "When I asked 'im to tell me a bit about Merlin, 'e told me the bits that 'e *could* tell 'cause those were the bits 'e knew. Tocky don't know any more than what 'e's already said, and 'e's is scared enough 'avin' done that much. I'll not back 'im into a corner over it." To Toby's surprise, Oriens and the Minister accepted his word and assured him that 'his' house-elf would not be pressured into re-telling ancient tales of Merlin to wizards or witches.

Kingsley leaned forward to look at the Llygad y Ddraig, which lay on the coffee table looking innocuous enough. "Severus, do your recent experiences give you a handle on what this thing actually is?"

Severus toyed with a scrap of waste parchment, gradually tearing it into confetti-sized pieces. "To say that it behaves like a Pensieve is perhaps an immature conclusion. I have only explored it *once* with the intention of using it as a memory-viewing device. I would need to do so many more times to be sure. Further, the images I have seen within it have a much more substantial feel than anything I've ever witnessed in a Pensieve. Also unique to the Llygad is the sensation of tremendous power contained somewhere within that crystal lattice and that power is not static. It moves and interacts with the visions."

"As though it were the driving force behind them?" Oriens asked, intrigued.

"No. It seems more a part of the visions. When I saw Merlin gaze into the brazier and watched his Sight begin to manifest, I thought I could feel *his* power stir. Perhaps this was an illusion engendered by the power of the Llygad."

Vice versa, Hermione thought. "What if..." She hesitated and bit her lip.

Severus crossed the room to sit beside her. "If you have any ideas, Hermione, give them voice. We are all playing a guessing game, here."

Hermione took his hand for courage. "What if it *was* Merlin's power that you could feel and the power in the Llygad is also... Merlin's?"

Kingsley folded his arms. "It is said in our lore-books that towards the end of Merlin's days on earth, Nimuë *took* his power. Whether she took his power, which is highly unlikely; or his memories, which is more likely; or maybe even both, she would have had to have stored them *somewhere*." He looked around at his companions. Severus scowled with scepticism. Hermione wandered between alarm and curiosity. Oriens pondered the Llygad y Ddraig with profound respect. Tobias had the look of one who had accidentally released a flame of Fire Crabs and was sorely tried as to how to round them all up again.

Kingsley phrased his next statement as cautiously as he could. "Severus, when we met with the centaurs, you went into the Llygad y Ddraig and said you had seen evidence that it is an heirloom of the Prince family. Firenze himself went on to say that it is *your* inheritance."

Severus snorted. "An inheritance that *might* have something to do with Merlin's*supposedly* stolen power? Kingsley, I begin to think we are jumping at shadows."

Hermione gave Severus a look that said she thought the 'shadows' were more tangible than he was prepared to consider.

No-one was willing to pursue that line of presumption any further.

Severus dismissed a fleeting shadow of uneasiness at the mention of Prince family heirlooms and things inherited. "I believe the Llygad y Ddraig has a more *substantial* connection to reality. Before Arawn went missing in action, he conducted an extensive search through the title deeds of lands owned by my mother's ancestors. The Aurors reported that the earliest record Arawn had accessed dated to A.D. 755."

Kingsley nodded. "I remember reading that report the property was described as a Roman-style villa in North Wales."

"It's highly probable that Arawn has visited the location. I propose to do so as well."

Kingsley's raised eyebrows prompted Severus to give a little more information.

"From everything I've been told about your missing Unspeakable, I conclude that he is very methodical in his actions. If he obtained a list of locations to investigate, he would begin at the earliest known record. Considering the short interval between the time he accessed the title deeds and his unauthorised removal of the Llygad from the vaults, I wonder if he did indeed find something very significant. Further, it would take months to investigate *every* property location. Whatever he may have found, he found it not long after commencing his search."

Kingsley gave a sigh of cautious agreement. "A logical proposition, Severus. But you will not be going alone." Kingsley's tone was resolute. "Take Oriens and at least three Aurors with you." He noted Hermione's sharp look. "And Hermione, if she is willing."

Severus nodded his acceptance of the conditions. "I will also attempt another exploration of *this* Llygad on site. Perhaps it can give me some insight into what Arawn seeks to achieve with the one he has appropriated from the vaults." He fixed his gaze at an undefined spot on the wall. "I understand that Tobias is not yet out of quarantine, so I suppose I will require his presence as well."

"Quarantine be buggered," Toby growled. "Y'd think I 'ad bloody fleas."

"I'm sure you've had a lot worse," Severus replied in a silky tone designed specifically to provoke annoyance.

"I'll give you a list in t'mornin'," Toby fired back.

"I believe that what Severus *meant* to say was that you're not yet clear of the magical object separation procedure." Kingsley eyed Severus amicably until he shrugged and looked the other way. "Do you have details of the villa's location?"

Severus nodded and handed over a piece of parchment.

Kingsley looked it over. "I shall send a team of Aurors on a reconnaissance mission tomorrow. I'll tell them to check for wards, tells, hex-traps, curses, and anything else that shouldn't be there. When you get on site, if anything happens, send a Patronus. We will keep your location on an alert-list."

Aurors Thistlethwaite and Savage dropped into the central courtyard with a fine display of synchronised flying. They hailed Auror Proudfoot as he emerged from the depths of the ruins.

"We've made a Cleansweep of the perimeter," Savage announced, shouldering his broom with a military flourish.

Proudfoot snorted and shook his head. "Funny. Not."

Thistlethwaite decided to be helpful. "There's nothing here that I wouldn't expect to find in the middle of nowhere. Merlin knows, we had a hard enough time finding this place! The only signs of life were a few birds and a sleeping pine marten. Who owns this pile anyway?"

"That's classified information," Proudfoot replied. "Shacklebolt wouldn't tell me, and orders are orders." He glanced over his shoulder. "But come and get a look at this."

Inside the remains of what appeared to have been a feasting hall, the three Aurors eyed the mosaic dubiously.

"It's been hidden until quite recently," Proudfoot mused. "Look at the pile of rubble on the floor. No moss, no lichen. The broken edges are all pretty clean." He turned his attention to the red dragon. "Nice bit of work, that is. Whoever the people were who built this place, they earned a nifty Knut or two, that's for sure."

Savage hunkered down to pull a straggling weed out of the flagstones. "Who says they earned it? They probably siphoned their money off the agrarian classes. Shame you couldn't bring young Potter," he teased.

Proudfoot rolled his eyes. "Potter! Here? I shudder to think what he would have got up to. Or into. No, Senior Auror *McPhee* is welcome to him," he said with a vengeful grin.

Savage and Thistlethwaite gasped. "Senior Auror *McPhee*..." they whispered, looking around as though she might appear at any moment.

"Oh, aye," Proudfoot affirmed with a chuckle. "Robards *did* say he was not going to muck around. He told Potter himself, 'As long as you *need* to work with her, but do not *want* to work with her, she will stay. When you *want* to work with her, but no longer *need* to work with her, she will leave.'"

"How hideous is she this time?" Thistlethwaite asked.

Proudfoot mentally ran through a list of magical creatures. "Picture a cave troll and a Blast-Ended Skrewt. Now think of something roughly half-way between the two."

Savage recoiled in mock horror. "Merlin! Poor Potter!"

"Poor McPhee," Thistlethwaite retorted. "From what I hear of Potter's *manageability*, she'll be staying hideous for a bloody long time. It's a shame, really. She's right pretty when she's not on assignment."

"Proudfoot!" Auror Bagsend hailed him from the east wing.

"Hey-up! What is it, Bagsend?"

"All clear. There's a blocked doorway looks like part of the upper floor collapsed over it at some time. There are no signs of curses or traps. Shall I move the mess and check it out? There's a bit of water seeping out under the stones."

Savage turned to Proudfoot, who appeared to be considering the option. "Not much point if there's no magical interference."

Proudfoot shrugged. "Yeah, it might only be a cistern room or something."

"Or a bog," Thistlethwaite suggested in a passable imitation of a Welsh accent. "With bodies!"

"You're full of it!" Proudfoot grumbled.

Sensing that all was quiet, a Dementor crept out of a deep, narrow cleft in a rocky slope, hidden beyond the forest edge. It had stayed out of sight, as ordered. It glided into the ruins.

Keeping close to the deeper shadows of the walls, it tasted the air, sensing the essence of the people who had recently been there their essence, their life force, and their purpose. With a predator's instinct, it knew more prey would soon follow them.

The Dementor stirred angrily. They would have been good food. Hunger pressured the creature into obedience. It returned to the rocky crag to find the stone that, when pressed, would signal its human contact.

Standing in the middle of what the reconnaissance team's notes described as a feasting hall, Severus eyed the mosaic with a small twinge of foreboding. His previous experience of dreams-come-true was not something he liked to dwell on. Admitting to himself that he was a little spooked, he probed his surroundings with his mind.

The sense of impending danger he had felt in his dream of this same ruin appeared to be limited to his response to the red dragon, which stared down at him with glazed-tile eyes. As he scanned, he could feel Hermione's fascination... and the alert wariness of the three Aurors Savage, Derwent and Tyburn who fanned out to search for potential danger. Oriens remained as inscrutable as ever, though his gaze kept returning to the mosaic. He did not need Legilimency to read Tobais' thoughts: *Eileen's family came from this?*

Hermione glanced at him questioningly, her lower lip held firmly between her teeth.

Severus waited until the Aurors moved far enough away to be unable to hear his next words. "I suppose," he murmured, "the next question we should ask is: What is a replication of a royal cipher doing in the home of my mother's ancestors?"

"It could be a sign of allegiance," Hermione suggested. "During the War of the Roses, people adopted red or white rose designs to show where their loyalties lay."

"Could 'ave somethin' to do with yer mother's maiden name," Toby muttered.

Severus glanced at him thoughtfully. "Having a *surname* suggestive of a grand title does not imply that the title ever existed in truth."

Aurors Derwent and Tyburn moved out of the feasting hall to explore the broken hulk of the west wing. Oriens paired up with Auror Savage to scan the remains of the east wing.

As soon as she was sure she would not be overheard, Hermione tugged on Severus' sleeve.

"I think I know what it means," she whispered.

Severus quirked an eyebrow a wordless way of asking her to enlighten him further.

"Don't you see it? Look! The red dragon is the royal sign of Ambrosius' house, right?"

Severus nodded. "And, by inheritance, Merlin's."

"It would also be the sign of Uther's house because he was Ambrosius' brother. By inheritance, it will be the cipher of Uther's son, Arthur."

"You are assuming that the 'lord Uther' I saw in the Llygad is the same Uther who robbed the royal cradle of Tintagel."

"Severus, what are the odds of two Uthers and two Merlins charging around in the same historically correct time zone?"

Severus' sense of foreboding increased. "The odds are skeletally thin. Your conclusions are?"

Hermione pointed at the mosaic. "The castle could be Caer Camel, Arthur's castle, and the hill might be... Bryn Myrddin."

"Two blood-related houses, with the red dragon presiding over both." Severus nodded. "It makes sense." He felt Hermione slip her hand into his.

"Have I gone too far?" she asked. "I mean, I know this must be bizarre for you..."

"Try surreal. Outrageously surreal." Severus turned to her and gave a small smile. "You've not gone too far. You rightly gave definition to something that should be stated as obvious. I... I think about the reasons why this image is *here*... in this place... and it makes me..." Severus shook his head, unable to put what he was feeling into words.

He offered his arm to Hermione. "I am afraid the guided tour was discontinued many hundred years ago. A pity," he said, looking around. "I would have liked to have seen this place when it was inhabited." He frowned, listening intently. "I can hear water trickling. Somewhere." He shot a glance at Tobias, who was aimlessly piecing together bits of broken slate. "Coming?"

Thinking that anything was better than being left alone, Toby wiped his hands on his trousers and followed them.

They made their way into the east wing, where they spotted Oriens and Auror Savage examining a narrow doorway partially sealed with rubble. A small gap near the top hinted at only emptiness within. Severus steered Hermione towards it. Judging by the thin ribbon of water seeping out over the flagstones, the room contained the source of the sound he could hear.

Auror Savage consulted a copy of the reconnaissance report. "I made a note of this yesterday," he said, nodding to the blocked doorway. "We didn't check it out: there was no sign of it being tampered with."

Severus narrowed his eyes as he tried to decipher the eroded engravings on the stone lintel. After a moment, he frowned. "I cannot tell if that was an inscription or an adornment," he said.

"Shift the stones if you want to," Auror Savage shrugged indifferently. "No harm in looking."

Severus and Hermione glanced at each other, then began levitating the stones into a neat pile to one side of the doorway. They both stood back from the exposed room, in which darkness hung like a curtain of musty velvet.

"You do the honours," Hermione said. "I shall protect you if anything comes out," she added mischievously.

Pausing only to roll his eyes, Severus cast "*Lumos*," and they all stood back in surprise.

"What the hell is *that*?" Auror Savage stood beside them, peering into the illuminated room, which seemed all the more derelict for having its neglect exposed.

"It has the look of... One of the ancient gods of this land," Oriens muttered speculatively. "But which one?"

Severus offered no response. Detecting no signs of magical entrapments, he made his way into the room with deliberate hesitation, testing each step before committing to it. Reaching the back of the room, he reached out and caught some of the water which dripped from a stone lip built into the wall. He examined the stone figure built into an alcove immediately above the source of the water. "And who might you be?" he murmured.

"Severus?" Hermione's voice made thin echoes which only served to amplify the sense of abandonment in the tiny room.

"It's quite safe," he replied over his shoulder. "It was a shrine of some sort. For this one, evidently," he said, tapping the time-worn figure on its slightly extended left hand. His questing thoughts collided, coalesced, and formed an idea. He exited the room and signalled Tobias.

Knowing why he was being signalled, Toby produced the Llygad and handed it to Severus. It was the only reason he had been brought along, anyway.

Severus took the object in his hand and hesitated for a moment. "I wonder if the Llygad can tell me anything about what is in that room," he mused. "If it can, it may be a reliable indication that its connection with this place runs a little further than images of red dragons." Smirking at Tobias' puzzled shrug, he prowled back into the room and stood before the anonymous statue. He looked it over again, committing what was left of its features to memory.

He focussed his power on the Llygad y Ddraig. Within its facets, a light played and swam. Severus concentrated with focussed intensity. Images began to form:

Blue sky, high clouds, bare rocks. A god carved in stone and standing beside a mountain spring. The god's features were clearly visible. Severus had seen an illustration of the same god before, while researching a fifth-year History of Magic essay: Myrddin of the High Places.

An uncharacteristic whim commanded an automatic action: Severus collected a little water in his cupped hand. He drank a small amount and sprinkled the rest out at the statue's feet. He placed the crystal disc in the god's left hand.

Hermione started in fright. Auror Savage swore and sent an alert to his colleagues. Toby blinked and shook his head. Oriens drew his wand.

Without a movement, without a sound, Severus had simply vanished.

Five Arrows – Part 3

Chapter 18 of 32

Severus arrives at a startling conclusion. Arawn makes his move. Toby makes a monumental decision.

A/N's

This chapter is presented in three parts.

The description of the crystal cave is adapted from pp 5859 of *The Crystal Cave*, by Mary Stewart (1970). The cluster of blue crystals is my addition.

The dragon brooch is described in *The Hollow Hills* (1973) and *The Last Enchantment* (1979) as being made of copper, with an enamelled design of a red dragon on a gold field.

In Ms Stewart's universe, Merlin crafted a small harp to take with him on his travels. It was not described in great detail, but he did store it in the crystal cave.

From Edwin Muir's poem 'Merlin', *Collected Poems, 1921-1958*

Indonesian: *Membela kami!* Defend us! (On-line translator. Please note there are language variations throughout the Indonesian islands. The words may be very different on Sumatra).

Canon characters are the property of J.K. Rowling. I make no money from them.

Thank you, TeaOli, for beta-reading and advising me on the representation of nested scene-changes ~hugs~.

Disorientated, Severus kept absolutely still. As soon as the sensation passed, he opened his eyes to darkness so complete, he wondered if he only *thought* his eyes were open. Blinking a few times to make sure, he drew his wand.

"*Lumos.*"

Immediately, a faint, musical sound echoed a response a single, lonely chord. Severus positioned his back against a wall, his eyes widening as he recognised the features of the cave he had seen in the Llygad y Ddraig. Silence prevailed.

"Show yourself!" he commanded, wand poised and ready. He added wordlessly: *Homenum Revelio.*

Answering notes sighed plaintively through the air and faded into the shadows.

Severus tilted his head and scowled thoughtfully. "*Dunderheads!*" he roared.

More notes sounded this time, in a proportionate volume to his exclamation.

Severus raised his wand, recalling that his sixteenth-century ancestor had climbed into another part of the cave from a ledge somewhere...

There! At the rear of the cave, Severus spied a shallow ledge supporting a dense mass of darkness. He pulled himself up and found a round aperture just big enough to admit a full-grown man. Looking inside, he almost lost his hold. A thousand points of light pierced his eyes, momentarily dazzling him. Cautiously letting his vision adjust, he looked again and drew a breath in admiration.

This part of the cave was an almost spherical space. It was lined entirely with perfectly formed, diamond-bright crystals, whose faceted surfaces threw back the light of his wand and reflected it back and forth between themselves in a riot of glittering rainbows. In the exact centre of the floor stood a small harp the sort a minstrel might easily carry in his pack or saddlebag. Severus deployed an arsenal of revealing charms for hidden snares and curses but found only a harmless preservation charm of untold antiquity.

"So *you* are the singer of echoes," he said to the harp.

The harp's strings caught the vibration of his voice and hummed softly.

Severus eased his body through the opening, not wanting to damage the crystals which prickled under his hands and knees. Deeply set into the floor, Severus spotted a small cluster of milky-blue crystals. He moved to get a closer look, finding that one of the blue crystals had been chipped away. He produced the Llygad y Ddraig and laid it next to them for comparison. In colour at least, the cave crystals were a perfect match.

"Is this where the Llygad comes from?" he mused out loud.

The harp murmured its musical rejoinder, causing him to sit up in the confined space and focus his attention on the instrument. He ran his fingers lightly across the strings, and the harp shivered a hopeful scale which seemed both familiar and strange. Severus did not know how to play the instrument, nor was he given to singing, but he had a sudden yearning to learn to do both. Shaking his head at such foolishness, he picked the harp up and set it to one side. There was something underneath it.

He had seen it before a small, vellum-wrapped package in the hand of his rapier-bearing ancestor. Checking again for hidden traps and again finding nothing he eased the package into his hand. Peeling away the vellum, which gave up its form to centuries of slow decay, Severus' hand began to tremble. A copper brooch, bearing a familiar enamelled design, rested on his palm. Uther had scratched his hand on it, moments before he had realised that Merlin was his brother's son. Soldiers had called it a royal cipher.

Severus dropped the brooch, flinching as it skittered over the crystal floor and came to rest against his boot. A half-remembered poem from his student days surfaced like an incantation:

O Merlin in your crystal cave

Deep in the diamond of the day...

Severus gasped, looking around in trepidation. His thoughts automatically, inexorably, slid into place: a boy called Myrddin, whose description matched that of the boy he had seen in the outer cave; the visions he had seen in the Llygad's depths which proved that the boy was indeed Merlin himself; the blue crystals which matched the Llygad y Ddraig; a statue of the *god* Myrddin standing as a connection between the home of the Prince ancestors and... a crystal cave; a royal insignia worn by Merlin and replicated above the fireplace in the home where those whose blood flowed in his veins had once walked...

Severus clenched his teeth and shook his head. *This cannot be...*

Myrddin Emrys, illegitimate son of the magically gifted Princess Niniane and Ambrosius Aurelianus the Muggle warrior who would become Britain's first High King. *Prince* Merlinus Ambrosius. Merlinus Ambrosius...

Overwhelmed, Severus pulled his knees to his chest and attempted to bring his mind back from the brink of absurdity. *I am delusional, or dreaming*, he thought. He focussed on the shimmering crystals lining the roof. A sharp pain lanced behind his eyes, and he felt the Llygad grow unnaturally warm...

In crystalline pinpoints of light, a red dragon hovered with its mouth open in a roar of defiance. Oriens lay face-down on cold flagstones, motionless, with his left leg at a torturous angle. Aurors Tyburn and Savage bound, gagged, and blindfolded. Auror Derwent stared into space with the blank eyes of a Dementor's victim. Hermione, her eyes wide with fear and rage, struggled against binding ropes.

A sense of danger rippled through his skin.

Without thinking, Severus snatched up the brooch and shoved it into his pocket. Using his power of flight, he launched himself out of the crystal cave and landed on his feet in the middle of the outer cavern. His wand-light shone like a beacon as he searched for a way out. In a protected nook near the sealed entrance, he spotted another statue of Myrddin. In a slightly better state of preservation, the statue's *right* hand was held out. A stone cup lay at its feet.

"*Aguamenti!*" Wrapping the Llygad's silver chain around his wrist, Severus filled the cup, took a mouthful and poured the rest out for the god. He placed the crystal disc in the god's hand.

He was back in the small room. The sense of danger increased exponentially as he caught his balance and his bearings. He held his tongue between his teeth to stop himself from calling Hermione's name. Moving stealthily, he exited the room and looked around. He could smell fear. His wand hand moved of its own accord...

"*Sev'rus!*"

...and he only just stopped himself from firing a Stunning Spell. Instead, he cast *Homenum Revelio* for the second time that day. Tobias emerged from a narrow gap between a wall and a pile of rubble. Severus could see the man was utterly terrified. He seized the Muggle by the scruff and dragged him into one of the passages leading to the ruins of the kitchens.

"What happened?" he hissed with more savagery than he intended.

"I didn't see what 'appened, but it all 'appened at once. There was a blast an explosion then someone starts callin' yer name. Said they'd done Oriens and Derwent like a... like a... *Thestral's* dinner. Yer lass dropped one of those charm things on me and told me to stay put and stay quiet. Then she went out to sneak a look around the corner..." Toby seized his son by the front of his coat. "They got 'er, Sev'rus. And Savage. Don't know about Tyburn. It got real cold and dim. There was somethin' wanderin' about. I couldn't see it, but I think it was the same thing Oriens snared back at St Mungo's. Yer lass is alive. I 'eard 'er callin' out: 'Six wizards against one witch? Brave lot, aren't you? Untie me and duel me one at a time.'" Toby shivered. "One of 'em was sayin'... they'll torture 'er. One of 'em said so the one t'others called 'Arawn'. Seems there's somethin' 'e wants you to do."

Severus gripped his father's shoulder while considering Hermione's communication. By taunting her captors, she had managed to relay information to Tobias in the hope that he could pass it on. And so he had. "Listen," he said, taking the Llygad and pressing it into Tobias' hands. "Take this and get out. Follow the culvert to that stand of woodland over there." He pointed to indicate the path he referred to. "Keep under the trees and make for the forest. Keep moving. Just keep moving." Severus cast a Disillusionment Charm over himself and Tobias, then shoved him towards the culvert. "*Go!*"

Severus took a moment to give Tobias enough time to make his way into the culvert and get safely out of range. He ground his teeth and carefully made his way out of the passage. It was too quiet. He searched within himself for the means to summon his Patronus.

A pebble bounced off the floor. Severus crouched and dodged. He glimpsed the ragged form of a Dementor hovering above a crumbling wall and pointing in his direction. In one movement he deflected a Body-Bind Curse and returned fire..."*Expulso!*" The top of the wall to his left shattered and a black-robed wizard howled in pain as a hail of broken stone bludgeoned him out of his covered position. The wizard staggered, slipped, and dropped over the other side of the wall. A dull, scraping *thud* rebounded off the empty walls.

One down, five to go. "Expecto..."

Severus did not even feel the Stunning Spell that caught him between the shoulder blades.

Toby moved as quickly as he dared, keeping to thickets and shadows. Timing his movement to the slow, brittle rustle of the wind in autumn-dry vegetation, he reached the forest edge and flung himself against the trunk of an ancient elm. In spite of Severus' instructions, helpless fury prevented him from going any further. He slammed his fist against the unyielding bark: the resulting surge of pain slapped him into thinking with awful clarity. The villa was ominously silent. It could only mean that Severus was also overpowered.

Toby had a choice. He could keep going and leave Severus, Hermione, Oriens, and the Aurors to their fate but having heard Arawn refer so coldly to torture and death, he knew that if he fled, he would not be able to live with himself. The bottle would summon him, and he would willingly surrender to it. His future stretched before him in years of slow, torturous death, with an ignominious end most likely in a gutter somewhere.

He considered the alternative. He could go back and try to create enough of a diversion for Severus to retaliate. It, too, held his death as the most likely result. *At least*, he thought, *I would die doin' somethin'*. The thought did not comfort him. He tried to rally himself. *Not everyone gets to pick when and where they die*. That thought made it even worse.

He shucked his jacket and placed it under the elm. The Llygad was a problem. He didn't want to risk carrying it back down to the villa. Whoever finished him off would be sure to find it. He looked around at the trees, searching for a knot-hole, a squirrel's drey, anything in which to hide the troublesome object.

A fiery flash high amid the tree-tops caught his attention. It reappeared, moving at an incredible speed. It banked and swooped towards him. Toby glimpsed wings like smokeless flames of fire, a black-jewel eye, and a long bundle held in strong claws. On a reflex, he caught the bundle as it fell towards him. Holding it, he watched as an extraordinary bird settled on a branch. It was about the size of a peacock, and its feathers glowed like embers fanned by a breeze. Toby half-expected to see the branch begin to char beneath its feet.

The bird watched him intently. Feeling a little self-conscious, Toby placed the bundle on the ground. The bird gave a lilting, musical call. Encouraged, he untied the bundle and sat back on his heels, completely dumbfounded. He reached out and lifted a re-curved bow from where it lay next to an archer's arm-guard and a quiver containing five arrows. Never had he seen a weapon so beautifully crafted. It sat in his hand and seemed to merge with him, flesh and bone an extension of his own body. He strung the bow and cautiously pulled it to a full draw. It seemed the bow had already been trained: he felt no stress or strain in its construction to indicate otherwise.

The bird sang again, a longer melody which stirred his blood. Putting the bow aside, he examined the arrows. Toby felt his insides turn to ice. The arrows were not tournament blunts. They were tipped with razor sharp, barbed points. They were made to maim and kill. Toby had never taken anyone's life, by accident or by choice. He looked out over the silent villa. Choice, indeed.

Swallowing, he took up the arm-guard. Worked into the leather in lifelike detail, a red dragon lay coiled in sleep. With a vague thought that this was a strange way to depict a dragon, Toby ran a finger over the image. He dropped it with a stifled yell when the image suddenly stirred. Jolted by the impact with the ground, the engraved dragon sprawled clumsily on its back, quickly righted itself, then glared at Toby with severely affronted dignity.

"Sorry," Toby mumbled, picking up the arm-guard and sliding it over his left forearm. He clenched his teeth as it shrank and shifted to a snug fit. The little red dragon spread its wings and extended its talons in a brave display of ferocity.

"Alright for you, ain't it?" he growled. He slung the quiver at his side, then took up the bow. At a gentle warble from the bird, he turned to see it drop a feather and fly towards the villa. Toby picked up the feather. It felt warm against his fingers. Tucking it inside his shirt for luck, he began to make his way back along the way he had come. Emboldened by the fiery bird's parting gift, Toby decided that the Llygad y Ddraig would stay with him. Severus would thus have an easier time of finding it.

"Rennervate."

Severus blinked and tried to move. His hands were bound behind his back. He tasted the coppery tang of blood in his mouth. Hermione lay on the floor opposite him, cocooned in ropes and magically silenced. Her eyes communicated pure relief as Severus came to his senses.

Amycus Carrow leered at Severus before eyeing Hermione lasciviously. Another Death Eater stood guard over the bound witch, his mask covering his features. Severus thought he recognised him by his build and posture. *Thorfinn?*

Arawn paced nonchalantly, apparently quite the lord of the manor in Severus' ancestral lands. "Nice of you to drop in, Snape. Though it was rather rude of you to make one of our company drop out. To his death, that is. In response to your *hospitality*, I have just summoned reinforcements: Every you cannot hold off ten Death Eaters and three Dementors."

"A little careless, don't you think, to reveal your numbers so early in the contest?" Severus struggled into a sitting position, his back against a wall. He ran his tongue over a small cut on the inside of his mouth. In his experience of assessing incurred physical damages, he was essentially unharmed. For the moment. "If there is something that you want from me, Arawn, why did you not adopt a more reasonable strategy and *ask*?"

Arawn laughed. "We both know what is required, Snape, and we both know that you are not one to simply cooperate."

"That would depend on *what* is required of me. You assume that I have some knowledge of whatever it is you are planning."

Arawn held out a disc of blue crystal flanked by two silver dragons. He allowed the silver chain to run between his fingers until the object swung like a pendulum. "I am sure you are aware of what this is, Snape. And I would be most interested to hear your interpretation of that fine mosaic you have uncovered in the feasting hall."

Severus snorted. "I did not uncover it. I didn't know it was there."

Arawn grinned, an action which made his soulless eyes all the more disturbing. "It was concealed from view, the last time I was here. Mysteriously, it is revealed just in time for you to wander in and take a look at it." Arawn smirked. "And I also have this the Llygad y Ddraig. Something that has been in the Prince family for generations. Do you know, I have heard some interesting things about this artefact."

Severus thought quickly, piecing together Lucius' warning:

"I heard them talking Voldemort, Father, Rookwood and Crevan..."

Severus put up his Occlumency shields. *Rookwood*. He re-played what Lucius had heard of the conversation:

"Voldemort said I remember it word for word: 'I will judge the time to hand it to him. I will judge when he should be told its history. I will command him to use it. Then, I will claim its power... Until then, keep the half-blood close.'"

Severus kept his expression fixed in slightly contemptuous neutrality. Arawn had taken memories from old Rookwood and then allowed a Dementor to feed on him. "What things have you heard?"

"Feigning ignorance does not become you, Snape." Arawn's eyes took on a cold luminescence, a lifeless sheen. Severus felt the same crawling sensation in his bones as he had experienced when facing Umbridge. But in Severus' opinion, Umbridge barely had two functioning brain cells. Arawn's intellect was far more dangerous.

"I have *heard* that the Llygad will not wake until it rests in the hand of its true owner. I note you have accessed a certain room and have, no doubt, encountered our small stone friend who by *pure* coincidence happens to be Myrddin, ancient god of high places. I look at that mosaic, and I cannot help thinking of Merlin himself, who was mentioned in Atilius' tale as being the true owner of the Llygad y Ddraig."

Arawn waved his hand. Thorfinn roughly dragged Severus to his feet. Arawn laughed. "Voldemort placed great value on this artefact and on you: a half-blood. I came to several conclusions as to why this was so."

Yes, *Riddle did say he was quite fond of Atilius* "Please, explain them to me."

Arawn gave a smile of false benevolence. It reminded Severus of Abraxas Malfoy. "Only one conclusion could stand: this artefact will only work for someone of a certain bloodline. You took Voldemort's mark and proved loyal to him or so he thought. He was waiting for the right time."

"The right time for what, exactly?" *Get to the point, man!*

"Really, Snape, you are not so obtuse. It all hinges on why Voldemort valued the Llygad y Ddraig so highly. In it is a power that is contained within defences I have never encountered before. A power that could revolutionise magic as we know it, guarded behind a fortress I cannot penetrate." Arawn held up the Llygad again, his expression hungry, devouring.

By the nine books of ancient magic, he is not far off becoming a Dementor himself Severus thought, recalling Oriens' description of what happened to souls following the Downward Spiral. "An intriguing notion. However, exploring the home of my ancestors is not mutually inclusive with knowledge of that artefact."

Arawn cocked his head as though thinking. Evidently, that was not all he was doing. A Dementor drifted in through an empty doorway and hovered in front of Hermione. "Patience, my friend," Arawn said to it. "We have not yet begun to bargain."

If Severus could have gained any pleasure out of the situation at all, it was when he saw Hermione effectively isolate her mind from the Dementor's deadly presence.

"I would not call them 'friends', Arawn."

Arawn turned sharply. "The Dementors follow my instructions; I have control over them."

"Are you sure? It appears to me, *they* have control over *you*. They are not ordinary Magical creatures: they are the forces of destruction embodied. They do not give, Arawn; they only take, and what they take, they consume."

Arawn glared at him. "I am done playing at niceties with you, Snape." He held out the Llygad y Ddraig. "Show me how it works. Place it in the hand of the ancient god and waken its power."

Severus could feel the strength of Hermione's frantic stare. He met her eyes for a spare moment, seeing her thoughts written plainly: *Do not show him! Please, do not let him win.*

There was nothing he could do to communicate to her what he strongly suspected and, with good reason, feared. The Llygad Arawn held was most likely the decoy his mother's brother had died with. If it was counterfeit, it would not work. When it did not work, what would happen to Hermione?

Feeling decidedly ill, Severus allowed himself to be unceremoniously ushered into Myrddin's presence. With Thorfinn's wand at his throat, he felt his hands released from their bonds. Without evident emotion, he took the Llygad from Arawn and placed it in the god's hand.

Nothing happened.

"Make an oblation and try again!" Arawn hissed, gesturing to the steadily dripping water.

Severus collected a little water in his cupped hand, drank some, and sprinkled the rest. Again, he placed the Llygad in Myrddin's hand.

Nothing happened.

Arawn seized Severus' hand. At a word, a shallow cut spread across his palm.

"Resorting to blood magic? How very druidic," Severus drawled as Arawn directed him to place a drop of blood in the god's hand and try the Llygad again.

For a third time, nothing happened.

Arawn grew pale with anger. "Why won't it work, Snape?" he whispered.

Severus felt his blood run cold. He had heard words like these before moments before Nagini attacked. He sensed Death approaching.

With a snarl, Arawn replaced Severus' bonds, subjected him to a Silencing Charm, and marched him back out of the room. He pointed to Hermione. "Take her to the feasting hall. Make her scream. Do anything you have to do to make her beg this half-blood oaf to cooperate! You," he rounded on Severus, "may listen to the results of your *hindrance* from here." As the Death Eaters laughingly carried Hermione away, Arawn addressed the Dementor. "Wait outside. Keep watch. You shall have more food soon enough."

Fawkes flew swiftly towards the villa, his head-feathers lifting in anger as he spotted his quarry. Three shrouded forms defiled the air, relentlessly cold and remorseless in their hunger. The human would not be able to fight *these* beings. Fawkes hissed quietly. He would take care of the abominations himself.

The phoenix flew higher, his spirit calling to the watery blur marking the position of the sun. He let out a burst of song. The thick clouds parted and a golden slant of sunlight reached down towards the Earth.

Fawkes hovered in the light of life, then flew hard and fast towards his first target. Falcon-like, he folded his wings to his body and relished the cleansing rush of increasing speed. At the last moment, he threw his talons forward.

The Dementors could not sense what banished them. It came out of intolerable brightness and struck with irresistible force. In its touch was a silent song, and it burned like the fires of creation.

Crikey, it's a bugger, gettin' old, Toby complained to himself. While there was nothing wrong with his endurance, he missed the speed and agility of his younger days. Moving through a particularly obnoxious thicket of blackberries, he mentally scaled a broken wall, picking out hand- and foot-holds and places where he might have a visual advantage. He backed up with a hissed oath as he almost stood on a black-robed body half-hidden in the thorny tangles. *Well, I reckon there'll be no cheek from you*, he thought, grimacing as he noted the glassy-eyed stare of death and the still-bright blood hanging in sticky clots from the man's ears and mouth.

Following the route he had calculated, he climbed the wall to a long ledge and listened.

"Are you *up* for it, Amycus?" A sneering voice slithered through the air. "Up for a nice little bit of war heroine?"

"Only if you'll let me take my time, Thorfinn. I've seen how impatient you are."

"I'll be here till next bloody Christmas, then. How about *you* hold the Mudblood down and *I'll* loosen her up for you? You never did have the knack of getting a woman to cooperate!"

Toby tasted bile. *'Ermione!* With cat-like stealth, he crept along the ledge until he reached an empty stone window-arch. Peering over the edge, he saw that he was looking into the feasting hall. There were two more black-robed wizards taunting a bound and apparently speechless Hermione. One of them wore a silver mask. With an uncomfortable prickle, he saw that Hermione was yelling wildly, but not making a sound. Eileen had used the same thing on him on the night she had made his doppelganger. *Been there, done that, too.*

If the wizards did not move Hermione to another location, Toby would have a clear shot at both of them. He was almost on eye-level with the red dragon in the mosaic. As he strung his bow, he glanced at the smaller version of the red beast engraved on his arm-guard. *I guess this says whose side I'm on,* he thought grimly.

He knew that timing would be everything. He took two arrows from the quiver. He fitted one to the bowstring and placed the other where he could pick it up immediately after shooting the first. He pulled the bow to a quarter-draw. *Wait for it...*

Amycus was having a wonderful time. "Hey, Thorfinn, Snape will want to hear what she has to say."

Hermione stared daggers at the masked Death Eater. He waved his wand lazily, and she was able to speak. She launched into a stream of blistering invective. As she had expected, her antagonists thought this was highly amusing. Capitalising on their distracted state, she tried to slip in a wandless Body-Bind Curse and Disarming Charm.

But Amycus was too quick for her. He deflected the attacks and retaliated. *"Imperio!"*

"Nice work, Amycus," Thorfinn chortled. "Now, let's untie her. Snape wouldn't want to think of his Mudblood as being *inaccessible*."

Toby chose the first victim as the ropes vanished into thin air. Nothing existed but the point of his arrow and the place it would strike.

"You! Mudblood! Do exactly as Thorfinn tells you," Amycus commanded.

Thorfinn removed his mask, revealing the reason why he wore it. Half of his face had been burned away, the puckered, parchment-thin flesh clinging obscenely to bones deformed by injury. "Now then, my sparky little wench." He shook off his cloak. "Come to me and..."

Hermione beheld her surroundings through a haze of contented compliance. The wizard with the scarred face had stopped speaking and dropped his mask. She wondered why, but it really didn't matter. The second wizard staggered and dropped to his knees. Her head began to clear. Amycus fell forward and lay still.

Hermione blinked and gasped, shuddering at what they had been about to make her do. *Ugh!*

Thorfinn collapsed with a hissing gurgle. Hermione had seen people die. She knew he was dead by the way his body hit the stone floor.

Her thoughts crowded together simultaneously: *I'm free! Where is Severus? What the hell happened to them? Is that an arrow?* She held the image of her wand in her mind and silently summoned it. She took Thorfinn's wand and tucked it into her sleeve, establishing that he had indeed been felled by an arrow. The missile was lodged in his neck, angling down into the right side of his chest. Only three inches of the shaft and the fletching was visible. She looked up towards an empty window, but saw no-one.

Claiming Amycus' wand as well, and noting a barbed point protruding through his back, Hermione wasted no time. She summoned her Patronus and sent it to Kingsley with a message.

Her courage soared as a familiar, fiery form streaked through the air.

Severus shivered with horror and desperation. He had heard Hermione's outburst and that it was suddenly curtailed. Arawn noted this with a shrug of false apology. He cancelled the Silencing Charm, allowing Severus to speak.

"Arawn, don't do this..."

"All you have to do is make it work," Arawn replied mildly, juggling the Llygad in his hand. A third Death Eater had come in from somewhere and now sauntered towards Severus with his wand at the ready. Severus had seen him before but did not know him—he was one of the brutish louts common to Riddle's lower circles. There was a strict class hierarchy even within Riddle's enclave of purity. The Death Eater pressed his wand into Severus' neck—into the scars left by Nagini.

Hermione. Severus could see no other way to stall for time—but he would never reveal the *real* Llygad's existence. "I cannot make it work for you because..."

"Stupefy!"

The Death Eater dropped like a stone. Severus saw Arawn look up. His soulless eyes widened, and he Disapparated just as a phoenix swooped down with a shrill cry of fury.

Fawkes? But the bird was gone, and Hermione was busily freeing him. She pushed an unfamiliar wand into his hand.

"Hermione, what..."

His words were cut short as she kissed him, quick, hard, and fierce. "I love you. I don't know what happened. Help is coming, and we need to get moving."

Severus applied a Concussion Hex to the stupefied Death Eater. Even if he was revived, he would be utterly useless for the next twenty-four hours.

Concealed behind a curtain of nearly leafless ivy, Toby was glad his taste in clothes never extended to vivid colours. *Then again, I s'pose they can't see me, with that delusionment thing Sev'rus did,* he reasoned. He concentrated on taking slow, deep breaths. *Two arrows gone.* He heard a loud *crack* from somewhere inside the ruins. His instincts told him the next round would begin very shortly.

Arawn Apparated into the west wing, where four Death Eaters lounged on stones transfigured into armchairs, supposedly guarding two bound, blindfolded, and silenced Aurors. They jumped to their feet as he glared at them. "Signal the others," he snarled, stepping over Auror Derwent's blank-eyed body. "Let them know the half-blood and his witch have escaped with the help of a blasted *phoenix*. Capture them. Kill the bird." Arawn steadied himself and summoned his Dementors. After a moment, he frowned. There had been no response. He sent his signal further out. *Where are they?*

Toby swore and mustered his wits. Three of them came out from the tree-line. Flying. On brooms. Luckily, they were coming from the opposite side of the forest in which he had met the fiery bird. Otherwise, he was sure, he would not be fitting another arrow to his bow and selecting his next target.

Hermione and Severus flattened themselves against a wall as footsteps thundered into the east wing.

"Spread out! Find them!" Voices mingled and exclaimed in a rising babble as Arawn announced that Thorfinn and Amycus lay dead in the feasting hall.

Toby waited, staying out of sight as the three broom-riders approached. To take the first or the second would reveal his position. He would have to be damn quick to pick off the third.

"They're here!"

With the shout came a curse, which Severus caught and deflected into the floor. Moving with him, Hermione counterattacked with a Conjunctivitis Curse. Severus followed up with "*Confundo!*"

He took her arm. "This way," he hissed, pulling her through a roofless corridor. He looked up as a shadow streaked across the floor. Wordlessly, he cast a Hurling Hex and shielded Hermione as broom and rider separated. The broom smashed to splinters against the wall above them. The rider sailed over the wall with a thin shriek.

Toby aimed and shot, bleakly satisfied when his target reeled and sent his broom into an uncontrolled descent.

Amid the broken columns of the east wing, the meaty crunch of a body hitting stone from a great height roused Oriens into consciousness. With awareness came pain. The shattered bones of his left leg grated against each other as his muscles tensed and stiffened the body's way of immobilising an injury. Oriens forced himself to relax by using a meditation technique to detach his mind from his physical sensations. He could hear the sounds of fighting, but knew he was too badly injured to help. He did not even have enough energy left to summon his Patronus. But there was something he *could* summon:

Kris. He felt the knife stir in its sheath. It slid out from under his cloak and hovered in front of him. Oriens linked his mind with the magic in the kris, giving it the means of distinguishing friend from foe. *Membela kami!*

Hermione skidded to a stop. "Go back," she gasped, pushing Severus into retreat as a volley of assorted hexes and curses seared into the space they had just evacuated. They turned a corner, ducked into a passageway, and nearly tripped over Alecto Carrow. She lay face-up with her broom beneath her. Hermione gripped Severus' arm and pointed. Above Alecto's body, a knife with a serpentine blade hovered. With a whirling flourish, it sped away from them and flew into another passageway.

Severus and Hermione looked at each other and ran, following the route the knife had taken.

They pulled up short at a side-entrance to the feasting hall close to mesmerised by the sight of a Death Eater duelling with the leaping, diving knife. As fast as curses were thrown or shields put in place, the animated blade seemed to find a way around them.

Hermione parried a hex from their left and pressed close to Severus as he simultaneously cast *Protego* around them both. He summoned his own wand from where it lay in a corner, evidently dropped during the on-going battle with the knife.

Their attacker advanced at a run, joined by another who deployed curses from behind a Shield Charm. Without warning, the first attacker dropped with a yelp, an arrow protruding from his lower back. The second stumbled over him, and his shield momentarily failed.

Hermione pounced. "*Incarcerous!*" Both Death Eaters squirmed on the floor, securely bound one to the other.

From his vantage point, Toby watched as Severus disarmed the knife-duelling wizard. With the knife hovering at the defeated Death Eater's throat, Severus waved his hand, and the unfortunate prisoner was hanging, upside-down, in the air.

As Toby moved to find a way down from the high ledge, something struck him hard in his right shoulder-blade. The force spun him around and threw him back against a crumbling arch which had once supported the roof beams.

He nearly fainted from the pain which seared and burned through his body. He could feel blood running down his back. Blinking through a fog of agony, he looked down and saw a wizard in a dark purple robe standing among the blackberry bushes.

The wizard gave a mirthless grin. "Well, well. A Muggle. Who would have thought? Destructive creature, aren't you?"

Toby recognised the wizard's voice. *Arawn, you second'-and arse-wipe!* He swept the fifth arrow out of his quiver and somehow managed to fit it to the bow-string. He tried to draw the bow, but his damaged muscles would not respond. Another gout of blood washed down his spine, and he shook his head as his vision began to blur. Someone was laughing.

A flare of rage surged through his shuddering nerves. His sight cleared for a moment, enough to see Arawn laughing at him. Riding the crest of his anger, Toby drew the bow, aimed, and shot.

Because of his injuries, his aim was low, but it caught Arawn cleanly in the thigh. Toby fancied he heard the solid *thunk* of metal striking bone.

A sound like a volley of gunshots rang throughout the ruins, immediately followed by a riot of shouting. Arawn snarled and vanished. Toby felt his knees buckle.

Strong arms seized him. Somebody was calling him. He distantly realised that he might just know who it was, if only he could remember.

Sev'rus? The name slid through his fading mind; then he knew no more.

The Book of Nimuë – part 1

Chapter 19 of 32

In a far away place, repressed magic stirs. Jean Granger answers a call for help. Arawn ponders his next move, and finds that reinforcements are ready and waiting. Severus watches, waits, and wonders what to do. Crookshanks demonstrates the power of the purr. The Hospital Wing is graced with civilisation of the Snape kind. An unexpected clue lurks where only a librarian could find it.

A/N's

* Selected from: *Deus omnipotens, a morte resurgens*

Track 13 on *Universi populi Chants sacrés à Prague du XIIe au XVe siècle*(Zig-Zag Territoires, © 2006)

French

Je suis désolé I am sorry

Les souris mice

Merci Thank you

Petit Small/little

S'il vous plait If you please

Un hibou an owl

Canon characters belong to J.K. Rowling. I make no money from them.

Thanks and appreciations to TeaOli for beta-reading!

"Da per bonitatem, Christe Eleison, fidea unitatem..."

Sister Clarise's rich alto voice resonated beneath the layers of higher notes provided by the rest of the priory's inhabitants, setting the foundations upon which the other voices merged and soared: marking the time, dictating the measure...

"...Alleluja, ave Maria,"

The devotional chant rang sublimely as twelve women offered their breath and their hearts to creating a sound that was beautiful in its complexity... and pure in its simplicity.

The massive stone walls caught the notes and passed them on to the cavernous heights of the vaulted roof, where they regaled the painted images of saints and angels as they had done since the priory's completion in the late eleventh century.

"Alleluja, ave Maria,"

Sister Clarise waited until the last echoes vanished into the silence from which they came. Observing this silence, the Sisters filed into the waiting pews.

She struggled to maintain her concentration. For once, the evening prayers seemed to last an eternity. She concentrated on her unspoken recitations. Usually, they brought solace and relief to the deep, dark pain in her soul but tonight was different. That which she had tried to repress and banish was stirring, and it would not be ignored.

The evening's duties completed, she followed the high-walled passages leading from the chapel to the dormitories. Her small lantern was enough to illuminate her tiny room, which contained a narrow cot, a closet, a writing desk, and a hard, wooden chair. Using the flame from her lantern, she lit a single candle and placed it on her desk. She sat before it and took a moment to steady her racing heart. She stared into the steady glow of the flame. "Show me," she whispered.

"Mum! Mum, please, help!"

In spite of her burden of confused hurt at her daughter's actions, it did not cross Jean Granger's mind to ignore Hermione's frantic entreaties. At once, she hurried to the lounge room, nearly colliding with her equally concerned husband as he exited the study at a run.

"Hermione..." Jean's words momentarily froze in her throat as she took in Hermione's appearance. Beneath a generous dusting of ash from the Floo connection which Jean had crisply specified should only be used in emergencies she could see that her daughter was not only distraught, but her clothes were torn, singed, and smeared with blood.

The freeze did not last more than a split-second. Few people knew that Dr Jean Granger had once worked night-shifts as a nurse in the Accident and Emergency department of Whittington Hospital. Not having the advantage of a wealthy family to help smooth her way into her chosen profession, Jean had taken an extended, alternative route to achieve her ambitions. She had worked and studied her way into a scholarship program. Years of determined, hard slog had paid off when she won a coveted annual grant to study Dentistry at the University College London the methodical practicality of her hospital training and hands-on experience had ensured a truly outstanding score on her entrance exams.

"Is that blood *yours*?" Jean's training took over, its rhythm as natural as instinct.

Hermione wiped tears from her eyes with the back of her hand. "No. No, it isn't." She lurched forward and seized her mother in a clumsy embrace. "Please, come with me and help us he's not a wizard, but we can't take him to a Muggle hospital he was hit with a curse. We have a curse-breaker working on him now, but Hogwarts' Hospital Wing isn't set up for Muggles. He's lost a lot of blood..." Hermione's voice trailed into a thin whisper.

"What about St Mungo's? I thought they had a Muggle ward for special emergencies?"

Hermione nodded. "They do, but it isn't as well-staffed as it was before the war, and... this is... complicated."

Familiar with his wife's sharp-eyed expression, Andrew Granger knew that she would assist as a matter of principle. "I'll get our coats and your lab-shoes, Jeannie. And a clean shirt for you, Hermione great heaven, you're a mess, girl!"

Hermione managed a hopeful smile. She had missed her father's good-natured bullyragging.

Jean pushed her daughter towards the Floo, firing questions regarding the patient's name, age, vital signs, and the details of his injuries.

On the open roof of Pripyat's gymnasium, Arawn quietly cursed as he bound the wound on his thigh. Physical injury was something he had not anticipated, and for now, several layers of healing charms would have to do. The wound burned and ached mercilessly. He was in for a very long night.

He picked up the bloodied arrow and examined it closely. It was definitely not of Muggle origin, but he was at a loss to tell where it had been made. The finely worked metal of its head suggested it was the work of a goblin armourer. However, goblins had never, to his knowledge, made arrow-heads in the style of the missile in his hands. The tapering point with its gracefully backswept barbs was very different to the broad, serrated heads favoured by goblin-kind.

Wherever the arrow had been made, Arawn was certain that a Muggle could not have obtained it without some form of magical assistance. The phoenix burned brightly in his memory. *So, Snape has a phoenix flying interference, does he?* Thwarted and furious, he flung the arrow aside. *But what use would he, a wizard and turn-coat Death Eater, have for a Muggle?* His wound gave an almost spiteful stab, and Arawn conceded that for Snape the Muggle had proved very useful indeed.

Amid the organised hubbub of the Hospital Wing, Jean spotted the injured man immediately. Unconscious and grey-pale, Toby lay on his stomach while a young man with red hair and a scarred face held a wand over a gaping wound which extended diagonally across his right shoulder blade. The wound was clean-edged as though he had been slashed with a machete, and it was deep; Jean suspected it went right to the bone.

A black-clad wizard with raven hair and intense black eyes stood by the other side of the bed, softly chanting in a language which sounded like Latin. He looked vaguely familiar.

A grey-haired witch in a long, plain dress and white starched apron approached them. Jean could recognise authority on sight. This was the Hospital Wing's Matron.

"Thank you for coming so quickly," the witch nodded to both Granger parents. "It seems that everywhere we turn, these days, we find we are short of helping hands with the necessary expertise. I am Poppy Pomfrey. I must ask you to stand back for a little longer until Bill has extracted the curse. Curses of that particular class can be quite unpredictable and have been known to jump to nearby bodies. As you can see, our patient will need his blood levels boosted. Because we use a replenishing potion to address blood loss and it will not work for Muggles we are unsure of how to proceed."

"That's Bill Weasley, isn't it?" Andrew asked. "One of Ron's five brothers?"

Poppy nodded, her expression grave as her next words hinted at stoic grief. "Four brothers now. Fred lost his life in the Battle of Hogwarts. Even in death, he never lost his smile."

Andrew and Jean looked at each other. In spite of Minerva's testimonies, Hermione's tearful and broken descriptions, and the reports sometimes gaudily trumpeted in various editions of the *Daily Prophet*, the reality of the insidious war that had culminated in a desperate battle within the castle walls had seemed like something distant. Something kept at arm's length as though it needed to be shelved for a time before it could be properly examined and comprehended. Something that took second place to the unsolicited magical alteration of their lives, their personalities, and even their names.

Everything they had read and been told came flooding back to both of them, demanding immediate acknowledgement. Jean could do no less as she looked around the Hospital Wing. There was a quiet, sombre undercurrent to the place which brought an ache to the soul and tears to the eyes. She *knew* that it had recently been a place where young lives were both saved and, inevitably, lost. She took her husband's hand. By the worried, sorrowful look he gave her, he was thinking the same thing.

Bill Weasley gave a gasp of effort, sweat breaking out on his forehead as his action indicated he was removing something particularly intractable. "Come on, you stubborn spawn of a psychopathic succubus! Severus, shields up... Got it!" He flicked his wand over a waiting canister and slammed the lid into place. "Right, it's safe to attend to that wound now Merlin knows, he's lost enough claret as it is." He stood up and shook the canister. "By Hecate, that was a nasty one! Madam Pomfrey, I'll be back in a tick. This thing should be stored under lock and ward."

Jean blinked as she thought she saw something like fluorescent green smoke writhing inside the canister in search of a way out. Dismissing the observation as irrelevant, she consulted the latest blood pressure, pulse, and respiration readings and swept into action. "At least he is still breathing on his own just. By the look of him, I doubt we have time for a haemoglobin assay. I estimate two pints straight up and a top-up later on. Do we know his blood type?"

A small chorus of negatives had her rummaging through the unconscious man's trouser pockets with little regard for physical sanctity. She ignored an outraged glare from the wizard Bill had addressed as 'Severus'. *Good name for him, too*, she thought. "I need alcohol swabs, an intravenous kit, and isotonic saline." She pulled a worn and battered wallet out of a front pocket and tossed it to her husband. "See what you can find in there," she ordered, not questioning how the requested items had materialised on a metal trolley conveniently positioned at her elbow.

Andrew quickly sorted through the contents of Toby's wallet. A red and white card caught his eye and he fished it out triumphantly. "Aha! A regular blood donor! He's O-negative."

"Do you have any contacts in a blood bank?" Jean called out to Madam Pomfrey, deftly inserting a cannula into an accessible vein.

Severus was thankful he had covered every aspect of his own blood chemistry while exploring the mechanisms of Nagini's venom. He cut off Poppy's reply with an almost territorial growl: "Tobias and I share the same blood group and Rhesus factor."

Jean cleared the intravenous lines of air. Making sure the saline was flowing as it should, she turned to find that Severus was watching her suspiciously. She glanced at Toby, then at Severus again.

"You are a relative?"

Severus nodded.

"Tobias is his father," Hermione supplied meekly.

"Any notifiable diseases?"

Severus' posture stiffened with a hint of indignation. "None. And I am able to provide the necessary volume."

"Taking any medications?"

"No."

Hermione tugged on her mother's sleeve as Jean calculatingly cast her eyes over Severus. "Mum, there's no need to estimate how much he can give. We have Blood Replenishing Potion on hand, so he won't be at risk."

Jean nodded. "Good. That's one potential obstacle dealt with. For the sake of urgency, we'll dispense with a full cross-match. There is a small risk in going ahead without it, but as Severus is an immediate relative with the same type, I shall call the risk negligible." She addressed Severus. "Take your coat off and roll up your sleeves; both arms, please. I'll need to find a suitable vein."

She studied Toby's breathing for a moment. "Deep breaths, slightly stronger exhalation, but not too rapid. Madam Pomfrey, we'll need to monitor that if his respiration rate increases, he'll be over-breathing, and we'll have a whole new set of problems. Do you have the means to separate red blood cells from plasma?"

Poppy motioned Severus onto a nearby cot. "We can adapt a charm to do it: I have an expert on selective extractions from heterogeneous substances right here!" She took Severus' coat. "You might as well be comfortable," she told him, arranging pillows so he could sit up enough to keep an eye on what was going on around him. "Our contact in St Mungo's advised us to follow standard Muggle procedures... *Oh, for Merlin's sake!*"

Severus looked down to find that his white shirt was liberally stained with Tobias' blood where it had soaked through his outer layers. He scowled and muttered an oath.

Casting one of her own specialised cleansing charms, Poppy wondered if Severus had chosen black as his signature colour for the simple fact that blood his own or

anyone else's would not easily be seen. "Why is it, Severus, that whenever I spend any time with you, I have to clean you up in some way?"

Severus answered with a sully shrug. He slyly glanced at his coat and waistcoat. He gave a half-smile when Poppy tutted, rolled her eyes, and applied the same charm to his discarded clothing.

A house-elf in immaculate blue-and-white linen tea-towels trotted into the Hospital Wing. "Bitsy is arriving in Madam Pomfrey's office," the house-elf announced to Poppy. "Bitsy is not wanting to alarm patients with loud popping noise. Bitsy is noticed, it is scaring some peoples, sometimes. Especially after wars." The house-elf craned her neck to have a proper look at Tobias, backing away nervously when the Granger Muggles turned and looked at her in open-mouthed surprise. "Tocky is telling Bitsy he is most upset," she explained hurriedly, hiding behind Poppy's skirts. "Tocky is saying master Tobias is good to him. Tocky is not wanting to lose a good master."

"You may tell Tocky that help has arrived, and I shall give him an update when I have a spare moment." Poppy ushered Bitsy into full view. "We have a Squib contact working for a Muggle medical supplies company in Edinburgh," Poppy told the astonished dentists. "Bitsy is his house-elf, so if you need anything, Dr Granger, just tell her what it is, and Evan will send her back with the necessary items." She nodded towards Tobias. "I'll make a start on getting the wound sutured while you're busy with Severus."

Jean was thankful she was in her own particular mental zone, where no sight or sound would shake her from attending to the task at hand. It was a skill she had developed during the Friday and Saturday night shifts at Whittington, and it had proved indispensable during the inexplicable mayhem coincident with a full moon. She could indulge in utter disbelief and a very stiff drink later. Right now, she had things to do.

She methodically listed the items she would need while the house-elf listened attentively. Bitsy scooted back into Madam Pomfrey's office. Mere moments later, Jean accepted the requested blood-collection equipment from the house-elf with a quietly professional "Thank you" and carried it to the cot where the ever-scowling Severus waited with obvious impatience.

Severus eyed Jean Granger impassively as she examined his right arm, pressing her thumb into his median cubital vein. She repeated the procedure on his left arm.

"Are you left-handed?" she asked.

"No."

Loquacious gentleman, aren't you?" Ambidextrous?"

"When it is necessary." Severus knitted his brows, trying to keep a treacherous thought-stream safely at bay. *By the way, I made love to your daughter last night.* He ground his teeth and told his mind to shut up and go away before it could regale him with images of Hermione at the exact moment she...

Positively effusive... "Hm. Your left forearm has a more prominent vascular structure than your right." She looked at him questioningly.

Out of habit, Severus retreated behind a wall of Occlumency. He kept his eyes on Poppy, who was using triple-skein spider silk for Tobias' internal sutures. Severus felt his leg twinge where Fluffy had inflicted a particularly deep laceration he knew all about having muscles sewn back together. For the more severe injuries, healing charms and potions needed a bit of physical help to perform their functions quickly and effectively. He frowned. There was nothing he knew of that would do the same for a Muggle. *Unless...* He sat up abruptly, chasing an elusive idea.

"Secret wizard business, I assume." Jean diplomatically let Severus off the hook with a rhetorical question and firmly pushed him back onto the pile of pillows.

Severus nodded, noting that Jean had evidently decided to draw blood from his left arm. He glumly considered that she would not so much let him *off* the hook, as drive a hook *into* him possibly into a very specific part of his anatomy if she knew of his history and his connection with Hermione. The treacherous part of his mind spoke up again with libidinous cheer: *Connection, alright!* He sighed resignedly, just as Jean released the tourniquet and allowed his blood to flow into a collection pouch. *Crookshanks...* Animated with inspiration, he sat up again.

Jean placed her hand squarely in the middle of his chest and pushed him back down. "Keep *still!* Honestly, you're like a bag of eels! I'll draw a pint from you, then give you a rest before I collect the second. Let me know if you feel dizzy, faint, or otherwise uncomfortable."

Severus looked her in the eyes. "Believe me, Madam Granger: I've lost copious quantities of blood in situations that were far less *comfortable*. This procedure is something of a novelty, given that it is voluntary."

Apparently, Jean was not sure how to interpret his statement. She frowned for a moment; then her expression softened as Hermione approached, bearing a wooden rack filled with glass phials and a goblet of water.

Andrew stood at the foot of Tobias' bed, with an extremely interested curse-breaker by his side, reading from a scroll over which a white quill hovered. He announced that the patient's blood pressure was slowly rising in response to the saline.

"I would prefer wine," Severus grumbled as Hermione placed the goblet within his reach.

"And you don't need *me* to tell you that the alcohol in wine will impede the sequestration of copper from the Vesuvian basil, leading to incomplete binding of iron with newly-generated globin proteins, which will result in the Blood Replenishing Potion having a less than optimal effect." Hermione stated in her best know-it-all manner.

Something in Hermione's slightly mischievous tone caused Jean to have a small moment of insight. There was a note of intimate familiarity there and, judging by the fleeting smile which flickered in his eyes, Severus was not about to repulse it. Jean sent the observation to join the other *interesting* scenes she had witnessed and filed for later reference. Leaving her daughter to keep Severus company, she went to assist Poppy with the correct placement of a drainage tube.

While Arawn tended his wound and pondered his failure, a Dementor hovered uneasily in a nearby doorway. It did not like the arrow. Through its senses, it could feel the echo of the songs that had been sung during the arrow's making songs of light and freedom, valour and strength, songs which told of Dark powers vanquished and souls redeemed.

The Dementor stirred as Arawn threw the arrow to a distant corner of the roof. It approached the human and established the mind-link which would allow communication:

The power we seek is not beyond us.

Arawn slowly got to his feet. "We need another plan, another strategy. It will be much harder this time."

We have the means. We are many. We must feed.

Arawn frowned. "What *means*?"

The Dementor extended its hand and pointed, then drifted towards the edge of the roof.

Limping, Arawn followed. Looking down, he drew a silent breath of anticipation. "How did you do this?"

The creature beside him seemed to swell. *Use the others as you will...*

Arawn nodded as his instructions to the Dementors were repeated back to him. He almost laughed. He had thought that the hungry creatures would have consumed the remaining Death Eaters. It seemed they had learned the benefits of strategic restraint. The square in front of the gymnasium was populated with partially-eaten wizards and witches. At a quick head-count, perhaps one hundred and fifty waited in empty-eyed, slack-jawed obedience.

They will do as you command...

"They should be easier to control than the average Inferius," Arawn mused, a strategy already beginning to take shape in his mind.

The Dementor turned to face him. *As will these.*

Arawn listened as the frigid streets echoed to the sounds of shuffling feet. *What...?* Muggles silently poured into the square, swelling the ranks of Death Eaters until the huge space was filled to capacity. Apart from displaying the signs of partial consumption, they all seemed to be Muggles of a particular dispensation. Using his mind-link with the Dementor, Arawn could sense them: thieves, street-thugs, desperate addicts, murderers, and many others who openly enjoyed inflicting acts of savage cruelty and brutal degradation upon any creature, living or dead.

This is our city, now.

"The City of the Dementors," Arawn agreed, looking beyond the square. Hovering above decaying streets and crumbling buildings, a cold, brooding throng had assembled. *We are many*, the Dementor had informed him. It had not lied. The Dementors in Pripjat easily numbered in their thousands.

Severus sat forward, rested his elbows on the edge of the bed, and watched his father attentively. Tobias' breathing had evened out, and he appeared to be in nothing more than a very deep sleep. His colour was markedly better.

Severus pondered the fact that *his* blood was responsible for the favourable change. It was a very strange feeling.

Hermione came to his side and draped his coat over his shoulders, her hands lingering to rub his tense muscles. "Mum and Dad are with Bill in Madam Pomfrey's office, drinking night-duty-strength cocoa while they wait for Headmistress McGonagall to come back from St Mungo's. She took Petrus there to see Oriens."

Severus raised an enquiring eyebrow.

"Bill took a Floo call from Minerva about an hour ago. Oriens will be out of action for a while until his leg heals, but he will make a full recovery. Auror Tyburn and Auror Savage have been released back to the Ministry." Hermione hesitated and bit her lip. "There's nothing they can do for Auror Derwent."

Severus took her hand. "And your parents?"

"Both of them are taking things in their stride, with a bit of help from Bill," Hermione answered, brightening a little. "I think the walls may be coming down. I can tell they *want* to talk with me." She squeezed Severus' fingers. "I asked Sir Nicholas if he would be kind enough to find Crooks and direct him here," she said softly. "But what Madam Pomfrey will say, I really can't imagine."

"I will argue a case for research purposes," Severus replied stiffly. He met Hermione's eyes and felt his mask of detachment falter. "I don't know what to do..." he whispered.

Hermione wrapped an arm around his shoulders, sensing that his statement went beyond Tobias' immediate requirements. "You will think of something. You always do."

Deeply moved by the comfort her simple statements and gestures brought, Severus could only hold her close and press several kisses to her fingers. He glanced up as Poppy approached them, wiping her hands on a towel. He saw her hesitate as surprise arrested her intention to speak. He felt heat creep up from his collar when the usually serious witch bestowed a beaming smile on them both.

About time, too, Poppy thought. *Merlin knows, he deserves some light in his life but I would never have guessed that Hermione would be the one to provide it. Ah, well, Minerva did warn me. So I was right about young Ronald being a flash in the cauldron! Oh, gods! Do her parents know?* "Don't you go fretting, Severus. He'll be sore and sorry when he wakes up, but he'll be right as good Scottish rain in no time."

Severus wanted to remain silent, but Poppy's reassurance thawed his resolve. He quietly voiced his concerns: "He is a Muggle. And he is not a young man."

Poppy cast a few diagnostics. She smiled openly at the results. "True on both counts but he is quite healthy, and I've seen *wizards* half his age who are not as fit. Thanks to your prompt recitation of a containment chant, the curse he was hit with didn't go far at all. Bill managed to extract every skerrick of it, so the injuries are purely physical. I also suspect your father has a remarkably robust constitution which he has passed on to you, it would seem." She waited for Severus to respond with an incredulous scowl. "There had to be *some* explanation as to how you managed to take mere days to recover from things that would have incapacitated anyone else for weeks on end!"

Severus rolled his eyes. "A *partial* explanation that much I *will* concede," he muttered. Noting Hermione's knowing smile, he curled an arm around her waist and dragged her into his lap, intending to lightly chastise her for impudence.

Poppy gave a slight cough, alerting them to the presence of Hermione's parents. They stood in the doorway, wearing twin expressions of carefully crafted reserve.

Hermione's breath hitched. "Oops."

Feeling suddenly defensive, Severus made no move to separate himself from his witch. After all, her parents had been keeping Hermione at a distance albeit with reasons that were somehow important to *them*. To Severus' increasingly protective mind, they had no right to question *what* Hermione did or with *whom*. His thoughts jolted to a stop. Would they try to take her away from him? Before he could entertain the question, Hermione's lips covered his in an unmistakably possessive kiss. He could not help but respond in kind, all the while wondering if he really *had* been sorted into the wrong House. "I think we have effectively removed ourselves from the frying pan and launched headlong into the fire," he observed.

Hermione rested her forehead against his. "I know. Terribly Gryffindor, don't you think? Mum, Dad, I can explain *everything!*" she whispered.

Severus acknowledged her effort to lighten the situation with a slight smile. "Are you likely to require my presence?"

"I shouldn't think so. Besides, you wouldn't be waiting here if you didn't want to be around when Tobias wakes up. Don't worry about *us*," she continued. "They *are* my parents, but I don't intend to spend the rest of my life with them."

Severus blinked in disbelief as she left to engage in what would no doubt be a detailed information session on a broad range of topics. *'I don't intend to spend the rest of my life with them.'* He played the words over and over again, a ball of trepidatious warmth settling in the pit of his stomach. Did her words mean that she would be willing to spend the rest of her life with *him*? He exhaled slowly. *One step at a time*, he reminded himself. He glared defiantly at Poppy, who had been regarding him with amused indulgence.

"You don't do anything by halves, do you, Severus?" Poppy hid a smile. "I shall be in the students' ward, if you need me. You've been in the Hospital Wing often enough to

know how the summoning system works. Let me know when Tobias wakes up." Sighing, she levitated a tray heavily burdened with salves and potions. "The First-Years' Flying class had a very *eventful* lesson today."

"Evidently," Severus watched Poppy leave. He leaned back in his chair and stared blankly at the ceiling.

A faint, determined scratching reached his ears. Tracking the sound, Severus approached the closed door of the staff ward, which was now empty except for himself and Tobias. A ginger paw slid through the space between the timber door and the flagstones. Pink pads turned upwards. Claws curled and searched, eventually finding purchase in the scuffed and pitted wood.

"Crookshanks."

The paw withdrew and was replaced by a symmetrical array of whisker-tips.

Having no desire to witness any more injuries, Severus opened the door with excessive care. Crookshanks flowed into the Hospital Wing and wound himself around Severus' legs.

"Severus? Is that you?"

"I would say so, Sir Nicholas, with a very high degree of confidence."

The ghost emerged from a wall and gave his shoulders a quick hitch, thereby settling his head in a less precarious position. "Miss Granger asked me to lead her familiar here. I found him down by the lake, cadging fresh trout from the merpeople." The ghost peered past Severus into the Hospital Wing. "I shan't loiter: I heard there were Muggles about and I don't want to frighten them."

Severus briefly wondered if it were possible for Sir Nicholas to frighten *anyone*. Before he could think of anything to say, the nearly headless ghost faded from sight.

Crookshanks sat in front of him, looking up with rounded eyes, pricked ears, and whiskers curved attentively forward.

"Cadging trout from merpeople, were you?"

The half-Kneazle seemed to shrug. He carefully washed a front paw.

Severus gathered the animal into his arms. "I *do* have a specific reason for requesting your presence," he began, slightly alarmed at the fact that *talking* to Crookshanks seemed to be an entirely normal thing to do. "Really, it is more a matter of asking you for a favour." *Shall I sign myself into in the Janus Thickety ward now, or wait for the nice mediwizards in white robes to make an appearance?*

Crookshanks stared at him, angling an ear quizzically.

Without knowing what response to expect or even how to begin to explain what he wanted Crookshanks to do Severus placed the increasingly curious creature on the end of Tobias' bed and stood back to see what would happen next.

Crookshanks' nose twitched as he examined this most unusual perch. His whiskers leading the way, he tentatively crept up beside the injured human, pausing every few steps to watch and listen. Almost a minute passed. With a slow sweep of his tail and a careful placing of paws, the half-Kneazle climbed onto Tobias' lower back. Settling himself in sphinx-posture, he closed his eyes and began to purr.

Severus cautiously resumed his seat, not wanting to do anything that might disturb Crookshanks' focus. The rhythm of the half-Kneazle's purr changed: it grew deeper and stronger, coming in long, steady oscillations. Severus wondered if the animal was using a cyclical breathing technique to sustain such a concentrated effort. He let his eyes drift closed and crossed his forearms on the bed. He could feel the vibrations through the mattress. With a soothing ripple, his nerves and muscles relaxed. Severus shifted forward a little more... and rested his head on his arms...

In Madam Pomfrey's office, Hermione watched her mother's face carefully. Her father paced the floor, thoughtfully wandering between crammed scroll-shelves and a locked cabinet containing the most frequently used healing potions and pastes. While the Granger family's discussions had been far from easy, the sense of cold distrust was nowhere to be felt. Hermione was emotionally exhausted. The desperate longing to fling herself into her parents' arms and beg forgiveness had melted away. The three of them had agreed that re-establishing themselves as a family would be a journey over ground that had been irrevocably changed and in places it would be difficult but there was a lot of new ground, too, to make the journey worthwhile and rewarding.

Bill Weasley had taken his leave almost two hours before. Hermione vowed to send him a letter expressing her gratitude for extracting a curse at short notice, the good-humoured support he had given to her parents as they encountered a barrage of novel magical experiences, and his warm smile as he took her aside and assured her that there were no hard feelings from the Weasley clan. Molly and Arthur, he had said, had seen their boys through the trials-of-love-and-woe many a time. All of the brothers had survived the experience to their betterment with a spoonful of common sense and a bigger spoonful of home-cooked comfort food and Ron was proving that he would be no different.

When Hermione finally got around to explaining her rather *forward* interaction with Severus, she had experienced an unexpected surge of uplifting energy, and she had wondered if he was with her in some subtle way. While being peppered with parental questions, she had realised that he *was* with her in her heart. The strength and significance of the connection nearly made her dizzy.

Andrew Granger continued pacing. *Her former teacher, an ex-Death Eater, a spy, and...* He stopped short of labelling Severus as an exonerated killer. One of his own patients, an infantryman who had served on the Western Front in the first World War, had once told him how he had sent a bullet through his best mate's head. In a voice weakened with age and sorrow, the old man had told of a bitter, desperate act. Cut off by winter snows, stranded in a dank fox-hole, shot at by day and frost-bitten at night, his mate's wound had turned gangrenous. By turns lucid and confused, feverish and shivering, the wounded soldier's abdomen had begun to swell with tormenting gas. They were days away from the nearest field hospital. Death was certain. And then there were the rats: corpse-fattened and bold, unwilling to wait for a man to die before they began to feed. A minute of ashen-faced clarity. A whispered plea to end the agony quickly. A final trusting handshake between lifelong friends. The muffled *crack* of a rifle had echoed over cratered fields treacherous with ice, shrapnel, and unexploded ordnance. Another soldier's name had joined the growing list of the fallen.

"Almost like a mercy killing, but what a horrific thing to have to do..." Andrew murmured, more to himself than his wife and daughter. He considered what Hermione had done to, or *for*, himself and Jean. An act of mercy. Erasing them from the landscape to keep them safe. Erasing *herself* from their memory in case she died, so they would not have to grieve her loss. *What a horrific thing to have to do*

Hermione crossed the room to the fireplace and stared into the flames. "Professor Dumbledore made Severus promise. He was going to die from the curse Severus said there was nothing he could do. There was nothing *anyone* could do." Her eyes flashed angrily. Tiny orange sparks danced at her fingertips. "It tore Severus apart, agreeing to kill him..."

"If I correctly recall what I read in the *Prophet*, those Death Eaters would have tortured Dumbledore," Andrew stated, unable to remove the sudden image of human-sized, robe-clad, silver-masked, corpse-fattened rats from his mind. "Not that the knowledge would have made it any easier for... Severus. It probably never will," he added, remembering the rawness of his elderly patient's grief. "But still, Hermione, he sounds like an extremely dangerous wizard."

"He can be," Hermione answered honestly. "But during the war, all of us who fought proved to be dangerous. *Anybody* can be dangerous when they are fighting for their

lives, with their backs to the wall." She consciously relaxed her hands they had bunched into fists as soon as her magic began to spark. "Even before the fighting, Harry and Ron both told me that /am 'way too scary'."

Andrew gathered his daughter into a hug as tears brimmed in her eyes. She had fought in a war. He had not. She carried the painful burden of direct experience where death was always watching... waiting. He did not. He shook his head.

"Dad?"

"Such a lot to try to understand, and I don't think we shall ever truly comprehend it all."

"But we'll do the best we can," Jean proclaimed stoutly, earning a fervent nod of agreement from her husband. She braced herself as Hermione seized her in a delighted embrace. "I swear, you have grown stronger," she gasped. "Now, about this new wizard of yours he looks a little younger than the photographs in the *Prophet*, now that I remember where I have seen him before. Oh, good grief! There I was: giving him orders, pushing him around, and likening him to *eels*."

Hermione could not hold back the grin which spread across her face. "Under the circumstances, I'm sure he'll forgive you."

Jean shrugged, her concerns taking a different tack. "He doesn't say much, does he? But I can see there is a prodigious intellect at work behind his silence. Mind you, he could do with a few sessions in my surgery. Does he treat you well?"

"We treat *each other* well. I don't think I could ever call Severus a chatterbox." Hermione paused, suddenly thoughtful. "I've been learning that not all communication depends on spoken words. Sometimes, we can spend hours together and not say anything and it's not at all awkward or uncomfortable. Quite the opposite." She smiled. "I think I know the photograph you mean and yes, he did look terrible! He isn't so heavily burdened now. Less stressed, in a nut-shell." *Definitely less stressed. Especially after... Whoa! Don't go there!*

While Andrew had one more question to ask, he could not think of a way to ask it without being blunt. He tried an indirect approach. "Was Severus the reason you had second thoughts about young Ron?"

Hermione sighed and bit her lower lip. "No," she said after a moment. "I suppose you could say I had some... insight... into what road I might have been heading down. If I had stayed with Ron, and things had started to... I would have stuck with it until... I would have compromised to the point where..."

"Oh, you know if I start on something, I like to see it through to the end, no matter what. I... I think... I would have descended into a whopping great mid-life crisis by my late thirties." She surprised her father by revealing that she had successfully read his disguised question. "Severus and I didn't get together until *after* he came back to Hogwarts. After the war..." Hermione hesitated. Her memory supplied an image of Severus as he was when she went back to the Shrieking Shack to find him. *Thank the gods, he was not dead. Thank them again and again, he did not die.*

"I could always see you with an older man," Jean stated in an attempt to clear the sudden glaze of haunted devastation from Hermione's face. "When you were little, you consistently preferred adult company to children of your own age. Ron seemed very nice, and I know you had your heart set on him for a long time. But in a lot of ways, he was also very much younger than you. A good friend, certainly, but I could never see him as a permanent prospect for anything more. In intellect, empathy, and maturity, you were leagues ahead of him. And he never wrote to you during the holidays."

Andrew gave a quiet sigh. "How much older?"

Hermione barely had time to draw a breath before her mother presented a reasonable answer.

"Andrew, I don't think that is any of our business. Hermione is old enough and wise enough to make her own choices. Besides, what will age matter when Severus is one hundred and ten, and our Hermione is, let's see, around ninety?"

Hermione turned crimson. Had her mother really intuited her newest, innermost, and deeply secret hope? "Mum!"

Severus leapt out of his chair when a hesitant touch startled him awake.

Without taking the trouble to raise his head from his paws, an off-duty Crookshanks half-opened one eye and glared at him for daring to interrupt the sacred rites of sleep.

"Sorry. Weren't sure... I might be seein' things," Toby mumbled unsteadily.

Taking a deep breath and willing his heart rate to return to normal, Severus sleeved his wand. "I am not a figment of imagination yours or anyone else's."

Toby shifted restlessly. "Where's the Llygad?"

"I have it." Severus felt in his pocket and drew the object out for Tobias to see. His fingers touched the smooth, warm surface of the enamelled brooch he had taken from the crystal cave. *A royal cipher...* He placed the Llygad in the top drawer of a cabinet beside the bed. "You are still in *quarantine* and must have access to it until you are formally cleared." He warded the drawer so that only he or Tobias could open it.

"Quarantine, my arse! What's sittin' on me?"

Welcoming any distraction from recalling the events in the cave, Severus was almost inclined to be conversational. "A very large, very hairy, ginger feline. He *appears* to be asleep, but Hermione assures me that when Crookshanks adopts that particular posture, he is meditating."

"She's okay, then? Yer lass, I mean."

"Yes. She is unharmed." Severus closed his eyes. "Thanks to your proficiency with the bow and arrow."

Toby tried to shrug. His eyes widened in pain. "Oww, bugger! *Soddin' bastard son of a fly-blown bush-pig...*"

"I do hope you're referring to Arawn or one of his acquaintances," Severus commented, surreptitiously summoning Poppy from wherever she might be.

"I weren't referrin' to *you*, that's for sure. Or *you*," he added as the reportedly very large ginger feline stood up, turned around in a clockwise circle, sat down in what felt like a sphinx-posture, and produced an engine-like purr. "Least I gave 'im somethin' to think about."

Severus raised an eyebrow. "You did?"

"Mongrel stopped laughin' when an arrow bit 'is thigh." Toby scowled. "If 'e 'adn't got me first..." He paused as realisation dawned. "God's Teeth... I never took a man's life before. Now there's three..."

"Under extenuating circumstances. Arawn wanted *me* alive for a specific purpose. As you may have gathered, he would not have experienced any regret over killing *you*, or anyone else in our party." Severus drew a breath as his eyes glittered dangerously. "They would have done much worse to Hermione."

Toby shivered, prompting another painful spasm and a reproofing tail-swat from the purring sphinx. "Yeah. When you put it like that... I couldn't 'ave done anythin' else." He

sighed. "Always in t'muck; only t' depth changes."

Severus folded his arms, momentarily lost in recollection. *I couldn't have done anything else..* He could hear Charity Burbage's near-delirious pleading while he maintained a mask of disinterested stone. *For the greater good.* He could see Albus, frail and brittle against the unyielding stones of the Astronomy Tower, damn near commanding him to deliver death while Mad Bella's demented cackle raked painfully across his senses. *Again, for the greater-bloody-good. Could I have done anything else?*

"Fair dinkum, Sev'rus, if you get any paler, you'll vanish."

Severus rubbed his eyes. He picked up the bow from where it lay next to his father's jacket and a bloodstained, empty quiver. From a leather arm-guard, an engraved red dragon ceased its pacing to look up at him.

"A bird brought it," Toby muttered. "A bird with feathers like fire."

"That would be Fawkes a phoenix," Severus said distantly. "I saw him, too."

"And *that* would be Crookshanks. In *my* Hospital Wing, sitting on a patient under *my* care." Poppy set her much-lighter tray down with a prim clatter. She placed her hands on her hips. "Well, Severus?"

"Yes, I'm quite well, thank you. It is most kind of you to ask. However, *Tobias* is the one in need of attention, and Crookshanks is giving all the assistance he can."

Poppy shook her head and pursed her lips in irritation. *At least I don't have a fight on my hands* she thought. She smoothed her apron as Crookshanks turned a pair of kitten-innocent eyes on her and tilted his head appealingly. "Tobias, now that Severus has *graciously* reminded me of my duty, are you in a great deal of pain?"

"Only when I breathe."

May the gods help us. There are two of them.

"It's better when the... when Crookshanks purrs," Toby added, taking the opportunity to shift his position as much as bandages and supporting pillows would allow. He examined his left arm and scowled.

"Dr Granger said we should leave the cannula in place, in case we needed to get some more blood into you." Poppy waved her wand over him. "I doubt that will be necessary. Your wound is stabilising ahead of schedule. You've already had a dose of antibiotics, on Dr Granger's orders."

"I needed blood?"

"You certainly did. We found your donor's card: I suppose we could say, 'what goes around, comes around'? Fortunately, you and Severus are the same blood type. He offered to play nicely and share." Poppy smiled at Tobias' expression of utter disbelief and Severus' sneer at the suggestion of playing nicely. "It would appear that his blood is worth bottling."

"I would rather keep it in my body," Severus muttered. "But it seems that the Fates consistently have *other* ideas." He nodded towards Crookshanks, who had settled into the same penetrative purring as the wizard had witnessed previously before being lulled into an unintended nap. "I cannot take all of the credit. I believe the half-Kneazle is administering a healing technique."

Poppy looked at Crookshanks with kindled interest. "There are plenty of anecdotal accounts telling of animals' instinctive attempts to heal the injured and sick. Personally, I've never seen it happen... But that purr certainly is not a means of simply passing the time!" With practised silence, Poppy approached the bed. Crookshanks did not twitch a single hair. "Tobias?" she whispered.

"Don't talk. Feels good. Pain's tol'able." Toby murmured, well on the way to dozing off.

Poppy gave Severus a sidelong glance. "Remarkable. Is there a physiological aspect to what is going on?"

Severus looked a little smug. "There is potential to obtain quantitative information. The healing purr covers a range of sound frequencies known to be beneficial to the healing of bones, muscles, tendons, and joint mobility. From what I can assemble out of literature, the harmonics of the healing purr cause a densification of tissue possibly localised in the case of transmission between bodies and I've read enough to speculate on positive correlations between purring harmonics, tissue density, and anabolic activity." He began to pace, his hands locked behind his back. "But even if such correlations exist, they do not imply causality. This would have to be a full-scale research project."

"If Tobias continues to recover ahead of schedule, and Crookshanks continues doing what he is doing, it may give you enough to put in a proposal. I will certainly back you on it for three reasons: that animal is acting *intentionally*, the last diagnostic I cast showed a rapid and significant improvement, and we both heard Tobias say that the pain had subsided. Are you intending to conduct the research yourself?"

Severus overwhelmed Poppy with a full smile. "No. I have enough to occupy my time at present. Kingsley has been at me relentlessly about the importance of delegation. I believe such a project could be given to a graduate Healer in St Mungo's Cooperative Research Facility. You are my witness, Poppy: you heard me use the word 'delegation'."

Leaving Tobias under Poppy's vigilant eye and Crookshanks' powerful purr, Severus hesitated outside Poppy's office. He could hear the three Grangers talking, but could not make out what was being said. At least there were no tones indicating blame or reproach. Not wanting to intrude, either physically or by the indirect route of eavesdropping, he made his way back to his rooms, knowing that Hermione would join him there in due course. He gave a rueful scowl. Eavesdropping had landed him in trouble before.

He halted on his way past the Great Hall when he heard Minerva's distinctive brogue in conversation with Petrus. Deciding to achieve two small tasks with one appearance, he strode into the Hall and made his presence known.

"Minerva, Petrus," he intoned, nodding to each of them. "I trust Oriens is in good hands?"

Minerva could not help her open astonishment. The number of times she had heard Severus ask after someone could be counted on one hand. "He is doing very well, but will need to stay in St Mungo's for at least a week, the Healers said. A Bone Shattering Hex did most of the damage. Not something that can be mended in a heartbeat, unfortunately. Oriens wouldn't say what caused his other, relatively minor, injuries other than that they were 'the usual things'."

Severus folded his arms. His expression darkened. "I have a fair idea of what 'things' he referred to. With the proper attention they will not result in permanent damage."

Minerva took a step back. "Yes. I suppose you would be in a position to know... How is Tobias faring?"

"Well enough. Poppy says he is recovering ahead of schedule."

Minerva prodded him for more information. "Has he woken up?"

"For a short time, yes."

Minerva had to struggle not to seize Severus by the shoulders and shake him. "Did he say anything?"

"He made several brief statements, asked one or two questions, threw a reasonably colourful insult, and went back to sleep."

Minerva gave up. Severus was not going to talk. "Oh, this is hopeless..."

Severus feigned confusion. "Poppy seemed *pleased* with his progress."

"You really are impossible!"

She turned to the assistant librarian. "Petrus, as I was saying, I shall make arrangements for an owl to be assigned to you. That way, you and Oriens may stay in touch as and when you like. If you feel the need for another visit, do not hesitate to discuss it with Madam Pince. I'll make sure I'm available to escort you."

"*Merci*, Madame la Headmistress," Petrus responded with a courteous bow. "*Un hibou* would be most appreciated."

"It's the least we can do, Petrus," Minerva insisted, patting his arm lightly. "I hear the lycanthropy section is better behaved these days."

"Ah, *oui*, Madame la Headmistress. It is little wonder the reference books were slipping the clasps, shedding the pages, and chasing the unwary student! I found, inside each volume, *en petit* piece of parchment inscribed with the Arithmantic equations in nitrate of *silver*. Monsieur le Professor Flitwick told to me that the equations form a charm, designed to respond to the phases of the moon, and to produce a silver disc when the moon is full!"

"Fascinating," Severus murmured, immediately suspecting a senior Ravenclaw boy. "Any idea as to who might have put it there?"

Petrus angled his ears back and flexed his wings. "I shall keep watch, Monsieur Severus. It may be that the books themselves will tell me who is this most cunning culprit. The books concerning the werewolves do not forget a pair of mistreating hands."

Severus imparted advice with something approaching glee. "Position the books, out of sight, near the reading tables when Seventh Year Arithmancy have a library reference period. Watch the Ravenclaw boys and be ready for action."

"Setting an *ambush*? With *books*? Severus, are you sure that's wise?" Minerva gasped, suddenly wanting to reach for her hip flask.

"Of course it's wise. *I* suggested it. And why not let the lycanthropy tomes have their moment?" Severus smirked contentedly at Minerva's flustered frustration.

Petrus looked the other way to hide the fact that he thought it was a wonderful idea.

"Take no notice of him, Petrus. He can be a corruptive influence, at times," Minerva huffed, signalling her intention to depart the scene by adjusting her shawl.

"*Non*, Madame la Headmistress," Petrus concurred. "I shall be most careful." He waited until the Headmistress was out of sight before unfolding his arms to display crossed fingers to Severus.

Severus acknowledged the covert allegiance with a smirk and a nod. "Was that '*Non*' for 'No, I shall not listen to *him*', or '*Non*' 'I shall not listen to *you*'?"

Petrus gave a classically Gallic shrug and dismissed the question with a wave of one hand.

Severus folded his arms. "Would you care to join Hermione and myself in a meeting with Professor Binns tomorrow at ten o'clock? It concerns a remnant of an ancient document. We are hoping that Cuthbert may be able to shed some light on its origin."

Petrus' ears swivelled forward, indicating his interest. "I would be honoured, Monsieur Severus."

"I thought you would be." Severus produced the remnant and handed it to Petrus. "Just so you know of the subject of our discussion. It is written on the hide of a Graphorn foetus. For that reason, we believe that it is more than seven hundred years old."

Petrus read the words twice. "*S'il vous plait*, who is Myrddin?"

"In Wales, Myrddin. In England, Merlin."

The stone being's jaw dropped open. Handing the remnant back to Severus, he signalled the wizard to follow him. Petrus led the way across empty halls, up one flight of stairs, through a secret passage which Severus had often used to head off fleeing curfew-breakers, down a corridor, and into the library.

Intrigued at how quietly Petrus could move, Severus passed by looming shelves and empty tables, his senses prickling. It was a strange thing about the library: it could feel slumberous by day, drowsy with study and warily alert at night, when no-one was there. Before he could wonder if the books themselves had something to do with it, Petrus opened a glass-paned door and ushered him inside.

Severus looked around with approval. The disused reading annex was a balanced mix of work-room, snug retreat, and study. A low fire burned in a pot-bellied, iron furnace. Several well-aged books, smelling of leather dressing and polish, lay within warming distance.

"A heat that is gentle helps the dressing to penetrate and nourish the leather," Petrus whispered in explanation, touching the heavy bindings as though checking on sleeping children.

Severus nodded and turned his attention to a high table which held a tidy arrangement of book-binding equipment, more leather polish, and a box containing sheets of gold leaf. Being careful not to touch anything as a Potions master, he was acutely respectful of any craft requiring the methodical arrangement of materials he admired a partially restored copy of *Neolithic Scotland: a Magical Bestiary* still held securely in its padded clamps.

"*The Merlin*?" Petrus asked in awe.

Severus nodded. "The very same." He stood before the double doors which gave access to a small balcony. Closed and shuttered, they quivered in their frames as great gusts of wind slewed down from the mountains and battled their way around immovable stone.

Petrus stood beside him. "There is one record of an availability enquiry sent from Hogwarts to another library, six hundred and fifty years ago. The parchment, it was mostly eaten by *les souris*, so alas, I cannot tell you which library held the subject of the enquiry, or who had written it. It most definitely concerned a book. A single volume. Only two words remained of the description: *Myrddin*. And Nimuë. Were they mentioned in the same sentence? *Je suis désolé*, it is impossible to tell. But the restricted materials section had been filled in the book, it was written on the hide of an un-born Graphorn."

Hermione stepped back in surprise when Severus' door opened before she had even produced her key. Caddy stood on the other side, beckoning her inside with gestured instructions to be quiet.

"Master Severus is sleeping. Caddy is been clearing away the supper things. Is Miss Hermione needing anything?"

"No, thank you Caddy. I had something to eat down in the kitchens," she said, noting the empty bowl on Caddy's tray. It was a good sign, she decided, knowing that Severus would have asked for one of his favourites a hearty soup made with beef and barley, and seasoned with wild herbs. *No doubt*, she thought, *consumed with inch-thick slices of bread slathered right to the crusts with butter*. A good sign that things had gone well between him and Tobias.

Bidding Caddy good-night, she transfigured her shoes into slippers and crept into the bedroom. Severus lay on his right side with his knees drawn up to the level of his hips, one hand tucked under the pillow. Hermione smiled as she recalled the nights they had spent together.

As Severus had grown accustomed to her presence beside him, his sleep-movements had become much less constrained, acquiring an almost loose-limbed abandon. It was a usual thing, now, for Hermione to wake with an arm draped across her chest, or a leg casually tangled between hers, or even better his lean body spooned behind her, holding her close, with his hand cupping one breast.

Hermione would never have guessed that sleep had its own form of sensuality. Sometimes, when she woke during the night, she would charm a candle to give silver light and look at him while he slumbered on, a finely chiselled study in black and white. Looking led to touching, and she would allow her hand to lightly roam over him. His sleep-warm skin had a different texture to when he was awake a velvety depth, firm, supple, and smooth. She found it impossibly arousing, but only gave in to her desires if his body responded and drew him out of sleep in a way that, he had said, was 'A delightful way to wake up'.

As though sensing her presence, Severus stirred and rolled over, one arm reaching out to her side of the bed. He mumbled her name. Hermione quickly positioned herself where his questing hand would find her.

"I'm right here," she whispered fondly, curling her body against his.

The Book of Nimuë – part 2

Chapter 20 of 32

Hermione provides a listening ear and logical conclusions. Severus finds that when it comes to thinking through things he is not yet ready to accept, a burden shared is a burden halved. Toby engages in a slight transgression of rules, gets into a little bit of trouble, and meets another unusual Being. Petrus goes for an early-morning fly and gives assistance to a "tired and emotional" witch. Professor Binns consults a colleague – and reveals an astonishing fact. Hermione voices a daring hypothesis.

A/N's

Australian

'ard yakka (hard yakka) hard work, usually intensively physical.

French (on-line translator)

Adieu Goodbye/farewell

Bonjour Hello

Débilitant Debilitating

Le chat Cat (or half-Kneazle)

Regardes où tu vas! Watch where you are going!"

S'il vous plait If you please

Latin (various on-line sources)

Et cum spiritu tuo And with thy spirit

Deus da mihi patientiam God grant me patience

Dominus vobiscum The Lord be with you

Ordo Sancti Benedicti The monastic order of St Benedict

Quiescit Anima Libris The spirit finds respite in books.

umava The Bohemian Forest, Central Europe (on the border of the Czech Republic, Austria, and Germany).

The description of the spearhead is consistent with that on P436 of Mary Stewart's book: *The Last Enchantment* (1979).

Canon characters are the property of J.K. Rowling. I make no money from them.

*Thank you, AmyLouise! On-line translators would never have told me that, when 'speaking to children or animals, the familiar "tu" is always used for "you"'.
Thanks and blessings to TeaOli, World's Most Patient Beta and recipient of the Great Fun Award for 2012.

Hermione turned in her sleep, a persistent cold draft nudging her reluctantly into the process of waking up. She stretched, yawned, and fuzzily looked about her. Severus sat next to her with his back against the headboard, so deeply focussed on something he held in his hand that he had not noticed the dislodgement of bedclothes.

"I can think of less chilly ways to say good morning," she protested, wriggling closer to him. Her skin tingled with his bathrobe-clad warmth.

Severus ran his thumb over the object in his hand. Scowling pensively, he passed it to her.

Hermione's eyes widened as she recognised the red dragon. "Merlin!" She looked at him in confusion. She had felt him twitch at the mention of Merlin's name.

"That is a more apt exclamation than you realise," Severus stated. His eyes conveyed perturbation, resolve, and disbelief in one sweeping glance.

Every question placed on hold between the arrival of no less than twenty Aurors at the villa and crawling into bed sometime around midnight crashed over Hermione's thoughts like a North Sea gale over the Bell Rock lighthouse: Where did he go when he placed the Llygad in Myrddin's hand? What did he see? How did he get back? What happened when he got back? But the only thing she could voice was a small, awed statement: "You flew."

Severus nonchalantly scratched his stomach. He quirked an eyebrow.

"I had heard that you could do it... Luna told me. But to see you... You *flew* without a broom."

"The Disillusionment Charm I had placed on Tobias had been cancelled. I saw him, and then I saw the blood. There was no time. If I had not reached him when I did, he would have fallen to a certain death. I had given him the Llygad and told him to run. I had no idea that he had come back no idea that *he* would *choose* to come back." Severus shifted to face her. "He is the reason you are..." He clenched his teeth. "Fawkes brought him the weapons."

"Loyalty... Tobias decided not to abandon us..." Hermione murmured, rubbing Severus' chest. She knew from experience that he found the action very soothing. "Fawkes. I wonder if *he* was responsible for the Dementors' disappearance. We didn't have time to notice they were gone until reinforcements arrived."

"Tobias could not have done anything to them. The rest of us were not in a position to do so. And the way Fawkes attacked Arawn it would have been a sight worth seeing if Arawn had not Disapparated. If the phoenix attacked the Dementors in the same way..."

"Darkness flees at the touch of light; cold withdraws from fire's heat," Hermione pondered.

Severus looked at her in appreciative surprise. "Very prosaic."

Hermione snorted. "Very naff!"

"Thus spake the Gryffindor." He summoned her bathrobe and dropped it in her lap.

Her fingers closed around the copper brooch. "When you disappeared in the villa this has a lot to do with wherever you went, doesn't it?"

Severus nodded soberly. He sighed and rolled out of bed. "It does." He gave her an unreadable look and summoned Caddy. "How *that* depiction of a royal cipher came into my hand will take some careful telling and should not be attempted without coffee."

Toby blinked, rubbed his eyes, and waited. Apart from the soft snores emanating from the enormous ginger cat sharing his pillow, there was not a sound to be heard. He shifted cautiously, biting his lip when his wound protested. A faint metallic jangle from an unknown distance away spurred him into action. Using his good arm, and noting that the cannula had been removed sometime during the night, he pushed himself onto his knees and waited for the throbbing in his right shoulder to subside.

The ginger mass of fur uncoiled and stared at him sleepily.

"Mornin'."

Still lying on his side, Crookshanks stretched from the tips of his ears to the tip of his tail and the very ends of his claws.

However, Toby had other things on his mind than exchanging pleasantries with cats. "Tocky?"

The house-elf appeared with a *crack*, which echoed alarmingly around the Hospital Wing.

"*Shush!* Keep it down, mate!" Toby eased himself off the bed and gritted his teeth against his body's protests.

Tocky clamped both hands over his mouth, looking around anxiously. Seeing no-one else, he fidgeted with the frayed hem of his pillowcase as he watched Tobias painfully gain his balance. "Tocky is not thinking Master Tobias should be..."

"Where's t' dunny?" Toby pleaded. Now that he was standing, it was all the more urgent.

"Master Tobias is wishing to...?"

Toby shut his eyes. "Master Tobias is bustin' for a leak."

Tocky gazed at him in forlorn bewilderment.

"The. Loo. I gotta pee!"

Tocky's eyes widened with understanding. "Tocky is knowing where it is!"

"Thank God for two-foot-tall blessin's."

"Is Master Tobias able to follow Tocky? Is not far. Is at end of hall."

"Yeah, I can manage. Oi! *Gerrofff!*" Toby unhooked Crookshanks' claws from his trousers. He firmly held a furry paw in his hand and stared the feline squarely in the eyes. "I reckon, if *you* were at t' vet's, you'd want to do yer thing on yer own terms that right?"

Crookshanks swivelled his left ear to one side and twitched his back-fur. He withdrew his paw in a dignified manner and flicked his tail. Adopting Egyptian-cat-statue posture, he closed his eyes and pretended he was oblivious to any breakage of rules. The human had made a very salient point.

Petrus crouched on the wall of his balcony, watching the eastern sky turn from milky silver to misty gold. The wind had eased to playful gusts that swept drifts of brown leaves into lazy spirals before dropping them into haphazard patterns over turf and flagstones.

He considered his visit to St Mungo's the night before. Of course, he had heard the Healers' whispers of *gargoyle* and felt their probing stares as he passed along the wide, spotless halls of the hospital with the Headmistress of Hogwarts by his side. He had ignored them. His concern had been for his friend, not for peoples' opinions and

comments. Besides, by now he was quite resigned to humans referring to him as a gargoyle they simply did not know what else to label him.

He had realised that Oriens was in extremely capable hands the minute he saw the intricate sheath of interlocking spell-work encasing the Unspeakable's injured leg. Custom-wrought to hold each piece of bone in its correct place, it would allow healing to take place without weakness or deformity. To Petrus' relief, Oriens was able to engage in a brief conversation, during which he assured Petrus that he would recover, and finished up with a philosophical observation on the taste of the healing potions he would have to take throughout the night.

Petrus snuffed the passing breezes, catching the aroma of wood-smoke, heather, and distant snow. Leaning forward, he extended his wings and took flight.

Silhouetted against the brightening sky, a wake of Thestrals played drop-and-catch with what looked like the corpse of a hare. A lively curl of smoke climbed from the chimney of Professor Hagrid's hut. Petrus soared higher, levelling off when he felt the vibration of Hogwarts' protective wards several feet above him. Enjoying the exercise, he circled the castle.

His roving eyes were arrested by a new construction on the Quidditch pitch. When he had first seen the Quidditch pitch, it was little more than an oval-shaped wreck of charred and broken timber. Now, three long poles of unequal heights stood at each end of the space. Each pole supported a wide ring. As mentioned in the staff meeting two days before, the degradable debris had been cleared away, pulverised, and mixed with assorted other organic materials. The entire botanically nutritious concoction now hulked behind the greenhouses, quietly steaming in the cold morning air.

Petrus flew in for a closer look at the pitch, catching the clean tang of newly milled timber stockpiled in readiness for the next phase of construction. Dipping one wing and using his tail as a counterbalance, he pulled a sharp turn around the three rings at one end of the pitch. He had given the Quidditch handbook a cursory read, but with so much to be done in the library, he had not yet had the time to fully educate himself on the rules of Hogwarts' most celebrated sport. *These are the goals*, he thought, quizzing himself. A spherical, reddish object lay half-hidden in long grass to one side of the pitch. He snatched it up without touching the ground, his hands easily finding purchase in the four shallow indentations spread evenly across its surface. *This is the... Ah! What is it called? The Quaffle!*

He frowned when his fingers traced the Quaffle's surface. One side of it was burned and blistered a poignant reminder of what had occurred in this place where children had played at sport. Still circling the pitch, Petrus considered the young people he had never known. Did they fly their brooms above this ground with all the passion and bravado of their young lives, yelling war cries as they sought glory for their House? Were they gracious in victory? Resilient in defeat? Petrus did not know.

The faces of the students who had seen the castle in ruins passed through his mind. He knew which ones they were. When alone, they walked through the reconstructed halls as if shadows followed on their heels. Sometimes, he would find them in secluded parts of the library: staring into empty space, or shaking with muffled sobs.

Petrus snarled quietly. *This war, it should not have happened! Always, truth is the first sacrifice. The innocent are soon to follow* He remembered looking down from the heights of the *Cathédrale Notre-Dame de Paris*, at war-widows and their children begging alms from the Church. It had seemed that there was never enough to go around. Over time, the children would grow thinner and paler, and the widows gaunt with the emptiness of abandoned hope.

From one end of the pitch, he looked towards the pristine goal rings at the other. He tossed the fire-scarred Quaffle in one hand *For those who played well, for the innocent, and for those who died with valour!*

With short, powerful wing-beats, he gained speed and flew down the centre of the pitch. He pulled one wing close to his body and spun away from an imaginary Bludger. Snapping his wings to their full span, he wrestled g-forces through a steep, climbing turn then dived under the broom of an invisible opponent. Swooping low to the ground, he felt the unruly grass brush his wing-tips. With an exultant roar, he gained height again. Throwing his bodyweight forward and his wings vertical, he came to a dead halt in mid-air and waved *adieu* to another successfully evaded Bludger. A short, backwards free-fall and a twisting roll had him tracking for the middle goal. Remnants of ground-marks told him that he was within the scoring zone. Making a feint towards the lower goal, he hurled the Quaffle through the highest goal ring and turned a somersault to slow his momentum.

The applause of a single person echoed around the pitch. A voice drifted up to him: "Nice moves."

Petrus hovered, astonished, and searched for his undetected audience. He spotted a witch leaning against the stacked timber. *Madame Hooch!* He descended in a circling glide, landed, and bowed. *Bonjour, Madame.* I must ask your forgiveness for the trespass. I thought I was alone."

"Nothing to forgive," Rolanda answered, her words slurring slightly. "Trespass, nothing, old boy! Staff can go anywhere they like on school grounds. And why keep the aerial acrobatics all to yourself, hm? Like I said: nice moves." She pushed off from the stack of timber, weaving on her feet. "A flying librarian! Ha! It's admirable... admirable. Sorry... What's your name? Don't worry, I remember. Petrus."

Petrus stared at her, meagre experience telling him what ailed the Flying instructor. Petrus had seen what happened to choirboys who decided to tap the barrels of communion wine to the point of passing out. He had put the limp-limbed inebriates in the confessionals where they would some hours later moan out their agonies in private. Petrus had stopped short of taking the role of admonishing spiritual guide, no matter how tempting the prospect.

He had also seen another witch in the castle who seemed to be a member of staff, yet did not readily associate with anyone. He had heard that she used to teach Divination and had once shared the position with Professor Firenze. Apart from her rather spiteful disapproval of the centaur, Petrus had been told of her vague approach to teaching and of a propensity to imbibe cheap sherry in large quantities. He had come upon her only once, on his first night patrol. Professor Trelawney seemed to wander the halls like a living ghost, the light of the sconces reflecting off her thick-lensed spectacles in pallid imitation of some fearsome night-ghoul. If she had properly *looked* at him through her sherry-tinted fog, Petrus could not tell, but she had taken his hand, traced his palm, and told him that he had a warm heart even if ~~it~~^{was} made of stone.

Rolanda swayed dangerously as she cast her arm in a broad gesture. "This Quidditch pitch..." She shook her head. "I taught them to fly, you know. Taught them how to sit a broom and make it dance with the wind. You should have seen them seen their faces when they got that first taste of *real* air... They're not here any more."

"The students who died in the Battle, *Madame*?"

Rolanda nodded. "I think I see them some nights when I come here. Ghosts playing a game that will never finish... and can never be won. Maybe the new pitch will help them rest? Do you think? Or will it erase the memory of them, like they were never here?"

Petrus spotted Madam Hooch's broom and appropriated it. She was in no fit state to fly and the staff timetable had her taking the second-year flying class before lunch. "It will not erase them from history, *Madame*. The very stones of the castle will remember them! I think that if the ghosts are here, they will enjoy to watch the future games from the new stands. Now, *s'il vous plait, Madame*, if you will walk with me to the Hospital Wing?"

Rolanda studied him blearily. "Are you feeling sick? *Can* you get sick?"

"*Madame*, I have the ability to discern when the headache *débilitant* is about to manifest. It is a wise action to take the preventative medicines, *non*?"

The Flying instructor grinned. "*Oui!* Didn't know gargoyles got headaches. Mostly, they just sit around grumbling about which way they're facing, or telling *dreary* jokes." She took a few meandering steps.

"I had noticed, *Madame*. There is one who *always* tells to me that his companion was knocked off his plinth by a boy on a broom being chased by a dragon."

"That'll be the one who complains about having a cold bum," Rolanda stated earthily, appropriating her companion's arm. "It's a long walk to the Hospital Wing. If you're

feeling poorly, you might need a teeny bit of help."

Petrus gave the sky a knowing glance as Rolanda assigned half of her bodyweight over to him. *Oui, Madame.*"

Having chosen to breakfast in his rooms, Severus fell back on one of the skills he had developed while living life on a dangerous edge. Eating was an essential part of being able to respond to any situation with intelligence and energy even if one's stomach was in a complicated tangle of knots. He stirred several pinches of sea-salt through his porridge, watching Hermione as she dawdled over her toast and fruit. With History of Magic as her first engagement of the morning, she had opted for "something light" to ward off any post-prandial drowsiness.

Hermione nibbled on grapes while she considered Severus' extraordinary tale. As was her habit, she summarised and recapitulated. "So... There is ~~fake~~ Llygad y Ddraig and a real one. The fake ended up in Voldemort's care, and from there to the vaults, while the real one along with a remnant of an unknown document was taken by Tobias, who has kept both items secret until now.

"When you first examined the *real* Llygad, you saw a boy looking at his reflection in a cave." She drizzled honey over her toast. "By the way, Severus, I still think he sounds a lot like you. A subsequent... um... dream?"

Severus nodded and swallowed another spoonful of porridge. "For the sake of brevity, we may refer to it as such."

"A subsequent dream showed you an ancient ruin with a mosaic depicting a red dragon on a gold field above a castle and a hill.

"Later on, when we heard what the centaurs had to say about the events surrounding Travers' consumption, you looked into the Llygad again, and saw a wizard whom you suspected was one of your mother's ancestors.

"Then Tobias gave you the piece of... Graphorn hide. You read a description matching that of the boy you had seen in the cave. With the help of his house-elf, Tobias put forward some good reasons to suspect that the boy Myrddin is actually Merlin.

"When we met with Kingsley and Oriens, the Llygad gave you another vision of Myrddin, who was referred to as 'Merlin the bastard' by a troop leader named Uther. As it turned out, Merlin was wearing a cloak brooch depicting a red dragon on a gold field just like the one in the mosaic." She indicated the brooch with her butter knife. "A royal cipher belonging to the house of Ambrosius Aurelianus and his brother, Uther..."

"Who later styled himself *Pendragon*," Severus put in with a snort.

"And Ambrosius' son, Merlin. You didn't think much of Uther, did you?"

"Detested him."

Hermione poured herself another cup of coffee. "Following the trail of accessed title deeds unintentionally left by Arawn, we went to a villa which, according to the deeds, is the first known home of your mother's ancestors." She reached for a small jug of cream. "We saw that your dream of the mosaic was a true one..."

"And you proposed that the forested hill and the fortified castle depicted in the mosaic were symbolic of Merlin and Arthur respectively."

"They were cousins!" Hermione curbed her excitement as Severus mechanically applied himself to his breakfast. *Gods, he looks miserable. Fang looked happier when he had hay fever.* "In the villa, we found a hidden shrine, and you established with the Llygad's help that the god within it is Myrddin of the High Places."

Severus shifted uneasily.

"Shall I stop now?"

"No. Go on." Severus was finding it oddly comforting to hear Hermione talking through the events which troubled and mystified him. It was good to finally have someone to share burdensome things with.

Hermione finished her piece of toast and wiped honey off her fingers. "You placed the Llygad in Myrddin's hand, and you found that you had been... Portkeyed... into the same cave where you had seen the boy Merlin and where you had seen one of your ancestors in the process of hiding something. *That something* turned out to be this brooch, hidden under a small harp in a crystal cave. The Llygad y Ddraig, you said, appears to be made from a crystal taken from the same cave." She chewed her lower lip.

Severus gazed at her, wary and tense.

Hermione drew a steadying breath. *My conclusions rattle me, too, love. But we are in this together* "Severus, to me, the events you described condense to five points. One: the Llygad y Ddraig with its heavily guarded power and *memories* something Voldemort was certainly interested in harnessing. Assuming Lucius told you the truth, Voldemort had been planning to obtain it for some time. Two: a trafficable two-way connection, via statues of Myrddin, between the home of your ancestors and a *crystal* cave it is a common belief that Merlin frequented a crystal cave and had some of his greatest visions there. Three: the mosaic featuring the royal cipher occupied pride of place in the Prince family home until, for some reason, it was hidden away as was Merlin's brooch. Four: Arawn's certainty that only someone of the Prince bloodline would be able to use the Llygad y Ddraig; and..." Hermione hesitated, then gave her fifth point. "We now know that Merlin's family were of royal blood on both sides. Considering the four points I have already made, we can deduce how your mother's family got their surname."

Severus pushed his empty bowl away. "Hermione, you *do* know what you are suggesting..."

"Yes, I do," Hermione answered. "And I know you have been brooding on the same conclusion. You are descended from the House of Ambrosius but from which line? Ambrosius? Uther? Arthur? Mordred? I'd put my Galleons on Merlin himself."

"Merlin did not leave any heirs," Severus muttered.

"None that we know of. What you witnessed in the Llygad was never written in our lore-books, either. But what if he did and you are his descendent? What if Voldemort suspected or knew that you *could* be Merlin's heir? The only living person who could access the power in the Llygad y Ddraig."

"Which he would have usurped, if possible, and then he would have had me assassinated." While his expendability to Riddle did not bother him, and his expendability to Albus had subsided to a mild sting, the thought of Hermione abandoning him filled him with cold dread. Severus knew there was no way he could *not* ask the question that had been plaguing him since the uninvited epiphanies in the crystal cave. "If I am..." he began, "against all logic and likelihood... If I *am*... Would it make any difference to you?"

Hermione considered his question, realizing that it was actually a number of questions encapsulated in one. She moved around the table and slid into his lap, locking her arms around his neck. "I fell in love with you before either of us had heard of the Llygad y Ddraig, let alone knew of its connection with Merlin. That love has not been challenged. It has grown, and it has deepened.

"I will not abandon you because of your ancestry, which is something you had no say in not that it matters to me and, awe-inspiring as it is, it certainly does not intimidate me." She looked deeply into his eyes. "If you *are* the descendent of an ancient king or wizard, I will *not pretend* to love you and stay with you as though you are some kind

of trophy in case that question crossed your mind. Whoever your ancestors were, I am thankful to them because they eventually produced *you*." She shrugged ruefully. "But will I be enough for *you*?"

Severus pressed a finger to her lips. "I do not change my mind easily, Hermione. By my life and my power, I will not shun you for the sake of a mere bloodline."

Moving with painful slowness, Toby emerged from the required facilities with relief as his ally.

"*Master Tobias!*" Tocky hissed with one hand over his mouth, frantically gesticulating with the other towards the curtained archway leading back into the staff ward. "Tocky is hearing voices..."

"You'd best get that seen to, lad. Maybe yer workin' too 'ard."

The house-elf gaped at him, frowned, and folded his arms. "Tocky is *not* working too hard! For house-elf, there is being *no such thing*." Having defended the honour of servitude, Tocky peeped through a gap in the curtains. "Tocky is hearing Madam Pomfrey persuading Madam Hooch to take potions."

"Are they comin' this way?"

Tocky's ears twitched in distress. "No, Master Tobias, they isn't. Not yet. They is not being far away *Please* be going back to bed."

Toby sighed and nodded. Taking careful steps, and steadying himself against the wall with his uninjured arm, he had nearly made it back to safety when the door opened with quiet efficiency.

Holding a wooden clipboard to which a number of parchments were attached, Madam Pomfrey strode purposefully into the room. She halted with a sharp precision that would have done credit to the Queen's Life Guard. She eyed Tobias with the cool displeasure of the deliberately disobeyed. "If I may ask," she began in severely pruned tones, "what the bloody *hell* do you think you are doing?"

Tocky looked as though he wanted nothing more than to scurry under the bed and beat his head against the floor. Instead, he stood bravely in front of his secretly adopted master, though his knees were shaking terribly.

Crookshanks leapt down from his position and, being too venerable to actually *run* from a human, padded at a reasonably brisk pace towards the door. Once there, he fled, his tail streaming behind him like a banner.

"*Ai! Le chat! Regardes où tu vas! S'il. Vous. Plait!*"

Toby glanced towards the open door through which the exclamation echoed. He faced Poppy unrepentantly. "I 'ad somethin' to attend to. Besides, no one *said* I 'ad to stay put."

Poppy waved Tocky out of the way and firmly steered her patient back to bed. "I would have *thought* that was implicit..."

Toby gestured indignantly towards the curtained archway. "*Crikey*, woman! What was I *s'posed* to do? Tie a knot in it?"

"Tobias, that will do," Poppy scolded warningly.

A nightmarish stone figure appeared in the doorway, a concerned look on its face. *Madame* Pomfrey, I heard a contrary tone and saw *un chat* flee as though for his life are you in need of assistance?"

Toby took one look and froze. His vision began to fill with tiny stars. Whatever-it-was looked as though it could easily tear a man's limbs off with its bare hands.

"Thank you, Petrus, but I shall have this *scapegrace* sorted out quick smart. May I introduce Tobias Snape: archer extraordinaire, flagrant rule-breaker, and notorious escapee. He is also Severus' father."

Petrus bowed respectfully.

"*Je-sus Christ!*" Toby dazedly sat down and allowed Poppy to unconcernedly fuss with his bandages.

"*Non, Monsieur* Tobias, I am afraid you are mistaken. I am Petrus. I have seen many depictions of *Monsieur* Christ fortunately for him, there is no resemblance."

Poppy moved to the end of Toby's bed and consulted his charts. "You are doing very well, I am pleased to say. Aside from physical damage, the curse has left no traces at all."

Toby had not taken his eyes off Petrus. "Curse?"

"Yes, Tobias, you were brought down with a curse. Thankfully, Severus knew how to contain it so that it would not spread through your body, and Bill Weasley arrived here just before you did, so he could start extracting it immediately."

"What would it 'ave done?"

"Incinerated your nerve connections, caused your muscles to spasm violently enough to break your bones, dissolved your intestines, and made your blood cells burst. Not necessarily in that order." She probed the edges of the wound. "I think the drainage tube can come out today. I'll send an owl to Dr Granger and arrange a time for her to come and have a look. I don't usually treat Muggles, so I would prefer to have a second opinion. Better safe than sorry. How are your pain levels this morning?"

Toby gestured towards Petrus, who was engaged in a quiet conversation with Tocky. "What the...? What is...?" he whispered.

"Who, Petrus? He is our assistant librarian. Which reminds me..." She cast some diagnostic charms and quickly updated the charts. "Petrus, I have spoken to Madam Pince, and she has agreed to give you tomorrow afternoon off for your staff course in magical first aid. Can you come to my office at half past two?"

Petrus nodded. "*Oui*, I shall be there. If there is nothing else, *Madame* Pomfrey, I shall return to the library."

"The Hospital Wing is under control, thank you." Poppy eyed Toby sternly as Petrus saluted both of them and left the room. "Well, Mr Snape, I can tell that your wound is giving you a bit of a touch-up. Serves you right, is all I can say." She took two plastic bottles from the side table and read the labels. "Medium or heavy duty painkillers? The heavy duty contains morphine."

"Medium, thanks. I'd rather stay conscious."

"Do you think you could manage some breakfast?"

Toby assessed his internal equilibrium and decided against it. He shook his head. "Cuppa tea'd be grand."

Madam Pomfrey shook two tablets into a paper cup. "Tocky, round up a pot of tea, will you? You know how he takes it."

Delighted to be of use and that he wasn't in trouble Tocky straightened his pillowcase and disappeared.

Severus spotted Madam Pomfrey on her way to the Headmistress' office. Ignoring the whispers of the younger students and glaring disdainfully at the older gossip-mongers he strode after her with the intention of getting an update on Tobias' progress before visiting the Hospital Wing.

Luna watched as students scattered, pell-mell, to get out of his way. She gave a dreamy smile.

Ginny tweaked her classmate's robes. "Don't let him catch you smiling like that!"

"Why not? There are some wonderful colours in his aura today."

"Black, blacker, and blackest?"

Luna shook her head. She arched an eyebrow at Hermione, who had stopped to talk with Neville. "Hermione has the same colours."

Ginny frowned. "Really? Is that a *good* thing? I mean... Look, I'm worried about her. Not because she gave my brother the shove... Truth is, I couldn't see them lasting too long anyway. But..." She gestured after the black-robed figure. "*Him?*"

Luna's dreamy visage grew serious, revealing a depth of wisdom few people credited her with. "You are worried that ex-Professor Snape will mistreat her."

Ginny hoisted her bag and nodded. "He was such. A. Git! He hated everyone, including Hermione. How come he changed his mind?"

"He didn't seem to like anything, much, did he? But people can grow in many ways, every day of their lives," Luna said quietly. "It all depends on what sort of nourishment they receive and how they choose to use it. He will not hurt Hermione, and she will not hurt him. When I see them together, the colours glow so bravely I have to look away."

"Bravely? Not a word I'd think of using to describe colours unless aural colours are different?"

Luna had returned to her usual state of otherworldly contemplation.

Ginny shrugged and smiled. "Whatever. Anyway, I think Hermione is bloody brave in anyone's language or aural spectrum! She'd need to be, to shack up with Sir Snarky-pants." She laughed. "Maybe *he's* the one who needs to be brave! Harry and Ron say that Hermione can be *really* scary when she's pushed to it! I suppose, like I always say: anything's possible if you've got enough nerve."

Having received favourable news from Madam Pomfrey, as well as the cryptic statement: 'Now I know where you got it from', Severus entered the staff ward with no clear plan on what he was going to do in fact, he really had no idea at all.

"Mornin'." Toby reclined on a pile of carefully positioned pillows, his right shoulder and arm supported in a padded sling.

Severus briefly glanced at him. "Good morning."

"Thanks for the blood."

Severus shrugged diffidently. He took his father's charts and scanned them with a calculating scowl. "Did Arawn have enough of a look at you to enable him to recognise you again?" he asked bluntly.

"I s'pose 'e did. I looked the bastard in the eyes while 'e was laughin'. Should I ask why?"

"You have two weeks remaining for your separation protocol. Assuming that you will have recovered sufficiently after the two weeks have elapsed, I wonder if it would be wise to send you home before we have this *business* cleared up."

"Do I get a choice?"

"You do." Severus replaced the charts, drew his robes about him, and folded his arms. "However, I would suggest that Hogwarts will be the safest place until the threat is either contained permanently or eliminated."

Toby shivered. Severus had a way of enunciating "eliminated" that made the flesh shift on his bones. For the second time in as many days, he considered the options before him. He stole a glance at his son, who was apparently lost in some unreadable thought of his own. *I don't even know who 'e is, really.* Loss and regret for the boy he had cruelly mistreated mingled with curiosity about the man the wizard that boy had become. A wizard who had withheld his justifiable claim on payback, expressing his fury on a suit of armour instead. A wizard who had set aside complete estrangement to engage in a quest of higher importance. A wizard who had prevented him from falling to his death, and then contained a lethal curse. His son who had given of his own blood when he could have chosen to walk away. Feeling overwhelmed, he took refuge in a question.

"I *will* get to go 'ome eventually? To Australia, I mean."

Severus raised an eyebrow. "Of course."

Toby nodded. "Alright, then. I'll take yer advice."

Severus gave a curt nod. "Is anyone likely to enquire after your whereabouts?"

"Shouldn't think so. Ev'ryone I know is used to me comin' and goin'."

Severus summoned Toby's arm-guard and frowned at the red dragon engraved upon it. The dragon roused itself from a nap and fearlessly frowned back. "Spinner's End is still yours by law."

Toby sighed. He had not given the house any deliberate thought, being too intent on wiping it out of his recollections altogether. "I don't want it. I'm surprised you still 'ave the old place."

"Yes, I still have it. However, since the day *I supposedly* inherited it, I have made a point of using it as little as possible."

"Don't blame you. If I was you, I'd sell it and be done with it. That place 'as seen too much of grief and 'ard times, I reckon."

Severus sank into a chair. He had felt the echoes of "grief and hard times" whenever he had stayed there for any length of time. Filling the walls with books had gone some way to transforming it into a vague insinuation of a place where he could be comfortable but it had never been a complete success. "I assume that you do not regard England as home anymore?"

Toby stared at him, surprised at the personal question. "Nah, not for a long time." His brows knitted as he tried to express a very complicated process in as few words as possible. "Manchester was where I 'ad ev'rythin I reckoned I needed, and I got it all by the time I were twenty-one you were born a month to t' day after me twenty-first, which were near enough. It's also the place where I screwed up meself, yer mother, and you and lost everythin'.

"In Australia, I s'pose I got another chance in exchange for a lotta years of bloody 'ard yakka. Spent a long time in places where a bloke could travel for days and 'ave no-one's company but 'is own. Gives plenty of time for thinkin'."

"And?" In spite of his guarded reserve, Severus found that he was actually curious.

"Ever thought to yerself: 'I can be better than what I 'ave been?'"

Severus nodded.

Toby fidgeted with his sling. "Didn't know where to start, or what to do, at first. Couldn't do anythin' about the past, but what might 'appen next were up to me. Y'know, once I made t' decision to move on, when I started tryin', 'elp seemed to come right outta the blue, if I really needed it."

Severus remembered standing before the Veil, hearing Lily's heartfelt insistence that her death was not his fault. It was when he had allowed himself ~~to~~*now* that speculation as to what *could* or *should* have been was pointless. It was time for him to move on. The decision had acted like a cold chisel in the hands of Vulcan himself. His deeply guarded bond with Lily had split asunder, leaving him alone, empty, and cold. As the Veil had threatened to draw him through, he had been terrified. Then, right out of the blue, Fawkes' song had warmed him and given him courage, then led him back to his still-living body, where a young witch sat holding his hand...

"The upshot is, that country's been good to me and good *for* me. It's where I belong. Not 'ere." Toby grinned as Crookshanks leapt onto the bed. "G'day! Thought Madam Merciless 'ad scared you off."

Crookshanks forgave the human the indiscretion of implying that he had been 'scared'. The ear rub he was getting was drool-inducingly good!

Severus considered what he had just heard as Crookshanks settled himself on Tobias' stomach. By the sound of it, the stuff that made his father who he was had not changed but it had been re-forged and tempered into a very different presentation than the one Severus remembered. "I suspect that your therapist is about to administer another treatment," he commented.

Crookshanks settled into sphinx-posture and began a warm-up purr.

"*Therapist?*"

"As you might recall from last night, if you concentrate on Crookshanks' purring, you will find it very beneficial." He smirked at the resulting look of sceptical compliance. He opened the warded drawer and picked up the Llygad. "If you agree to a small risk and a deviation from Ministerial protocol I shall take this with me for an hour or so."

"Nothin's 'appened before: no reason why it should now."

"If you feel any pull towards it while I am gone, alert Tocky and tell him to fetch me from Professor Binns' classroom."

"Will do."

At the door, Severus halted and addressed his father again. "I shall return. No doubt, I will find you here."

Speechless, Toby watched Severus exit the staff ward with a dramatic billow of black robes. Not knowing what to think, he allowed Crookshanks' resonant purr to lull him to sleep.

The Dementor had encountered a receptive human before, but it had proved fickle and weak, with an undisciplined mind and stunted power. The Dementor had not succeeded in communicating with *that* human what passed for a mind was too noisy and cluttered. And the human itself had seemed inordinately fond of its own voice, giving orders and tittering in tones that would surely irritate the dead. It had certainly annoyed the Dementor.

It watched its new conduit with senses only other Dementors could comprehend. This entity was very different: a highly structured, organised intellect and well-developed magical strength.

Initially, the human had guarded itself well. Shields had been in place constantly until, the Dementor recalled, a single word had changed everything *Crevan*. At the sounding of this word, the Dementor had felt the human next to him emit a burst of frustration and excitement. Gently probing the ever-present shields, the Dementor had found a small fissure and had shifted restlessly. Two words had burst into the Dementor's awareness without being vocalised: *Be patient!*

The Dementor had weighed the risks, then sent a single word back to the human. A muffled echo of fear had been replaced with exhilaration. This was new. Exploring the human's mind while the shields were lowered, the Dementor had discerned an object held in memory: something of great power. Something its kind could put to good use. Of more interest to the Dementor, the human was fixated with the object. There was anger there, too: the anger humans displayed when repeatedly denied an obsession's demands for gratification. Obsession and anger were doorways the Dementor could use, but it would, as the human had requested, be patient.

"Severus. Come in, come in," Professor Binns droned contentedly from behind his desk.

Hermione paused in her circumambulation of the classroom and sneaked in one more yawn. She caught an amused gleam in Severus' eye as he entered the room.

"Taking a turn around the room, Miss Granger? I have heard that it is a fitting remedy for *fatigue*." He waited by the door, holding it open in anticipation of another arrival.

"Yes, it is quite refreshing. More so than playing at cards, or applying myself to other *accomplishments*, sir," she answered, taking inspiration from her collection of Jane Austen novels.

Petrus appeared, laden with five enormous books and several ornately fastened scrolls. '*Bonjour, Messieurs, Mademoiselle! Monsieur le* Professor Binns, here are your requested loans."

"Excellent. Thank you, Petrus." Professor Binns stood up and wandered through his desk, eyeing the delivery with anticipation as Petrus carefully placed his burden on a reading table to one side of the room. "Severus, I understand you have an enquiry about a particularly ancient document?" he murmured absently while gazing at the books, happily distracted by the worthy weight of knowledge awaiting his house-elf-assisted perusal.

Severus wandlessly closed and warded the door. He produced the fragment of Graphorn hide and held it up to the pale, mottled light which fought its way through cobweb-curtained stained glass. As anticipated, the action immediately caught the ghostly historian's attention.

"What have you got there?"

"Miss Granger proposed that we show you this. We assume that it is a remnant of a larger work. Hermione is of the opinion that it originally came from a book," Severus explained. "It is written on foetal Graphorn hide..."

"That has not been used for over seven hundred years!" Cuthbert was definitely interested now. It was a rare thing for him to interrupt someone he recognised as a scholarly peer even rarer for him to exclaim while doing it.

Severus tolerated the interruption, knowing that Cuthbert was well and truly hooked. *Time to really shake his ectoplasm...* "It contains a written description of Merlin."

Cuthbert opened and closed his mouth several times. He regarded Severus with the haughty disbelief of an academic ready to dismantle a presumptuous challenge to a long-held theory. "You know I deal only in facts. Hard..."

"Irrefutable. Facts. I am well aware of your preference for the indisputable." Severus placed the fragment on Cuthbert's desk.

The ghost immediately pored over it, the palms of his hands pressed half an inch into the desk on either side as he read it over and over again. "Thoth's stylus! I have not seen this passage before," he whispered. "But I *have* seen script very much like it."

Hermione could not help herself. "Where? When? Was it a book? A scroll?"

Cuthbert waved his hand without turning around. "Miss Garthwaite, one question at a time, please."

Severus smirked at his beloved, earning a warning frown and an irritated shrug. He signalled Petrus. "Do you have a copy of the record?"

Petrus nodded and drew a folded sheet of parchment out from under his arm-band. "*Oui, Monsieur* Severus. *Madame* Pince made the duplication."

Severus placed it on Cuthbert's desk. "This is what is left of an availability enquiry sent from Hogwarts to another library in A.D. 1348. As you can see, the description is lacking due to the predations of hungry mice. But what *is* left is noteworthy. As is the evidence that the requested *book* was written on foetal Graphorn hide."

Cuthbert read the parchment. "Myrddin... *Nimuë*... The hide of an un-born Graphorn... A book... A script so alike to..." Shaking his head, he took several steps back, turned, and began to pace through the first row of desks.

Spiders paused in their web-making. A lost tribe of Doxys peeked around the edge of a bookshelf. Hermione, Severus, and Petrus all exchanged breathless glances. For the first time in living memory, Professor Binns' classroom had a charged atmosphere. As one, they all looked at the pacing Professor, who had clasped his translucent hands in front of him as though praying to whichever deity was responsible for the bestowal of facts.

Cuthbert addressed them suddenly. "I must confer with one of my colleagues. While I am gone, turn to page forty of *A History of Magic* and read to the end of the chapter." He passed through his blackboard without a backward glance.

Petrus regarded Severus and Hermione with blank astonishment. The end of his tail had worked itself into a thumb-knot and his ears drooped in utter confusion.

Hermione came to his rescue. "Don't worry about the reading, Petrus. He has a habit of lapsing back into teaching mode. For a moment, he would have simply assumed that we were all students."

Petrus nodded gratefully, attended to his tail, and flexed his wings.

They did not have to wait long. Cuthbert reappeared through his blackboard. A second ghost followed, dislodging a small puff of chalk-dust.

"A *monk*," Hermione whispered.

"*Oui, Mademoiselle. Ordo Sancti Benedicti*," Petrus clarified.

At the mention of his Order, the monk noticed the presence of the living and floated across the room to address them. "*Dominus vobiscum*," he intoned, his right hand bestowing blessings.

"*Et cum spiritu tuo*," Petrus answered formally.

The monk chuckled and deliberately walked through a chair. "Spirit, in truth!" His slightly opaque eyes conveyed that when he was alive, he had been of a somewhat irreverent and very mischievous nature. He shook his head at Cuthbert, who was oblivious to anything beyond the Graphorn hide and the parchment. "I shall make the introductions myself, then, shall I?" he asked loudly, his English flowing with a liquid Welsh lilt. At the absence of a response, he sketched a cross in the air and muttered, "*Deus da mihi patientiam*." He tucked his hands into the sleeves of his cucula. "Forgive my excessively focused friend; he has probably forgotten the ~~fact~~ that you exist."

"Fact?" Cuthbert turned, his eyes desperately searching the classroom.

The monk rolled his eyes. "I am Cadfæl the Younger, twin brother to Cadfæl the Elder but he was smaller than me. And still is. It is a bone of contention which *would* cause the odd skirmish in the ossuary, if our priory had one. We all make do with unmarked graves and enforced penance in wet weather."

Severus bowed and introduced himself, Hermione, and Petrus. Cadfæl's interest in how Petrus had acquired his name was interrupted when Cuthbert drifted impatiently towards them.

"Cadfæl, when you have *quite* finished *wittering* on..."

"Let not polite conversation..."

Obstruct the interrogation...

Of that which will *not* explode...

For want of attention..."

As Cadfæl chanted his retort, Severus and Hermione seated themselves at one of the students' desks. They watched Professor Binns with intense attention. "I have not seen Cuthbert so animated since Lupin *accessed* the class notes and changed all the key dates for the Giant Wars," Severus whispered.

Cuthbert was getting very cross. He waved Cadfæl towards his desk. "Enough of this abstraction and frippery!"

"I haven't seen him like this since we asked him about the Chamber of Secrets," Hermione rejoined, biting her lip when Severus took her hand under the desk.

"Permit me the indulgence," he murmured. "I have never had the chance to do this *in class* before."

"We should make a point of getting you up to speed, then." Hermione threaded her fingers through his and saucily rubbed his thigh.

Petrus covered his eyes, then his ears, then his mouth, and looked out of the window.

Cuthbert scanned the classroom for the source of a subliminal disturbance. He pointed sternly at Severus. "Mr Slocum. Where is your uniform? Ten points from Slytherin."

With devoted care, Cadfæl examined the Graphorn hide and silently referred to the parchment. He glided to Cuthbert's side. "It is definitely from the same book, my friend."

Cuthbert shook his head. "Impossible!"

Cadfæl looked his colleague in the eyes. "Are you sure? Parts of the book are missing if they have not been destroyed, then it is *certain* that they still exist and may be found again. It is *obvious*, to a scrivener's eye, that the script is identical. It is a *fact* that Merlin lived, and it is *implicit* that, having lived, he would have had a physical appearance." The monk gave Severus a long, searching look, but said nothing.

Hermione was ready to scream with frustration. Her hair began to bristle wildly.

Severus could feel her magic building to a critical point. He released her hand. "Gentlemen," he said, standing up to address them. "Does this book you keep referring to have a title?"

Cuthbert sucked in his cheeks and slowly nodded. "In the fifth-year syllabus, I give several lectures touching on the subject of the nine books of ancient magic."

"The same books Galapas used while teaching his pupil, Merlin," Hermione stated crisply.

"There was a tenth book," Cuthbert sighed. "It was written after Merlin's time. *The Book of Nimuë* written by Nimuë herself."

Cuthbert waited for the stunned murmur to pass. Only Cadfæl appeared to be unmoved. "It contained everything she *ever stole* from Merlin. A detailed account of his life's work. It was he who wrought magical instruction into the form we see today. He established the founding principles of healing and mediwizardry, created the discipline of Arithmancy, and made advances in defensive magic the like of which have never been equaled." Cuthbert indignantly adjusted his robes. "At every point in that book where Merlin's appearance or ancestry would have been detailed, pages... entire chapters... had been removed."

Hermione and Petrus hissed in outrage.

"Merlin also forged allegiances with non-human magical beings," Cadfæl added. "And, as you no doubt know, with Muggle kings and warriors."

"The defeat of Vortigern by the High King Ambrosius..." Severus murmured.

Cadfæl nodded. "Vortigern had Dark Magic on his side, *a fact* that is not common knowledge." He sent a slightly accusing look in Cuthbert's direction. "Along with several thousands of the creatures you call Dementors."

Outside, a cloud obscured the sun and plunged the classroom into a gloomy chill.

Cuthbert seated himself above a desk. "Even after Vortigern's death, his would-be successors continued to cause trouble and misery in a land broken by war and lawlessness. Without Merlin, the allied resistance would have been annihilated. For wizard and Muggle alike, there was a reason that the time before the coming of Arthur was referred to as a *dark* age."

"Does the book still exist?" Hermione asked, half-dreading the answer.

Cuthbert looked towards his ghostly colleague. "I believe you can trust them with the knowledge. They are the most book-learned beings in Hogwarts."

"*Quiescit Anima Libris*," Cadfæl murmured. "It is held in the Priory of Abergavenny. At least, it was a priory when I *lived* there. I was at Compline when I saw a man pass through the cloisters in the company of the abbot. The man who had a passing resemblance to you, Severus, carried a leather-wrapped book. He did not have it when he left. Having many duties to attend to, I gave it no further thought while I lived. When I left my grave and returned to the scriptorium, I chanced upon it while passing through a wall. It was not until I met a wizard learned in history that I mentioned it and found out how significant it was."

Hermione raised her hand. "Professor Binns, have you actually *seen* the book?"

Cuthbert reached out to one of the volumes Petrus had delivered. As his hands passed through it, he gave a wistful sigh. "I held it in my living hands. I was journeying through *Cymru* Wales researching ancient strategic alliances between Muggle and wizarding populations. Of course, the subject matter could not avoid the deeds of Meriin and Arthur. I stopped at Abergavenny Muggle places of worship could always be counted on for a quiet place to read and to reflect upon what was myth and what was truth.

"It was there that I met Cadfæl, who, in his living days, had been placed as a watcher, in case the Dark should attempt to reassert itself by sowing seeds in seats of Muggle influence and power using Muggles to gain a foot-hold was a common tactic, in those days. After the most illuminating discussions, he led me to the place where the book was hidden. No doubt, Miss Goonse, you are wondering why I have never referred to it in lectures."

"Miss *Granger* and I are both intensely curious as to the reasons," Severus prompted silkily.

"For one, the book itself is incomplete. For another, the Ministry of the time forbade any consultation, copying, or reference to *The Book of Nimuë*. I did ask why, but the only answer I received was that it was too controversial. I left the book where it was. I knew it would be safe in Abergavenny, shrouded in the *myth* of its own existence."

Cadfæl frowned thoughtfully. "Do you think it was due to the outrage surrounding Nimuë's alleged betrayal of Merlin, the theft of his power, and leaving him to die while she ran off and married that young king?"

Cuthbert began pacing again. "Possibly. The then Department for the Discouragement of Vice, Treachery, and Infidelity did have a reputation for extreme measures. The young king was Pelleas of the Isles, by the way, a man fiercely loyal to King Arthur. From Pelleas' court, Nimuë assisted Arthur until the very end."

Severus' eyes narrowed in thought. "Some of the more influential *purebloods* of the time would have seen only the betrayal of Merlin and loyalty given to a *Muggle* high king. Nimuë's marriage to a Muggle lesser-king would have been unconscionable."

Hermione felt herself turn pale. A vague train of thought had suddenly acquired all the subtlety of the Hogwarts Express, huffing, clanking, and bellowing its way up a steep incline.

"*Mademoiselle*?" Petrus asked, searching her face for any sign of what might be troubling her.

Hermione licked her dry lips. By now, Severus had noticed her disquiet, and the two ghosts regarded her with raised eyebrows. "Did..." Her words failed in a broken whisper. She looked into Severus' eyes, and had an irrational urge to weep. "Did Nimuë have any children?"

Her audience exchanged puzzled glances.

"She did," Cuthbert droned disinterestedly. "The number is not specific, but there was a rumour that the first came somewhat early in her marriage: a further sign of her treachery while Merlin still lived."

Hermione could only shake her head. She began to tremble.

Severus took her hands in his. "Gods, you're freezing! What is the matter?"

Hermione looked around. *A wizard, a gargoyle, a monk, and a historian. All of them male. They might not see it. Would it ever occur to them to think of this?* Nimuë was a powerful witch who had taken to living in, and assisting, a Muggle society, yes?"

Cuthbert nodded cautiously.

"Muggles would have been suspicious of her. In some enclaves of wizarding society, she would have had sworn enemies. If she were alone, in those times, it would have been even worse. Her life would have been forfeit. Especially... Especially if she were with child."

Blank looks were her only reply.

"She may have married King Pelleas a man loyal to Arthur and, by association, Merlin so soon after Merlin's demise..." she drew a deep breath ".because she was carrying Merlin's child."

Sister Clarise stood up slowly. She had procrastinated long enough. Fearfully, she moved towards her cot and shifted it to one side. Following the sequence of the visions she had seen, she knelt and examined the stone floor intently. Outside, the umava whispered and creaked under a heavy load of mountain snow.

Blinking back nausea, she reached out and touched one of the flat stones, distinguished from its neighbours only by a small crack in one corner.

"I do not want to do this," she whispered. "In the name of everything sacred, why does this fall to me?" There was no answer to her plaintive question. The stone waited with all the patience of the Earth itself.

She reached out and placed her hand flat against the stone. Leaning forward, she used her weight to press against it. The stone sank perhaps an inch, then rebounded with a solid *snick*.

Lifting the stone from its bed, Sister Clarise let her tears fall freely. She took out an object wrapped in coarsely woven cloth, rotten with age. Letting the wrappings slide away, she held a long, bronze spearhead up to the light.

The spearhead had lost its wooden shaft to the demands of forgotten centuries long before it was hidden in the priory. It was forged in the Roman style but had more of a ceremonial appearance, rather than the functionality of unadorned iron favoured by the militia of the Roman Empire. Rich jewels flashed from its empty bindings. Within its form, ancient magic stirred Sister Clarise's fingers tingled with it. The light of her candle caught the honed edge of the spearhead. As she turned it this way and that, the red gleam trailed down its length like drops of blood.

By Order of the Phoenix – Part 1

Chapter 21 of 32

The centaurs receive visitors from a distant land – *armed* visitors bearing news. Severus sees an ancient treasure, and Hermione is proved right. Fawkes is an extremely busy phoenix. Severus and Tobias reach an understanding, and Severus makes a strategic alliance with Jean Granger. Petrus demonstrates his ability to keep order among students and magical books.

A/N's

Schwarzwald: The Black Forest region in south-west Germany.

Camargue: A vast alluvial plain in southern France, famous in part for its herds of freely roaming horses.

S'il vous plait If you please

As far as I know, the names of the visiting centaurs (and the beings Fawkes leaves a message for) do not have any real-world meaning: they are the product of imagination.

The physical description of Nimuë is only slightly adjusted from P305 of Mary Stewart's *The Last Enchantment* (1979).

In Ms Stewart's universe, Merlin had been poisoned by Morguase with what sounds like a variant of the Draught of Living Death. Succumbing to the potion, Merlin was assumed dead and entombed at Bryn Myrddin. However, he recovered and, after a reader-approximated six months, returned to Arthur's court. By that time, Nimuë had married Pelleas of the Isles. The scene Severus witnesses is adapted from P436437 of *The Last Enchantment* (1979). The existence of a child is my addition. Unaltered dialogue from Ms Stewart's work is marked with an asterisk (*).

The paraphrasing of Mr Bennet is taken from Chapter 59 of Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice* (1813).

Canon characters belong to J.K. Rowling. I make no money from them.

Thank you again and again to TeaOli for her amazing beta skills.

Special thanks to Severus Snape, who showed up in dreamscape and gave me some excellent reasons as to why I should "stop moping around like a dying Flobberworm" and finish writing this chapter.

In a grassy clearing in the most secret part of Forbidden Forest, the centaurs gathered before an immense trilithon marking the entrance to a stone circle. From his position at the front of his herd, Bane squared his shoulders and watched the pulsing shimmer surrounding the quartz heart-stone at the circle's centre. Never in his lifetime had the circle been used in this way, and Bane knew that the reason would be something momentous.

His grand-sire had told him tales of bygone times, when centaurs had moved freely through the forest that had once clothed the entire land in a cloak of shaded green. From faraway lands, they would travel from stone circle to stone circle, to meet in times of ceremony, celebration, or war and wars there were...

Bane had heard of the allegiances forged by Merlin when Vortigern's shadow lay over land and sea like a restless wraith of evil. As a yearling, he had often enacted the old stories in play he had never tired of the Ambush of the Horns, where three hundred centaurs banished four times their number of Dementors with a massed sounding of aurochs horns charmed by Merlin himself. Then, a thousand centaur and Veela archers had launched deadly flights of arrows into the flanks and rear of Vortigern's mortal reinforcements, halting their advance to the hill-top fort of Lesser Doward in the Wye Valley, where Ambrosius and Uther held the old tyrant at siege. Best of all, Bane had loved the telling of the charge that had followed his *people*, his *ancestors*, surging downhill at a headlong gallop and obliterating the enemy's front lines with war-axe, spear, and sword.

He glanced at Firenze, who stood motionless with his arms folded across his chest. Firenze had proved a legend true on the night Travers' soul was eaten when he called upon the herd to sound the horns in unison as Dementors swarmed around them in a sickening plague. Merlin's magic still had power: the foul creatures had been swept away like leaves in an autumn storm.

'Not since Merlin's time have we seen such patterns in the planets and in the smoke of sacred herbs.' Firenze's words played in Bane's mind as he recalled the bright power shining within the Llygad y Ddraig Severus Snape's *inheritance*. Bane frowned as a question arose unbidden. *Who are you, Severus?*

Bane ceased his musing as the shimmer within the circle became a cascading silver ripple. Three forms appeared by the heart-stone. Following a timeless tradition, he waited for the newcomers to speak first.

A heavy, muscular centaur with coal-black flanks and a long black beard forked into twin plaits stepped forward. As he bowed, the chain mail adorning his torso jingled lightly. Hanging at his side, a double-bladed war axe gleamed in the pale light. "Bane of the Forbidden Forest: may the powers that move the planets favour your herd with good health and long life. Here is my daughter, Esnyë, and my son Rôthvar. We travel with the trappings of war, but war upon you is not our intention."

Bane observed formality. "Bryndorach of the Schwarzwald: honour comes to us with your arrival. For what reasons have you travelled?"

Bryndorach held up a phoenix feather. "Two days ago, a phoenix came to us while we discussed the recent portents of the heavenly wanderers. In his talons, he bore an acorn from this forest, and placed it alongside a fir-cone from our own forest upon the heart-stone in our circle. Such a thing does not happen without good reason." Bryndorach's turquoise eyes held a wry humour. "We are here, it would seem, by order of a phoenix."

Bane held up a phoenix feather of his own. "Then enter our lands and be welcome, centaurs of the Schwarzwald." He was hard-pressed not to stare as Esnyë passed by; he silently admired her confidence and poise but Bryndorach's herd had never known a reason to send their females into hiding. They had never known the humiliation of betrayal and defeat at the hands of humans, of branding and slavery, of having their young ones snatched away by goblin traders, of being corralled and segregated into reservations, of being treated as *playthings* by those who regarded them as mindless brutes and expendable savages.

As the leader of his herd, Bane felt the shame of those days keenly, even though they had happened centuries before he was born. He sighed and scanned the layers of forest where he knew a small and secretive number of his herd watched at a shy and wary distance. He felt a sense of imbalance and loss: a herd was not meant to live this way...

As if sensing the reason for his disquiet, Esnyë approached him. "Our sire told us why you keep the females hidden," she said softly. "While we respect your laws and will not question them, it is our hope that one day you may have the means of bringing change."

Bane cast a curious eye over her Veela-made armour a sleeveless jerkin of soft leather into which was sewn hundreds of tiny, interlocking metal rings. *Light and mobile. Suitable for an archer in battle*, he thought, noting the bow and quiver at her back. The Schwarzwald centaurs had always fought together and the females had a reputation for fighting just as fiercely as the males. "Some things have changed," he said. "I am not proud to say that it was the grief-swept accusations of a half-giant that finally changed our course and sent us into the *humans'* war."

Esnyë knitted her ash-blond brows. "Where, we heard, you helped turn the tide against a great peril. A peril that would have touched all of us, eventually." She swished her tail and regarded Bane candidly. "They must have been accusations of some weight."

"By Chiron, they were!" Bane caught a late-falling leaf and, after a moment, let it drop to join its companions on the ground. He ran the phoenix feather between his fingers. "Often, the most potent medicine has the bitterest taste."

Bryndorach excused himself from a cluster of news-hungry centaurs. "We have had word from the Camargue herd. They, too, have been visited by a phoenix. I wonder that the bird has any feathers left," he snorted, stamping a hind-hoof.

"Were they also instructed to make their way here?" Ronan asked, testing the balance of Rôthvar's broadsword while the younger centaur looked on with obvious pride.

Bryndorach shook his head. "Etüyen and Breyün were given a different message along with their feather: a reed in the shape of the Rune of Waiting, a stone in the shape of a spearhead, and a shred from a Dementor's shroud. They are digging up charmed aurochs horns, fletching arrows, and cutting javelins as we speak."

Hermione took a wincing glance at Professor Binns' aghast expression. *There goes one N.E.W.T.*, she thought. *Oh, shit!* The prospect of a lack-of-facts-forfeited N.E.W.T. faded into insignificance. Severus' eyes were still fixed on her but he stared *through* her with the same infinite, smoke-eyed gaze as she had seen on the last occasion he had delved into the Llygad's depths. *He must have brought it with him!* She did not dare to touch him as she felt his power stirring and *another* power was stirring with him...

Severus did not have time to wonder how he had been drawn into the vision so smoothly and painlessly. The scene before him captured his attention instantly and completely.

Merlin? He could recognize the wizard he had seen both as a boy and as a youth, even though Merlin's hair was now grey and streaked with white at his temples and his face held the gaunt, dry-boned fire of one who had defied death to recover from a long illness.

Merlin sat with two others: a man in his prime, who carried himself with the proud economy of a seasoned warrior, and a woman generously swathed in robes.

Severus noticed the woman's hands pale and fine-boned, with long, deft fingers. Reminded of his mother, and overtaken with curiosity, he examined her features. She was perhaps between thirty and forty years old, with the poise and dignity of a priestess. Her eyes were silver-grey, the irises ringed with black. Her hair would have been a thick mane of earth-brown had she not tamed it in a complicated braid with a tasteful arrangement of silver thread. Her attention rested on a dented metal box positioned in the centre of a massive marble table.

Severus leaned forward a little as the man, with only a passing difficulty, opened the box.

Within it lay a mass of rotting canvas then jewels flashed brightly as the man drew out a long, bronze spearhead. With a soldier's habit, he ran his thumb along its edge. "For ornament, I think," he said, rubbing dust off the jewelled binding and setting it aside. Next, he lifted out a platter of gold, its rim crusted with gems. Finally, he held up a magnificent gold cup, richly worked, with handles shaped like a bird's wings and banded with emeralds and sapphires. Marvelling aloud at its beauty, he offered it to Merlin.

But Merlin solemnly shook his head. "It is not for me to touch," he stated with firm certainty.

"Nor for me," said the woman, echoing Merlin's tone.

I look upon an object of myth... but could this be... Severus scowled, daring ancient tales to reveal their truth. *A spear of which only the head survives, evidently and a platter... And a grail... This could only be...* A jewel-hilted sword hanging on the wall at the end of the room sealed his speculation, the mighty blade's name surfacing from the still depths of legend like the war cry of an advancing army: *Caliburn!* A thrill ran through him. *Gods. And. Powers. Macsen's treasure!*

The man's eyes lingered on the precious items for a moment longer, then he placed them back in their humble container. He raised his hands in a gesture of uncertainty and gave Merlin a fond smile of resignation. "And you won't even tell me where to keep such splendour, or what I am to do with it?" he asked.

Merlin got to his feet, wincing at the obvious stiffness in his weary joints. "It is not for you either, Arthur. You do not need it," he said, waving one hand over the glittering objects, then pointing specifically to the grail.

Arthur... Severus looked on with a sense of sober reverence as Merlin gently counselled none other than King Arthur, telling him that *he* was the grail from which his people would drink he would never fail them, and he would never be forgotten.

Nor have you been, Severus thought, wishing for a moment that he could tell him so.

Merlin gestured once more towards the treasure, his black eyes locking with Arthur's as he concluded his discourse with a stern instruction: "Leave it for those who come after."

After a moment's carefully weighed thought, King Arthur stood back from the metal box and nodded to the woman. He addressed Merlin with a curious mix of deference and decisiveness. "Then since it is neither mine, nor yours, Nimuë must take it, and with her enchantments hide it so that no one can find it except that they are fited."

Moving to the table, Nimuë looked from Arthur to Merlin and closed the lid on the box. "No one shall," she said.

Severus gasped and felt the blood leave his face. The floor seemed to shift under his feet. As Nimuë turned away from the table, the heavy swell of her belly showed in a parting of her outer robes. She caressed her unborn child and gazed at Merlin, who watched her with disciplined longing.

Cuthbert's words echoed in Severus' mind '*...there was a rumour that the first came somewhat early in her marriage: a further sign of her treachery while Merlin still lived.* Hermione's postulation leapt on the heels of '*treachery*' and dragged it down like a lioness claiming her prey. He *knew* Hermione was right. The look that passed between Merlin and Nimuë was not one of accusation and betrayal there was love and the heartfelt, accepting ache of those who have placed necessity and duty before their own desires.

In St Mungo's, Oriens levitated his draft parchment. With a flick of his fingers, he destroyed it with a bolt of white flame. Reading over his official account of what had occurred at the villa, he cautiously tensed the muscles of his injured leg. He suspected that when he was well enough to return to the Ministry, he would have to hit the ground running.

During a brief visit earlier in the morning, Kingsley had told Oriens to take as much time as he needed to recover, but the Unspeakable could read the premonition of impending danger behind the Minister's blandly neutral expression. There was another message there: *For Merlin's sake, recover quickly. I will need you.*

Just why the Minister for Magic had also deposited a loudly purring, tortoiseshell, possibly quarter-Kneazle on Oriens' bed was a question for which an answer would be revealed, no doubt, in due course.

Oriens combed his fingers through the animal's long hair and teased it out to look like a lion's mane. All he knew was that *Severus* had mentioned the healing properties of Kneazles in a quick Floo call to the Minister. "If the Minister had not produced you alive and intact," he said to the happily crooning feline, "I would have expected to be handed a goblet of... *something*."

The feline's purr halted with a choking cough.

"But this is much more beneficial for *both* of us," Oriens stressed, comforting his new room-mate until she began to purr again. Reluctantly, he turned his attention to more serious matters.

Arawn will not stop now, not for anything Oriens thought, recalling what he had seen in the moments before the bones of his left leg shattered and a Stunning Spell curtailed his observations.

Subjected to a Cruciatus Curse while Arawn had demanded information on *Snape's* whereabouts, Oriens had seen that Arawn no longer had any sense of risk or consequence. Drawn by the lure of power and prestige, the renegade Unspeakable would be relentless in his pursuit. *He thinks he has the real Llygad, and he thinks that Severus is the key to gaining mastery over it. At least he doesn't know there are two Snapes who have their fates intertwined with the Llygad y Ddraig.* Oriens knew that, by now, Arawn's usually intense goal-focus and aggressive drive to rattle the cages of established procedure and climb the fences of enforced law would have transformed into a lust for absolute victory. *From now on, Arawn will be uncompromising in his demands, and he will feamothing that might be sent against him*

Oriens let his eyes drift closed as he considered the Llygad y Ddraig. When he had first encountered the *real* object, he could sense that it was a thing of rare and daunting power but what was it about the *fake* Llygad that made it so convincing a replication?

A melodic warble startled him out of his contemplation. Sitting up, he could not miss the bright, warm glow of the being responsible for the interruption. "Where did you come from?" he asked in astonishment.

Fawkes settled himself on the edge of the hand-basin by the door to Oriens' private room, nudged one of the taps, and gave a parrot-like shriek of delight as water poured into the basin.

"I doubt that very much, Hermione," Severus muttered as he briskly ushered her out of the Room of Requirement which had obligingly manifested directly opposite Cuthbert's classroom after Severus had made expeditiously crafted apologies and excused both Hermione and himself. "Cuthbert cannot deprive you of a N.E.W.T. simply because you voiced an opinion. An opinion which appears to have *real* substance."

"But you saw the look on his face," Hermione rejoined. "And his colleague didn't seem too impressed either."

Severus held back a laugh as he directed her through a shortcut to the Hospital Wing. "I saw more aspects to Cuthbert Binns today than I ever knew existed. *Outstanding* revelations." He checked down another corridor before striding down it, dismissing the resident portrait with a blistering sneer. "As for Cadfæl, he was merely contemplative. At least, I recall that was his response to your proposition before I was treated to you-know-what." He paused near a three-way junction of passages. "Besides, Petrus will defend your honour in your absence, should the need arise in Latin, if necessary."

Hermione shivered, still not entirely convinced that she had been right in spite of the envisioned details Severus had imparted in the Room of Requirement. "But if Nim..."

Severus clamped a hand over her mouth and bundled her into a deeply shadowed alcove. "Not *here*!" he hissed.

"I should hope not." The testy brogue of the Headmistress was unmistakeable.

Severus rolled his eyes. "Oh. Wonderful." He tucked Hermione's hand into the crook of his arm and escorted her the few steps back to the junction as though they had merely been taking an innocent stroll and found themselves in the alcove by inexplicable accident.

"I suppose you are going to tell me this *isn't* what it looks like," Minerva alleged, eyeing Severus and Hermione with her best *I'm-warning-you* stare.

"That depends on *what* you think it looks like, Headmistress," Severus retorted coolly.

Minerva tutted and shook her head. "Canoodling in corridors! Really! Reverting to adolescence, the pair of you..."

"Ah, but did you actually *see* us enacting your accusation?" Severus interjected, narrowing his eyes in counter-accusation. "Perhaps one should get one's mind out of places it should not be?" The corners of his mouth twitched when spots of colour appeared in the headmistress' cheeks: a sure sign that he had successfully irritated her. He half-expected her to adopt her Animagus form and hiss at him.

"I did *not* seek you out to split hairs or have a slanging match with you, Severus. Jean Granger has arrived to assess your father's injury. I thought you might like to seize the day, go down to the Hospital Wing, and introduce yourself properly."

"An appropriate suggestion," Severus mused, giving Hermione a secretive look. He knew she would understand it as an instruction not to reveal that he was going to the Hospital Wing anyway. "Is something amiss, Minerva?" His ready acquiescence had evidently thrown her.

"Apart from this school taking its first steps on the road to Knockturn Alley, no."

Hermione heard the school clock chime the hour. "Oh, Mer... *Merpeople!* I'm late for the Charms practical! Excuse me, please, I *really* have to run!"

Minerva gave her favourite cub a warm smile. "Tell Filius that I held you up. Your mother is joining me for tea in my office when she has finished with Tobias. Come up and join us when your practical class is over."

Hermione nodded her thanks but before she could take two steps, Severus pulled her into a full-bodied embrace and kissed her thoroughly and sublimely.

"Off you go, then," he purred, sending the tousled, flushed witch on her way with a slight push. He watched her go, then turned to the headmistress, who was suddenly in quite a pother. "Canoodling, indeed," he said with a half-bow. Smirking at her speechlessness, he headed for the Hospital Wing without further delay.

Fawkes flew above a vast expanse of seemingly impenetrable forest, scanning its dark, misty depths for a certain landmark. He intended to stop at the landmark to wash the sea-spray from his feathers and search his memory. It had been a long time since he had visited this enigmatic, rugged land even longer since he had seen the beings that clung to existence there.

The phoenix gave a short whistle when he spotted it: a chain of mountain lakes, draining one into the other through an orchestra of waterfalls. Descending in a spiralling dive, Fawkes landed on a mossy rock, set his "message" to one side, and fluffed out his feathers to catch the drifting spray. He dunked his head in the cold, mineral-rich waters, and emerged with a sputtering sneeze. Several minutes of preening, fussing, flapping, and scratching put his flight equipment back into pristine condition by which time he had deduced which path he needed to take.

Flying low, Fawkes followed the turns and twists of a straggling trail. Massive trees draped with hanging moss loomed above him, swaying with the hard, frosty air which rolled down from the surrounding mountains. As he flew deeper into the forest, the trees grew bigger and older.

Fawkes perched on the protruding, twisted root of a forest giant: a sprawling, gnarled colossus of groping branches and clinging epiphytes. The silence here was absolute. The phoenix cocked his head, his breath misting in the still air. He knew that he had been seen and he knew that those who had seen him would not readily show themselves. Untroubled, he arranged the items he had brought in a sheltered nook where the root made a curling loop before diving deep into rich soil: a merlin's feather, a centaur's arrow, and the clasp from Oriens' cloak. Looking around once more, Fawkes sang, loud and long. As his final notes danced away into the gloom, he added one of his own feathers to the arrangement, stretched his wings, and flew away.

A shadow detached itself from the bole of a neighbouring tree. Another shadow followed. Then another. Soundlessly, the lithe, nimble figures moved towards the place where the phoenix had sung. Blowpipes and short spears were set down. Dew was brushed from shaggy haunches. Cloven hooves found easy purchase in the giant tree's embrace. A careful hand reached out to touch the arrow, the clasp, and the feathers.

A voice whispered: "Navlūk! What does the fire-bird want?"

Navlūk gathered up the items and turned to face his companions. "We have seen the wild things flee before a gathering darkness. From the north-east, the wind blows colder and howls with a voice of implacable hatred. In it rides the scent of evil." He held up the centaur's arrow. "The fire-bird has been calling the centaurs. I could hear in its song: they have answered, and ready themselves for battle." He examined the clasp. "We must watch for a messenger from among the humans."

A third voice hissed in outrage "*A human!* Why should we..."

"Peace, Sukh-Ey!" Navlūk commanded. "A fire-bird does not take action for nothing. The messenger may be some other being, acting *with* humans against the growing threat." He frowned, troubled. "T'eylun, what do you make of this?"

T'eylun took the arrow from Navlūk's hand and used it to point north and east. "If the cold shadow moves unchallenged, no living thing will escape it. It will consume whatever it may touch. The fire-bird sang also of courage and allegiance in the face of an enemy." He handed back the arrow and touched the clasp. "Centaur's, humans and, Pan help us, what is left of our people. Such a gathering has not been made since..." He took up the merlin feather. "Since the days of Merlin. We should hold counsel tonight."

Navlūk nodded gravely. "Send out messengers. Sound the song-pipes. We meet when the moon rises."

Severus arrived at the Hospital Wing just as Poppy was assuring her most recent patient a student whose hair had been transformed into pangolin scales that all would be back to normal within an hour or two. He waited while she summoned an incident report parchment and attached it to her clipboard.

"Go on in, Severus," Poppy said, pointing to the staff ward with her quill. "I think Dr Granger is expecting you thanks to Minerva," she added, smiling when the taciturn wizard sighed and muttered something about infernal busybodies. "I'll be in shortly."

Severus folded his arms. "I told Tobias I would return. But it seems that *some* people *cannot* leave well enough alone," he growled. *At least Minerva is not here right now. She would probably tell me to wash my hands and brush my hair. And smile. I won't.* Severus paused at the door to straighten his frock coat and adjust his robes and entered the ward to what felt like an interview with destiny.

His father sat on the corner of the bed, minus sling and bandages, grimacing while Jean Granger pressed a sterile pad to his wound.

"I *did* offer you a local anaesthetic, but you declined in favour of playing the hero," Jean reprimanded.

Toby turned to give her a pained glance and noticed his son watching the scene from a distance. "G'day, Sev'rus..." His eyes widened as Jean applied antiseptic. "Oi! That *stings!* I thought torture was illegal!"

Severus allowed himself a rueful half-smile. "It is. Unfortunately, illegality does not always stop those who are hell-bent on making others suffer."

Jean tossed the pad into a metal tray which contained a slightly bloodied piece of silicon tubing and a soiled dressing. "Hello, Severus. *Unbearable* torture and prolonged suffering aside, this time, we meet under much better circumstances."

Severus bowed. "Madam Granger."

"Please, call me Jean. I'm not a stickler for formalities."

Poppy bustled into the ward. "I'm sorry about that interruption, Jean. Students *will* throw jinxes around with no thought to the consequences." She took Severus' arm and steered him into a more inclusive position than one of loitering on the periphery.

"Not a problem," Jean said, tearing open a clean dressing kit. "I'm just about done here. You'll have a scar, Toby, but the wound is healing cleanly. Don't get it sunburned when you go home scar tissue isn't as resistant to damage as intact skin."

Toby shrugged his left shoulder. "No worries. I can't see it anyway."

Severus moved closer to have a look for himself. "I've seen far worse," he offered.

Jean finished the dressing and pulled off her latex gloves. "Also, avoid any heavy lifting or sudden movement for the next week."

"Should he be kept on bed-rest?" Poppy asked, ignoring her patient's rebellious scowl.

Jean sent an amused look in Toby's direction. "I think you'd have trouble keeping him there! No, if he's strong enough to walk around, let him.

"However, Toby," she made sure she had Toby's full attention "wear your sling when you are up and about for at least five days. Take it off when you lie down so you can straighten your arm." She turned to Poppy. "I'll send our owl with a set of graded exercises for him to do so he won't lose flexibility and muscle mass."

Poppy smiled in approval. "Ah, good! It might keep him occupied, though I doubt it will keep him out of trouble. I wondered if the Ministry had given you an owl," she added as an afterthought.

"They delivered a tawny owl when we came back... home," Jean replied delicately. "Aluco is a fairly solid owl to begin with, but he's grown a bit podgy... Regular messenger duties will do him good," she finished with a repentant glance at Severus.

Severus nodded an acknowledgement of the obliquely admitted remorse. When Jean and Poppy began a small discussion on the nature, care, and proper employment of owls, he deftly returned the Llygad to the drawer of the bedside table. His eyebrows knitted with a question when he noticed a phoenix feather and a brass ring next to his father's wallet.

Toby saw the unvoiced question and knew that Severus would not ask it. "Yer phoenix friend left the feather when 'e gave me the arrows and stuff," he said quietly. "As for the ring... dunno why I keep it. When I married yer mother, I couldn't afford gold. Didn't know she were bloody royalty."

Severus closed and warded the drawer. "That was generations ago," he murmured, keeping an eye on Poppy and Jean.

"But it still runs deep, don't it?" Toby shifted back onto his pillows, hurt flickering briefly in his eyes. "She could've 'ad so much better... She *should've* 'ad so much more. What'd she think she was doin', skulkin' around mill-workers' streets?" He shook his head in bewilderment.

Severus moved between his father and the still-nattering women. "I don't know if *it* runs deep," he said, keeping his voice low. "I'm still coming to terms with... unexpected revelations. As for what my mother was doing... I have no idea. Until now, I cannot say that I cared."

Toby glanced at him. "But you do now? Care, I mean."

Severus shrugged noncommittally. "Perhaps. May I question you on the subject at another time?"

Toby gave a short laugh. "Another time'd be good." He looked Severus in the eyes. "Y' don't need to ask *permission*... Crikey, you don't 'ave to *ask*." He cringed. "You can just rip into someone's mind and find what yer after..."

"But I *will not*," Severus hissed. "Not again, ever, unless you specifically request it." He evaluated Tobias' quizzical stare. "That was an offer of peace, in case you didn't recognise it," he muttered long-sufferingly.

Toby decided to keep to himself the fact that he *hadn't* recognised it. Instead, he made sure Poppy wasn't looking before gingerly extending his right hand, supporting it with his left. "I never expected an offer, to be 'onest," he said. "But it's somethin' I'll 'onour for the rest of me life."

Severus gave a half-smile before accepting his father's hand in a firm grip. "So be it," he said, pleased at the strength and surety communicated in the contact.

Toby grinned openly. "My oath."

Jean felt a stab of sympathy for the silent wizard beside her. Having formally introduced himself by giving his full name, a brief summary of his employment details, and rather graciously offering to escort her to the headmistress' office, Severus now seemed a little out of sorts. Jean could sense that he was not sure of *what* to say, or *how* to say it. *Well, that makes two of us.* "Hermione told Andrew and me a great deal about you," she said, putting as much assurance as she could into her tone.

Severus gave her a fleeting glance. "She said as much," he answered shortly, tension stiffening his stride.

Jean tried a different tack. "You know, I'm not about to grill you for information, or judge you in any way."

Severus wandlessly opened a door and stood back to allow her to precede him through. "And your husband?"

"Andrew had a few concerns, initially, but Hermione addressed them before they gathered any real momentum."

"Concerns related to my past, no doubt." Severus halted abruptly and turned to look Jean fully in the eyes.

She took an involuntary step back as he cast a Silencing Charm around them both. The intensity of his gaze was like a physical force.

"Madam Granger... Jean... I *love* Hermione. If you and your husband, as her parents, aim to judge me by my previous deployments, consider this: to see her crying for you when there was *nothing* I knew of that I could do to help her was... torment."

Jean nodded solemnly. "I know now how much we distressed her, and we are both deeply sorry. Even more so for the fact that we unwittingly left you to in a way clean up after us. At the time, we couldn't move beyond our own hurt. I can see why she couldn't tell us what she intended to do, but at the same time, it would have been nice to have had some warning."

"There was no time to give any warning," Severus said, his shoulders relaxing a little. "I doubt very much that you would have agreed to willingly participate in her plan."

Jean shivered. "No, we wouldn't have. Not without a fight. We would have insisted on there being some other way of..." She came close to biting her tongue when the wizard fairly pinned her to the wall with a sharp glare.

Severus' expression conveyed frustration, bitterness, grief, and anger, before settling into stoic sagacity. "*Was there another way?*"

The question was not one to be answered. Jean could see that Severus was making a point: what was done was done, and Hermione's plan had succeeded where anything else would have, most likely, failed. She nodded her understanding, earning a half-smile and the cancellation of the charm.

As they continued on their way, Severus drew himself to his full height. "In case you are wondering, my intentions towards your daughter are honourable," he stated softly, with just a hint of challenge.

Jean felt a rush of adrenalin and delight. While she had not expected Severus to make such a statement so quickly, she had felt that he would, at some point, place his cards on the table. In truth, she was both relieved and absolutely chuffed. Severus showed a solid reliability a careful constancy and firm resolve that marked him as a man who knew who he was and was reasonably comfortable with that knowledge, gristle and all. A great many of Jean's reservations about young Ron had been centred on a complete absence of those characteristics. To Jean's *maternal* mind, Ron was still, in many ways, *a boy* who had yet to define himself.

She shook herself out of her oasis of present and future happiness. "Does Hermione know?"

"Not yet," Severus answered with a side-long smirk that said: *And don't you dare tell her*

Jean answered with an expression of her own: *I promise I won't even dream of it* "I'm sorry I said you were like a bag of eels. And for ordering you around."

"Think nothing of it," Severus conceded. He paused at the gargoyle guarding the stairs to the headmistress' office. "Have you seen one of these move before?" he asked, deciding to build on his newly established strategic alliance by heading off any avoidable frights.

Jean eyed the gargoyle dubiously. "I can't say that I have..."

Sister Clarise looked out over a snow-covered courtyard. A bitter wind snatched up tiny fragments of ice and snow, flinging them like spiteful daggers at anything in its path. She could feel the threat building like a snowstorm climbing the backs of high mountains, growing in strength and fury as it toiled. Turning her body, she could feel its presence most strongly to the east a long way to the east but it was growing inexorably.

She let her hand feel for her unwelcome burden. Hidden within the folds of her habit and held in place by a belt of black wool, the spearhead felt strangely warm.

In response to her conscience prompting her to send a warning on ahead of her, the Sight had granted a dream the night before. She had seen a door to an office bearing the sigil of the Minister for Magic, the half-forgotten skyline of London, and a name: *Shacklebolt*.

But *how* to send her warning? She did not have enough magic left to send a Patronus, nor did she own an owl, or have access to a Floo. Further, years of strict isolation within the priory walls had cut her off from familiarity with both Muggle and wizarding societies. Not that she wasn't isolated to begin with...

Sister Clarise roused herself, unwilling to sink into the thought circles that would lead to a heart-slowng misery. It had taken her too many years to break free of the hopeless malaise to ever submit to it again. Looking around, she spotted a raven hunkered down in the shelter of a carved saint's stone robe, waiting for the refuse from the kitchens to be brought out for disposal. A spark of hope leapt in her heart. The wily raven just might be able to help.

"*Brân y gors*," she called softly in Welsh, letting the remnants of her power flow with the words.

Evidently, it did not matter that the raven had never before heard his species named in the Welsh tongue. With a lazy glide, the great, sooty bird landed on the snow-covered bench beside Sister Clarise with a solid, well-fed *thump*.

Looking around to make sure no other eyes were watching, Sister Clarise tore an inch-wide scrap of paper from the flyleaf of her prayer book and printed her message with a pencil stub. "Long ago," she told the bird as she wrote, "your brethren forewarned us of war or plague. Does the memory of those times still flow in your blood?"

The raven watched her with intelligent dark eyes, the wind ruffling his glossy black feathers.

With whispered incantations, she bound the bird to temporary service, and calmed him long enough to tie the message around his leg. "Take this to the Minister for Magic, in London. The Minister's name is Shacklebolt. I was given no other description." Another incantation and a gesture sealed the magic and set it in motion.

The raven cawed and sprang into the air, his powerful wing-beats carrying him to a point where he could soar with the wind.

A little dazed from the effort of using her meagre reserves of power without the aid of a wand, Sister Clarise watched until the raven was a miniscule dot of black against a grey sky. Mustering resolve once more, she skirted the inside walls of the priory to a small, barred door leading out to a forest track. *Alohomora* was the last word she uttered in that place.

From Irma's office, Minerva watched Petrus as he stepped out of the shadowed canyon between two bookshelves and patrolled the perimeter of the reading tables. The seventh-year Ravenclaw students gave the assistant librarian an incurious glance if they noticed him at all and continued their reading with assiduous application. Luna Lovegood, who could be relied upon to mindfully acknowledge the existence of any entity she encountered, gave Petrus a serene smile as he passed by.

Irma pursed her lips and shrugged. "I cannot tell *who* it might be, Minerva. Severus *really* thinks that one of the boys is responsible? They do not look devious enough to slip troublesome charms into books. It could be one of the girls, I suppose, but I'd be very surprised if it is."

The headmistress cast a searching eye over the students in question, knowing that they could not see her through the charmed glass. "Nor can I, but Petrus seemed very certain that he would flush out the culprit today. He didn't use *all* of the Lycanthropy references, did he?"

"Athena's owl, no! He only unchained the Index volume. He said he found the idea of using all fifteen volumes quite amusing, but they would form a hunting pack and be too difficult to control. Things would get out of hand very quickly."

Minerva surveyed the scholarly scene for a moment longer. "Is it my imagination, Irma, or is Petrus showing signs of being *tutored* in the authoritative art of prowling around tables of seated students?"

"I was thinking the very same thing. I have an idea of who his tutor might be." Irma waited for Minerva's arched-eyebrow prompt. "Watch him when he reaches the end of the room and turns... There!"

"He turns on his heel... with a rather theatrical sweep of his tail."

"And folds his arms... Just so. Petrus does not have eyebrows as such, but look at the way he cocks one ear and slightly angles back the other."

"If ears were eyebrows: just like a certain someone's forbidding scowl."

"And if the theatrical sweep were one of billowing robes instead of a tail..."

"Severus. Obviously, that wizard has too much time on his hands."

"Not necessarily," Irma stated. "Petrus is a remarkably quick study," she added with a touch of pride.

Minerva smiled to herself. She would not say anything to her older colleague, but she knew that for Irma, this was an admission of affection bordering on adoption. Suddenly, Irma gripped her arm.

"Several students have headed for the catalogues," the elderly librarian hissed and pointed.

The headmistress made a move towards the door, but Irma held her back. Frowning, she followed Irma's interested stare. Petrus had evidently noticed something else. Behind the shelves, an invisible *someone* was moving away from the catalogues. The two witches observed as Petrus surreptitiously tracked the potential miscreant's progress with his mobile ears. He moved into what appeared to be a strategic position between the tables and the exit.

A malevolent snarl followed by a blood-curdling shriek and the sound of tearing cloth violated the sanctuary of studious silence. A howling, slaving Lycanthropy Index erupted out of the shelves, snapping at the heels of unseen quarry.

Petrus stood to one side, attention trained on the sound of fleeing student. With perfect timing, his right hand shot out and he seized a handful of robes. The Disillusioned captive firmly in hand, he swiftly turned to face the advancing book.

The Lycanthropy Index hesitated, growling murderously. It bayed a bristling challenge as Petrus bared his teeth in warning and lunged for its invisible tormentor.

Petrus roared. The book came to a page-ruffling halt, yelped, and retreated, its spine-fur flattened in submission.

"Great *Merlin!*" Minerva gasped, feeling her skin prickle. She noted that Irma appeared to be enjoying the spectacle thoroughly. *You have a strange sense of humour, Irma* she thought. *That roar would have frightened the ink out of the Giant Squid*

The librarian left her office and drew her wand. "*Homenum Revelio. Mr Boddington*, I would like to give you the benefit of doubt, but I wonder what I would find if I were to summon, say, small pieces of parchment bearing charms written in silver nitrate?"

Young Mr Boddington gasped and looked around fearfully. He blanched as the headmistress appeared in the doorway of Madam Pince's office.

Petrus released the bedraggled, trembling seventh-year, noting the shredded edges of the boy's robes. He held out one taloned hand. "*Monsieur Boddington: the charms, s'il vous plait.*"

"Wise choice," Madam Pince commented as a small packet of written charms was nervously surrendered to her imposing assistant. "Merlin knows what I would have found had I been forced to *Accio* the contents of your pockets, Mr Boddington. There might be things in there that I really shouldn't see."

Petrus glanced at the reading tables as suppressed mirth and furtive nudges exacerbated the culprit's acute discomfort. *Mademoiselle* Lovegood, however, continued her studies as though nothing had happened. The other senior Ravensclaws quickly called themselves to order and watched him with rounded eyes. Petrus gave them an all-encompassing stare and twitched the end of his tail. Twenty pairs of eyes snapped back to ink-inscribed knowledge with synchronised zeal.

Minerva made several decisions at once. "Madam Pince, Petrus, if I may see you both privately, please? Mr Boddington, you *will* wait here until I call for you." She sent a steely glare around the library and nodded satisfaction at the students' orderly obedience.

Andrew Granger frowned in concentration as he typed the last bit of data into his business management program. "Hermione *did* tell us he's no chatterbox... From what you tell me, what he *does* say is worth listening to... which is a great relief." A few mouse-clicks resulted in a brightly coloured pie-chart. "... Much better than some babbling bore who can talk the leg off an iron pot and not say anything useful at all."

"I can assure you, Severus is definitely not boring," Jean said, topping up the paper tray in the printer.

Andrew stretched his arms as the printer hummed into life, his fatherly instincts telling him that there might be some "writing on the wall" to consider. "What were those two questions your mother asked you when we decided to get engaged?"

"Does he treat you well?" and 'Are you happy?'" Jean closed the curtains against the encroaching night. "Hermione is very happy with Severus, Andrew."

Her husband nodded thoughtfully. "Is *he* happy with *her*?"

Jean smiled. "Minerva vouched for Severus' character and declared that he is a man of honour and integrity though she said that he can also be monumentally exasperating when he wants to be. She said she has never seen him so contented, especially when he is with Hermione."

"Ha! You have that look on your face. You, my dear, are hoping our Hermione will be asked a certain question." Andrew rubbed at his shock of wild hair. "Don't frown at me like that! I *was* listening when you spent a whole hour outlining Severus' current occupation and future good prospects." He briefly raised his hands in surrender. "Do you think he'll ask permission? He comes across as being... traditional, I suppose."

Keeping Severus' secret as promised, Jean eyed her husband hopefully. "If he *does* ask your permission, what will you tell him?"

"My permission? What about yours?"

"In my heart, I have already given it, love."

Andrew gave a short laugh, saved his database, and exited the program. "To paraphrase the esteemable Mr Bennet, my dear Dr Granger: Mr Snape-the-younger is the kind of wizard, indeed, to whom I should never dare refuse anything which he condescended to ask."

"*Condescended?* Andrew! He's not like that at all, once you spend a little time with him."

Hermione's father ran the shut-down procedure and grumbled under his breath at how long it always seemed to take. "I'll make a point of doing so." He eyed his wife sternly. "But if he's going to do any *asking*, he has to do it after dinner. More specifically: when I have withdrawn to the library, which must be equipped with a roaring fire, a mahogany table the size of a small African sovereign state, and a big old hound snoring on the hearth rug. There, I shall pour a glass of port, put on my smoking jacket, and complain about the financial outlays of the estate, the lack of competent gardeners and the sorry plight of unmarried daughters. Your prospective son-in-law may seek an audience with me then," he teased with a wink.

Jean laughed at the fictitious image. "Don't get too clever, Dr Granger," she warned. "Severus is a wizard he is capable of meeting your specifications to the letter."

By Order of the Phoenix – Part 2

Chapter 22 of 32

Minister Shacklebolt receives an unexpected message. Toby gets a great deal off his chest and finds his son's response very surprising. Minerva is merciless, and Harry makes a peace offering. Arawn begins to position his forces. A very-much-in-demand Severus meets his new Patronus and receives an important invitation.

A/N's

Kew Gardens The Royal Botanic Gardens, Kew. Located in southwest London, this botanical research and education institution holds the world's largest collection of living plants. Of *course* they have a magical plants facility!

Pugsley's reference to a "bust of Pallas" is taken from the poem *The Raven*, by Edgar Allan Poe (1845)

Words from t' Northern UK

Spelk a splinter

Wazzock a fool, a daft individual

Australian

To spin a yarn to tell a story

French

Mon hibou My owl

Pugsley Addams is the property of the cartoonist Charles Addams. I make no profit from his character.

'Senior Auror McPhee' is adapted from the character Nanny McPhee in the film *Nanny McPhee*, Universal Pictures, 2005

Canon characters are the property of J.K. Rowling. I make no money from them.

Blessings and thanks to TeaOli for the most thorough beta read this side of Severus' essay marking. Thankfully, Tea, you do not use red ink. :o)

"Jean told him to wear this for at least five days," Poppy grumbled, dropping Tobias' discarded sling into a large wicker basket. "Merlin, he took that *very* literally."

Severus raised an eyebrow. "It *is* the morning of the fifth day..."

"Barely! I doubt Hagrid has even fed the Thestrals yet."

"...so one could say that he *has* exercised compliance. Where is he now?"

"*Compliance? Your father?* Oooh, *don't* get me started! The week I've had..." Poppy shook a warning finger and placed her hands on her hips. "I don't know where he is, Severus. But I *can* tell you that he and Filius have been plotting *something* for the past few days."

Leaving Poppy to her morning duties, Severus decided to see if the Incompliant One had sought sanctuary in his rooms. He gave a half-smile when he caught sight of Draco poring over a sheaf of crib notes while navigating the staircases on autopilot. Hermione had been doing a similar thing when he left her alone to pace and mutter as she would. The second-time-around seventh-years had voted to have their Herbology and Care of Magical Creatures N.E.W.Ts on the same day with a decent break for lunch. Severus gave a small frown and shook his head. Hermione already had enough credit from her research into Petrus' case to earn the highest score ever awarded for Care of Magical Creatures, but she had *obstinately* insisted on participating in a formal examination procedure.

Stifling a yawn, he trailed up the stairs to the barrel-vaulted hall where he had confronted his father and caused no small amount of damage to a suit of armour. He halted in surprise when he got to the top of the stairs. The expertly restored armour had an attendant: a surly house-elf with large, calloused hands, notched ears, and ropey arms speckled with burn scars.

"Good morning, Smithy," Severus intoned, smirking internally at the house-elf's instant stare of accusatory suspicion.

Smithy took his time in replying. He reached up to give the cuisses one last rub with an oiled rag, squinted in satisfaction, and tucked the rag into the suede tool-apron he always wore over his scorch-marked blue denim smock. "G'mornin's. Is no more *damages* no thankings to *some*," he mumbled, in a tone that could have also said: "Do me a favour and let a giant stand on you".

Satisfied that he had achieved a near-impossible feat in eliciting a multi-word response from the notoriously grouchy house-elf, Severus was just about to knock on Tobias' door when a shout echoed from another door at the end of the hall a shout immediately followed by peals of laughter. Sensing the imminent disclosure of the room's occupants, Severus folded his arms and waited.

The door opened, and Filius staggered out. Leaning against a fluted arch, he made an effort to simultaneously hold his aching sides and wipe tears of mirth from his eyes, only to fail at both tasks. "Oh, *Merlin!*" he gasped. "I warned you, Tobias... I t-told you... th-they*spit*. I d-didn't know Muggles could m-move so fast."

Tobias appeared, besmeared with Gobstone expectorate and grinning like a rapsallion schoolboy. "You didn't say 'ow *far* they could spit *and* that they'd wait and try again if I dodged t' first one! Crikey! It got me from t'other side of the room... Don't even *think* about a Cleansin' Charm, sport! Laughin' like that, you'll mess up and blow me bloody leg off."

"Gentlemen," Severus began, steadfastly upholding Hogwarts' last reserves of dignity as Filius and Tobias looked innocently at him, glanced guiltily at each other, and

dissolved into another bout of hilarity.

Travelling in the guise of a Muggle business executive, Kingsley wended his way through cold, damp streets, following a carefully randomised path to the Ministry offices. The previous afternoon, several wizards and witches in the vicinity of the Ministry had reported a distinct feeling of being watched. Pausing at a Muggle newsstand, he looked back along the streets and shop-fronts, checking for anything untoward. Seeing nothing but his fellow "investigators", he purchased a daily paper to justify his unscheduled stop and used the appearance of scanning headlines to check along the route he intended to take.

Turning into a graffiti-marked lane, he caught sight of Auror Proudfoot disguised as a Muggle council-worker who was about to enter a dilapidated red telephone booth. He silently hailed the Auror, waiting until he had come within quiet conversation range before wishing him good morning.

Auror Proudfoot returned the greeting and saluted with a handful of bacon-and-egg roll. "From the Muggle bakery down the road," he explained with a gesture in the appropriate direction. "They make the best rolls in London must have a house-elf working in secret." He held the booth door open and waved Kingsley inside. "After you, Minister Shackbolt," he said.

As soon as the Minister's surname been spoken, a hoarse *caw* sounded from above, and a scruffy-looking raven dropped into the middle of the lane.

Having drawn their wands on a subconscious reflex, both wizards quickly scanned the bird. A faint pulse of magic surrounded the creature.

Kingsley signalled Auror Proudfoot to survey the immediate area while he cast more revealing charms on the raven. After a moment, he sleeved his wand and slowly approached the exhausted bird. "You're no Animagus, are you?" he stated.

The raven gazed up at him sulkily and fluffed out its feathers until it resembled a large, black feather duster.

"All clear," Proudfoot announced, frowning speculatively at the raven. "What've we got here?"

Moving carefully, Kingsley lifted the unprotesting bird, his fingers brushing paper on the raven's lower leg. The pulse of magic flickered and died a pre-set version of *Finite Incantatem*. "A messenger: bound by magic and sent, I presume, specifically to me," Kingsley said softly. He looked the raven in the eye. "And you've come a long way but on whose order?"

The raven settled into his hands with the listless surrender of the utterly fatigued.

Tucking the raven into his greatcoat, Kingsley assured Auror Proudfoot that the *birditself* presented no immediate threat and made his way into the Ministry complex, attracting some curious stares as he passed through the Atrium. He glanced at the group of golden statues standing in their pool, noting in particular the centaur and the house-elf. Keeping his thoughts at bay for the time being, he collected his daily schedule from his administration assistant and warded his office to "Do not disturb."

Minutes later, he read the raven's message with alarm.

"Aren't you 'avin' breakfast with yer lass?"

Severus thumbed through the *Prophet* while he waited for Tobias to finish cleaning himself up. "She is indulging in a last minute swot-session. I couldn't get anything out of her that didn't relate to the contents of the greenhouses, so I left her to it." He scowled at the slightly ajar bathroom door. "By the way, her name is *Hermione*. Challenging, I know, but could you *attempt* to make an effort?"

Tobias sauntered out of the bathroom, clad in clean trousers and vigorously rubbing his hair with a towel. "*Her*-my-oh-nee."

"Very good. Now try closing the gaping chasms between the syllables."

Toby rolled his eyes and absently tossed the towel over the back of a spare armchair. He rifled through the contents of his wardrobe and produced one of several new shirts Tocky had brought for him. "God's Teeth, this is a bit fancy," he said, holding the garment up for inspection.

"I'm sure you will rectify that situation in a remarkably short period of time," Severus observed silkily, checking Gringotts' latest interest rates.

Toby rounded on his son with a barrage of recalled ammunition. "Oh, *really*? Ha! *You* need talk! Remember Jonesy from next door? The cranky old wazzock with the crabapple tree? Yeah, I see you do don't shake yer 'ead. 'Ow many times 'ad yer mother put you in clean gear, only to 'ave you go scootin' over t' side fence and pinch as many crabapples as y' could carry, eh?" Toby paused for dramatic effect. His experiences in Australia had taught him how to "spin a yarn" or two. He dragged on his shirt and folded his arms. "Then y'd come back mucky as a chimney sweep's 'prentice buttons missin', 'air a mess of twigs, and yer 'ands full of spelks. Not a bad effort for a five-year-old lad."

Severus risked a glance away from the economics editorial. He did indeed remember. *Next door is a woman called Jones; she whinges and grizzles and moans. Gods! I used to sing that!* Climbing the fence and the crabapple tree had been his first application of the magic which had begun to stir, albeit fitfully, in his blood. Sometimes, what had started as a carefully planned jump had ended in... well... a bit of a disaster.

Another memory made him wince. He quirked an eyebrow at Tobias' puzzled scrutiny. "*Accio* candlestick!" The heavy bronze object flew across the room and intercepted his waiting palm with a loud *smack*. "Around the same time as I began to explore magically assisted climbing, I discovered that I could summon objects even though I didn't know the verbal command. In practice, it was... unpredictable. Sometimes it would not work at all. Other times it would work a little too well," he admitted.

Toby gave an "Ah!" of enlightenment. "Summoning fruit off t' tree if you could call those sour bloody things *fruit*. Is that 'ow you got the shiner: that time y' came in with one eye swollen shut?"

Severus nodded.

"Well, that explains why you were coated in crabapple pulp. Always did wonder 'ow that'd 'appened." He shifted uncomfortably, remembering other occasions when his son had worn bruises when *he* had been the cause. A bubble rose up from his chest, lodged in his throat, and burst. "Sev'rus, I'm so sorry... I can't take it back or nothin', but... I'm sorry." He shrugged and stared out of the window. "Shit," he muttered, wiping his eyes with the back of his hand. "I tried to get away from it, but I didn't 'ave the willpower. It took whatever yer mother did... that night... to scare me enough to stop."

Severus realised that Tobias was talking about the alcohol-fuelled rages that had torn life apart for the inhabitants of the house at Spinner's End. He got up, replaced the candlestick on the writing table, and stood beside his father. Grasping Tobias' arm, he pressured him into turning to face him. "If you're going to talk about this, look me in the eyes."

Toby complied with steely resolve. "It started when we didn't 'ave jobs no more and didn't have a snowball's chance in t' devil's kitchen of pickin' up anythin' else. Couldn't provide for our own that 'urt like nothin' else. Even worse, Britain's money were made with t' sweat an' blood of people like us not that t' workin' classes ever saw much of it. But it were like bein' told: 'we don't need you anymore, piss off and bury yourselves.' When we lost work, we lost *respect*, we lost *independence*, and we lost our *pride*. Christ, I'd been bringin' in 'onest wages since I were fourteen: sweepin' floors at t' mill until I worked me way into machines!" He paused, shaking his head. "Sev'rus, y'know what I found on me first day replacin' parts on one of t' looms?" Without waiting for an answer, he continued: "I found bones. Buried in years of sump muck. Finger bones of

some little tyke no more'n ten year old. Sliced off clean, they were. I put t' bones in a gasket box an' took 'em to t' cemetery. Buried 'em under a tree. That little kid were used and thrown away when 'e or she were no longer useful, I reckon. Same thing 'appened to us lot."

And my soul, Dumbledore? Severus inwardly flinched at the memory of Albus' cool, distant reply and the gut-gnawing sensation that had arrived with the knowledge of his own expendability. Oh, he knew what *that* felt like.

An impulse he would not have experienced only weeks ago struggled to make itself heard and made *him* struggle to define it. Noting the haunted look in Tobias' eyes, Severus did the best he could: "I *do* know that Muggle children were often used as under any other name slave labour during the peak of the Industrial Revolution," he affirmed quietly. "In the more unscrupulous establishments, children would be literally worked to death."

Toby gulped and nodded. "After t' shock wore off, and we knew there were no goin' back, drinkin' and fightin' went through like a plague and the ones it got 'old of couldn't escape. I know you and yer mother suffered for it. Every time I sobered up, I'd promise meself it wouldn't 'appen again. I'd promise Eileen the same. You wouldn't look me in the eyes no more wouldn't stay in t' same room I couldn't fault you there. In secret, I'd promise you as well... that I wouldn't give in. But then the drink called, and like a cringin' dog, I'd answer and I'd be even worse... 'cause I'd been too bloody *weak* to resist... couldn't keep to what I'd promised. I was ashamed, Sev'rus. Then everythin' would be a red mist of... somethin' worse than temper.

"It were like a door to escape through to get away from weakness, to get away from the 'opelessness, and the indignity of takin' money that I 'adn'*earned*. Me, I went through that door like a blind fool, and it slammed shut be'ind me. Then I realised: it weren't a door to escape it were a door to insanity, and I didn't know t' way back out. But, like I said before... it were no excuse for what I done. If yer mother 'adn't made that... that..."

"Golem."

Toby shuddered. "I'd be there still. And I'd be long dead, for sure."

Has it ever occurred to your brilliant mind that I don't want to do this anymore? Severus pondered the fact that he had also been locked into a situation he could not get out of. The undefined impulse began to struggle again. This time, Severus realised what it was: a need to demonstrate that he could *begin* to understand the man he had always thought to avoid. "Listen," he said as his childhood scrolled through his memory images bleached with desolation, emptiness, and helpless rage. "There are some things I cannot forget... where too much was done... and too much *not* done. I don't know, yet, what may be salvaged between us, and what can be bridged. I would be lying to myself and to you if I pretended to know otherwise." He looked at the floor, yet again thinking of how many things *he* would like the chance to undo. "Can you appreciate, from all the reports Oriens gave you to read, that I am heartily sick of pretending?"

"Yeah, and I can see why," Toby responded. "You do what yer most comf'table with, Sev'rus so far, it's more than I ever thought possible."

Severus leaned against the wall and tucked his hands into his pockets. "Of course, I *will not* forget that it was you who protected Hermione's honour and life at great risk to yourself..."

"Couldn't have done it if that phoenix 'adn't given the means..."

"The phoenix wasn't the one shooting the arrows. You intended to come back regardless of Fawkesian manifestations." Severus gave a half-smile when Tobias shrugged and turned his whole attention to the low fire burning in the fireplace. He pushed off from the wall and paced across the room. "Someone I know once said: 'I couldn't do anything about the past, but what might happen next was up to me'."

Recognising his own words, Toby sat down heavily. "Surprise a minute, you are."

Severus eyed him astutely. "Indeed. May I summon your house-elf? I believe the next thing to happen should be breakfast."

"Yeah... 'ang on a minute, he's not *my* 'ouse-elf! Tocky belongs to t' castle!"

Severus quirked an eyebrow. "That's what *you* think."

Having fed the raven Owl Treats and bits of breakfast sausage, Kingsley left the bird to sleep in a box by the fire while he paced and thought. He needed more information. He penned a meeting request on pale violet paper and sent it speeding away to International Magical Co-operation on Level Five. Next, he made a secure Floo call to the Department of Mysteries. Finally, he trekked up to the owlery. There, he surrendered a scroll to the ever-reliable Turbary, a Ministry owl named after the sanctuary that had taken her in as a storm-orphaned owlet. "Deliver this to Severus Snape at Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry," he instructed.

Turbary replied with a soft hoot and took to the air. Banking sharply, she turned north and flew with the wind at her tail.

"I could do with a Butterbeer," Draco sighed, rubbing at the ink smudges on his hands.

"Without lunch to line your stomach, it would put you to sleep," Hermione cautioned, retrieving her crib notes from Madam Sprout's desk and sorting them in readiness for filing.

Draco vanished the ink smudges and shoved his own notes into his pocket. "Hm, maybe it would. I'll wait until we've finished N.E.W.T.-ing for the day. Then, I shall procure a pint or four and spend the evening in glorious indulgence."

Neville burst out of the examination room and enthusiastically clapped his Potions mentor on the shoulder. "That test was inspirational! I could have written a book on the subject of question three! Draco, I hope you're not planning on drinking alone."

Draco froze in mock astonishment. "What! Write *more* than *three-feet-not-six-Miss-Granger*? Impossible!"

At Neville's snort of laughter, Hermione gave both wizards a warning look before breaking into a smile. Draco did not have Severus' mesmerising tones, but he could match the cadence precisely.

Neville beckoned to the Patil twins to include them in an impromptu plan. "The castle has decided to produce an all-House common room we can all meet there, if you like. Luna found it last night while she was tracking Wrackspurts. The little blighters were plotting to sabotage the N.E.W.Ts."

Draco sent a sly look in Hermione's direction. "Sounds like a plan unless some have previous engagements to partake of *finer* offerings than Butterbeer and... what are those dangerously addictive Muggle condiments again?"

Neville grinned. "Crisps. They are *accompaniments*. Also known as bar snacks when taken in the appropriate establishment. Remedial Muggle Studies for you, I think."

"A practical class in a Muggle highland inn would be most beneficial," Draco agreed.

A shout echoed off stone walls: "*Mione*!" Several dozing portraits unwillingly opened their eyes and grumbled irritably about disrespectful youth.

Harry Potter the disrespectful youth responsible for the shout disengaged himself from a milling swarm of students and bounded up the stairs. Draco made a quiet,

dignified apology to his N.E.W.T. companions, excused himself, and withdrew into a shadowed corridor.

Hermione braced herself for a hug that would have done Molly Weasley credit. She grinned happily to think that while Harry was nowhere near as comfortably padded, he had regained the weight he had steadily lost in the time leading up to Voldemort's defeat. She pulled away, held him by the upper arms, and looked him over. "You look so well," she said, her eyes tearing a little.

"So do you! Merlin, I'd hardly recognise you!" He lightly pinched her cheek. "Where'd all this colour come from?"

"I've just come out of the Herbology N.E.W.T.; intensive thinking must have sent the blood to my head."

Harry laughed and took her arm in his. As they all walked to the Great Hall, he regaled his former classmates with anecdotes of life as a trainee Auror. Eventually getting Hermione away from the crowd, he had just begun a tentative discussion on Ron's progress when one of the side doors flew open with a *bang* and Severus Snape billowed into the Great Hall, sporting a scowl fit to intimidate a mountain troll at one hundred paces.

Not noticing Hermione, Harry, or a huddled group of suddenly crying first-years, Severus half-turned and snarled over his shoulder: "You *cannot* seriously expect the Quidditch budget to come in under..."

"Of course it can! I have great faith in you, Severus." Minerva followed at enough of a distance to give her time to react should the rather exasperated wizard draw his wand.

"What did I *ever* do to earn it?" Severus stopped to ask the Enchanted Ceiling. The Ceiling mildly rearranged some puffy white clouds and did not deign to give him an answer.

Minerva caught up and patted his arm soothingly. "You are from Manchester. You could do it for *half* that amount."

Severus glared at her defiantly, his black eyes snapping with ire-stoked sarcasm. "I. See. *Aye, Minerva, an' I'd still get change from t'Knut*!"

Minerva lightly applauded. "Precisely! And being a Slytherin, you could always negotiate a discount or two on top of that." She smiled at him before preceding him through another doorway. "I haven't heard you use your northern accent since you were in first year!"

As the headmistress and Severus left the Great Hall still bickering, Hermione *felt* Harry's intense stare. *Time to face the music*, she thought, raising an eyebrow and readying herself to cast *Langlock* at a split second's notice.

Harry's gaze turned to the doorway Minerva and Severus had passed through. His expression flitted between juvenile suspicion, rebellion, anger, confusion, and grief, before dissolving into one of mature, guarded regret. "So it's true, then," he said quietly. "You and Snape. I could see the way you looked at him. There've been rumours... and Skeeter is snooping around for gossip every day." He looked her in the eyes, his glasses slightly askew. "Snape... Bloody hell, 'Mione! I know he's earned his Order of Merlin and all. I can get my head around *that*, but... I mean... what's the attraction?"

Hermione considered a staggering number of reasons for her attraction to Severus. They all seemed to come down to one summarising statement. "I love him, Harry, and he loves me. That's the attraction." Her stomach rumbled as lunch materialised on the tables. "Come on," she said, dragging him through the students' mad scramble for seats. She scooped up a plate loaded with sandwiches, thrust a pitcher of pumpkin juice into Harry's hands, and led the way to a vacant classroom. "We can talk here," she said, transfiguring two broken inkwells into goblets and levitating them onto a desk.

Harry took a seat and fidgeted uncomfortably.

Hermione gave a cheese and cucumber sandwich immediate priority. "You could be Mother and pour, you know," she managed around a mouthful.

"Er... yeah. Sorry..." Harry filled the goblets with pumpkin juice. He selected a ham sandwich and picked at it morosely.

"What's on your mind?" Hermione asked bluntly, guessing that whatever it was, it would have something to do with Severus.

"I thought I was seeing things when I was in St Mungo's or Snape's ghost was going to haunt me. I was actually relieved when I heard he'd survived." He rubbed his jaw ruefully. "Thanks for the letters and the ice cream, by the way." He fiddled with his goblet. "Remember I wrote back about that run-in with Snape's dad? Merlin, when I got back to the Aurory, Robards skinned me alive over it! Do you know I report to Senior Auror McPhee as punishment?"

Hermione gave him a *serves-you-right* look. "Severus learned of it at the Ministry. He told me over dinner."

"Whoa! Great dinner conversation and he probably smirked like a goblin in a gold mine the whole time..." Harry shook his head and gave in to a moment of despair concerning his supervisor. "'Mioneee, she's an absolute *Gorgon*!"

"She can't be that bad..."

"She's *worse*! I can't even *fart* and she knows about it!"

"Harry! Do you mind? I'm trying to eat lunch."

Harry gave a boyish grin. "She'll know I said that, too. You wait and see. It'll be six months before I'm allowed out again. At least I get to take Gin out for lunch this weekend." He grew serious. "Look, you know about... about Snape and my mum, right?"

Hermione nodded and tossed a crumb to a mouse waiting hopefully in a corner. "You mentioned it while you faced off Voldemort, and you gave me a little more detail once we knew for sure that he was dead." She put her sandwich down, the memory of those cold hours temporarily stemming her appetite. "Severus told me a bit about her as well. She was the reason he learned to fly without a broom... They would jump off the park swings at the highest point and see who could stay in the air longest." Her eyes flashed fire in defence of her lover. "For the record, flying was *not* something he learned from Voldemort."

She noted the sadness and worry in Harry's eyes and reached across the desk to squeeze his arm. "He's moved on, Harry. Memories of your mother were the only light he had for so many years, the only things that kept him focussed and, inadvertently, protected him against the worst influences of Dark Magic. He'll always have a place in his heart for her like I'll always have a place in my heart for you and for Ron, but the... I suppose you could say *romantic*... interest isn't there."

Harry grimaced. "*Snape* and *romantic* shouldn't be mentioned in the same sentence! It's just not right!"

Hermione smiled serenely. "True. Severus is definitely more amorous than romantic."

"I really didn't need to know that." Harry took off his glasses, cleaned them, and put them on again. "Getting back to what I was *going* to say... I found my mum's photograph, and her signature from a letter, when I was laid up in St Mungo's. At first, I wondered who'd found them and put them there."

"You didn't see?" *Good!*

Harry shook his head. "All I remember is thinking that I saw Snape looking at me. Now I *know* he gave those things back. Why would he do that if he hadn't moved on? Wouldn't've guessed he'd moved on to you..." A deep blush stained his cheeks. "Er... Oops... That wasn't the best choice of words."

Hermione rolled her eyes and snaffled a cress sandwich. "You *could* have phrased it with a little more sensitivity, but I can live with it years of hanging around you and Ron taught me to do just that."

Harry nodded sheepishly. "Do you think... he... Snape..."

"*Severus*."

"...yeah... would ever tell *me* about her my mum?"

Hermione chewed thoughtfully, swallowed, then sipped her pumpkin juice. "My considered opinion is that it will probably take some time if he chooses to tell you anything at all."

Harry's green eyes widened with a flare of outrage. "But..."

"Neither of you sought to keep your interactions civil," Hermione interjected firmly. "Casting *Reparo* will not fix the situation, but time and courtesy might. If I were you, I'd try written communication as a starting point. And *do* try *not* to use his acquittal by the Wizengamot as leverage." She eyed her friend knowingly. "I won't do any writing for you. Not even an introduction. This is an assignment you'll have to do all on your own, Harry Potter."

"I think the Wizengamot gave more weight to Professor Dumbledore's portrait's testimony than mine after all *he'd* known Snape for ages." Harry shrugged and toyed with his sandwich. "Would you put in a good word for me and smooth the waters?"

Hermione shook her head. "No, Harry. This is between you and Severus. I won't play the intermediary, nor will I do anything to coerce him into an action that should be entirely his decision."

Harry visibly bit his tongue. Taking a deep breath, he fumbled inside his Auror's robe and placed a package on the desk. "When I asked permission to come here, I had to tell McPhee what I hoped to achieve. Anyway, she agreed, but said that I would not be able to cross Hogwarts' wards until I'd properly considered a question she set me. It was: 'What would a wise man do?' I'm here, so I suppose I'm on the right track."

He enlarged and opened the package to reveal the Half-Blood Prince's slightly singed Potions textbook, and a crystal phial of silvery memories. "These belong to Snape... Severus. He gave *my* stuff back to *me*, and I realised it's only fair that I give *his* stuff back to *him*. I wondered if it might break the ice, you know?"

Hermione smiled, a small wave of pride warming her eyes. One of the boys was *finally* beginning to grow up. "If you write that reasoning on a covering note, I think you'd be making a good start."

Harry coloured a little and produced a self-inking quill. "I'll do that now... 'Mione... Do you have any parchment?"

"Silly question!" Hermione handed over a spare sheet and watched her friend take more care over a few lines than he had over the most crucial essays of his schooldays.

The trainee Auror signed his name, then tucked the note in with the textbook and the phial. "I don't suppose you'd mind dropping this off to him?" he asked optimistically.

Hermione pulled the package over to her side of the desk. "That much I will do."

Arawn walked along the road leading through the centre of a small Muggle village. Snow crunched cleanly beneath his boots. Cruel laughter rang from the fields behind the simple houses, punctuated by the sound of breaking glass, and embedded in the mingled scent of blood, mud, frost, and rough alcohol. Here and there, the heavily clothed bodies of Dementors' victims lay motionless slowly freezing solid in the sub-zero air. The fretful wail of an infant was abruptly silenced.

Indifferent to the cold, Arawn located the rusting case of an artillery shell. Several days before the raid, he had fashioned it into a Portkey to move his human associates to a mustering point in an isolated mountain chain far to the southwest. There, he intended to create another Portkey to bring them to their final destination, should their persuasive power be needed. It really depended on Snape's cooperation, which Arawn was sure the ex-Death Eater would be obliged to give this time. Wizarding Britain's resources were depleted after the war: the collective attention was focused on rebuilding. Both situations were, Arawn considered, advantages there for the taking.

He summoned the first wave of Dementors, noting that the creatures were certainly more attentive after several days of feeding their way through isolated Ukraine villages on their way to the Romanian border. "Join your scouts in the underground," he told them, sending a mental image of the city they were to travel to. "Do not move to the crossing point until I give the word." He did not need to tell them how to find the Eurotunnel. The Dementors that had crossed into England before had shared the information when they returned. They could, apparently, mind-link with several hundred of their species at a time a mechanism of mass sharing that Arawn found fascinating.

When the pre-selected eight hundred Dementors took their leave to wait in the vast underground labyrinth that was the Parisian sewers, Arawn listened impassively to the revelry of his mortal resources. The Dementors had not taken so much from them as to dull their need for *activity*. If Snape proved incompliant, they would get all the activity they could ever want. Each human would be grouped with three Dementors, thus forming a reserve force of about two thousand in total, divided into five regiments, each led by one of the late Voldemort's high-ranking Death Eaters.

Arawn fingered the Llygad thoughtfully and smiled. Even more Dementors waited by the rift in Pripyat. He turned his thoughts to the wording of the ultimatum he would send to Snape.

"Severus!"

Severus turned and waited for Pugsley to shoo the recently dismissed fifth-year Potions class out of the dungeons something *he* had *never* had any trouble with.

With a final instruction to his students to have their essays in on time, Pugsley hurried over to where Severus stood and pointed him in the direction of the private laboratory. "You have to see this!"

Indulging his peer's excitement, Severus didn't say a word as he was all but shoved into the room and steered towards a heavily warded corner.

Pugsley cancelled the wards and lifted the cover of an incubator, beckoning to Severus to view the contents. "Aren't they something?"

I assume they can't be nothing, therefore they'd have to be... Severus stared at two rows of tiny, bright green seedlings, some still struggling to rid themselves of the wrinkled black caps that had been "Peppercorns," he murmured in awe. "They actually germinated."

Pugsley lightly punched Severus' shoulder. "May I present *Piper antarcticus*: snap frozen for over fifteen million years and *still* raring to go!"

One of the seedlings threw off its cap and reached hungrily towards a sunlamp.

"Antarctic pepper vines," Severus said, watching in fascination as the tiny plants turned towards him and waved warning tendrils before stretching towards the sunlamp

again. "The last time this species saw sunlight, Antarctica still had forests and flowing water. Aside from fossilised mature plants, we know next to nothing about them."

"Except that they're feisty little devils! Check this out..." Pugsley pointed at one seedling with a toothpick, ignoring its angrily coiling tendrils. With a lightning-fast strike, the hours-old plant snared the end of the toothpick and inflicted a vicious bite. "I can't wait until they start producing fruit!"

Severus folded his arms. "How fast do you think they'll grow? We may need some time to adequately fortify a greenhouse in a suitable location."

"Yeah, that's the next thing... I copied the soil sample analysis of the place where the frozen peppercorns were found and keyed it into the *GeoWizard Land and Soils Atlas* down in Kew Gardens. According to the results, the little so-and-so's won't thrive *here* without a whole lot of help which I don't want to do in case it threatens the integrity of the plants' as yet unexplored properties. I'd like to let them grow as natural as possible." Pugsley covered the seedlings to keep out the cold air of the dungeons. "As for how fast they grow search me, I don't know. I'm hoping the aggressive tendencies ease off a little once the plants are big enough not to be snack food."

"Did the results indicate any potential growing sites?"

"Sure did. None of them close by. Eastern Australia looks like the best bet but I need to find some remnant vine forest."

Severus gave the incubator an artful glance. "Vine forest in a sheltered mountain gully?" Pugsley's instant, all-consuming interest gave the impression of a bear on the track of a beehive containing a motherload of honey. "Are fig trees likely to be a problem?"

"Hell, no! The figs would keep the micro-climate in the Goldilocks zone. You know of a place, don't you?"

Severus shrugged. "Perhaps. I shall discuss it with the land owner. In the event of granted permission and quarantine clearance I will insist on magical protection and a suitable buffer area for a *Duboisia* tree growing in the same locality. If Antarctic pepper vines behave like their modern-day counterparts, they may try to become the dominant species. *Goldilocks* zone?"

"Muggle expression: it means 'just right'." Pugsley grinned at the resulting eye-roll. "Well now, that's *one* issue on the way to being solved..." His face showed a fleeting shadow of pained worry.

"What's wrong?"

"Oh, nothing Earth-shattering..." Pugsley sat at one of the benches and sighed. "You remember when Malicia's Puffskein went missing, and I went to find the Bloody Baron to see if he'd help out?"

"Yes."

"Well, the Baron found Cyclops, alright... *and* put Peeves in his place... but..."

Severus quirked an eyebrow. "But?"

Pugsley rubbed at his thick brown hair until it stood up like an animal's pelt. "Now he's Malicia's *hero*! Gods *damn*, Severus, she says she wants to *marry* the Bloody Baron!"

Severus had the sudden feeling that he was drifting on the surface of an alien planet consisting entirely of unbroken ocean. "She's four years old, is she not?" Helplessly, he asked another question: "What does her mother have to say?"

Pugsley slumped on the stool. "Yessir, four years old. And my wife is no help Nephelie thinks it's *cute*. Oh, she tells me not to worry that Malicia will grow out of it and find someone with a pulse..." He stared at a row of pewter cauldrons. "But what if she doesn't? What if she does? I'm *not* ready for this conversation."

Alien planet. Ocean. Drifting. Lost. Very lost. "Conversation?"

"The one I was *supposed* to have with her when she turns... Oh, I don't know... Twenty-one?"

Severus snorted as he realised what sort of conversation Pugsley was not ready for. "I would have thought that with your extensive teaching experience, you'd have noticed that the need for *conversation* occurs a lot earlier than the age of twenty-one."

Pugsley stared at him desperately, every inch the overly concerned father.

Severus gave in to a dark streak of humour. "Start worrying when hordes of young wizards start asking her to *study* with them. After. Curfew."

"*That* does *not* help! Sometimes, having you around is like having a hellhound on the porch!" As Severus' smirk suggested that this was quite a compliment, Pugsley took a different angle of retaliation. "You'll find out what it's like."

Severus was momentarily mystified. "What?"

"When you have kids of your own." *Bulls-eye!*

Severus felt his stomach execute a slow somersault. "I..."

"Oh, sure you will! Hey, I've seen you and Miss Granger together." Pugsley winked cheekily. "It's some years off, yet, but I can read the signs. You'll make a great dad."

"*What?*" Severus' internal chaos suddenly vanished in a blue-grey haze. Images began to take shape, coming into grainy focus as though through a series of lenses that were still in need of adjustment:

A little girl with black, curly hair stood in front of a mirror. To Severus' offended sensibilities, she was wearing a sparkly *pink* tutu, and a sequined top of the same appalling colour. Behind her, a slightly older boy also with black hair, though his was poker-straight sneered and mimicked the ungracious act of vomiting up his intestines. Severus stared at the two children with a mixed sense of dread and curiosity, suppressing a snort of amusement when the girl smacked the boy *her brother, obviously* in the chest with a stuffed toy.

"Severus? Come on, cut it out!"

Severus blinked. A very concerned Pugsley held him fast by the shoulders, searching his eyes with genuine insistence. "I'm fine."

"Fine as frog's hair, right? Didn't look like it! I thought you'd gone into shock or something. Then you *smiled*..."

"I did *not*!"

The Potions aficionados were spared the effort of sparring any further by a soft tapping at the door.

Signalling to Severus to keep quiet about the pepper vines, Pugsley opened the door a little and gave a short laugh. "I see. Not a raven tapping on my door, but an owl." He stood back to allow the bird to enter. "I have no bust of Pallas, but you can perch on Severus if you want."

Turbary sidled into the laboratory, holding a sealed scroll in her beak, her claws making soft ticking noises on the stone floor. With a muffled hoot of relief, she flew towards Severus and dropped the scroll neatly into his outstretched hand. With what sounded like a sigh, she settled on the edge of a bench.

"Excuse me for a moment," Severus muttered, noting the exclusive seal used by the Order of the Phoenix. He read Kingsley's message several times, keeping his expression unconcerned, though he did quirk an eyebrow at the mention of a raven in the Minister's message and Pugsley's *coincidental* reference to a certain poem. He re-sealed the scroll and tucked it into his robes. "As much as I hate to leave you to the mercy of your seedlings, I must go and contact the Minister."

Pugsley shrugged and sat next to the owl. "Duty calls?"

"You could say that." Turning on his heel, Severus swept out of the laboratory.

"Well... that's nice," Pugsley grumbled, looking to Turbary for agreement. "He just billows on outta here and leaves *me* with a parliament of hungry owls."

Turbary swivelled her head to the left and to the right, making a full visual sweep of the room. She hooted questioningly. As far as she could tell, there were no other owls present but she was definitely ravenous. She gave the human a sharp nip.

"Oww! Mer-*lin*! Keep your feathers on, girl. Let's get you something better than Owl Treats and *my* finger." He settled Turbary on his shoulder and headed for the kitchens, where a generous attendance of house-elves would enthusiastically oblige any request for sustenance. "Do you like burgers?"

Severus took the most direct route he could find to his rooms. There was only one way he could send an immediate, confidential reply to the Minister, and he wanted to do it in private. Taking the stairs to the guest wing two at a time, he arrived at the Ravenclaw room slightly breathless and enlivened with exertion.

Inside, after checking that he really was alone, he settled himself and focussed on the love he shared with Hermione. Unexpectedly, other thoughts barged into his awareness with all the finesse of the Gryffindor Quidditch team: *Should I tell her that I may have seen our... Gods! I saw our children! They were definitely ours, no doubt at all... But I saw them without the Llygad... Then again, I saw Nagini's attack without the Llygad and the mosaic in the ruins... But they were dreams; this wasn't a dream. It had to be Sight; it couldn't have been anything else... What names will we give them? Will they really happen? Merlin! I haven't even asked her yet... to be my... When should I ask her? After the N.E.W.T.s, of course can't have any distractions there... What if she says no? Ah, but what if she says yes!* This last thought sent pure happiness coursing through his veins. At any other time, Severus might have given voice to an exultant exclamation *other* than:

"*Expecto Patronum!*"

It took him a fraction of a second to realise what he had just done. He had intended to summon his Patronus anyway, but had expected to need a little more preparation and the use of his wand, which was still stowed in his sleeve.

He backed away from a hovering, pulsing sphere of light, wondering what might come forth. He was certain that the silver doe the manifestation of his devotion to Lily *and* a symbol of the protection given by the same devotion should have made an appearance by now. Obviously, his Patronus was about to take a new form.

The light intensified to a blinding blue-white. From within it, something flew right at him with startling speed, and he instinctively dropped flat on the floor. Duelling reflexes engaged and primed, he sprang back up into a defensive crouch, wand in hand.

Without losing speed, Severus' new Patronus swooped on him this time affording a glimpse of long, pointed wings and formidable talons. He ducked just in time, a small part of his mind calmly reasoning that it was silly to be dodging an ethereal creature. *Silly, indeed.* He sleeved his wand and stood up straight, looking around the room.

Perched on the edge of the pelmet above the door to the bedroom, his Patronus glared down at him angrily.

"I suppose I *have* been neglecting you," he said, holding out his arm as he had seen Hermione do with her merlin. The large falcon showed no sign of appeasement. "I'm sorry. Now, come here. I haven't got all day."

The falcon launched off the pelmet and circled the room once before landing on Severus' arm. Close up, it was an impressive creature: a peregrine falcon flying ace of the Feather Clan, renowned for unwavering courage and martial prowess. The peregrine stared down its hooked beak at him, then imperiously ruffled its silvery feathers. Severus remembered the peregrine depicted in the tapestry not far from the Ravenclaw room. "I suppose I *am* a prince, of sorts, if that's any consolation," he said, also recalling that in Wizarding France, peregrines were regarded as an aerial aristocracy. "I'll have to mind my P's and Q's with *you*."

Apparently mollified, the falcon tilted its head and listened while Severus dictated a reply to Kingsley's missive.

"Severus!"

I am surely the most in-demand wizard to ever walk these halls Severus mused in disbelief. "Firenze."

With echoing hoof-beats, Firenze trotted up to him and made a casting sign with one hand. "So no-one else will hear our conversation," he explained. "Fawkes has visited three centaur herds our own, the Schwarzwald herd, and the Camargue herd and delivered messages warning us to be prepared to fight. The devouring force we spoke of has gathered and is on the move, hungry to claim the bright power..."

"The devouring force being Dementors and Merlin knows what else under the supposed command of a renegade Unspeakable who aims to take ~~my~~ inheritance and wield its power as his own."

Firenze swished his tail and backed up a full step, for once looking surprised. "*Supposed* command?"

"No Earth-born being can control the eaters of souls. When I last spoke to Oriens, he had reason to believe there are increasingly dangerous numbers of them skulking about and they are highly organised. Dolohov's testimony from Azkaban supports Oriens' conclusion." He drew the scroll Turbary had delivered from his robes and showed the centaur the seal of the Order. "The Ministry has had a tip-off from an unknown informant. From a place alluded to as the northern Ukraine, a power of hatred and pitiless cold is building and spreading. Kingsley has alerted International Magical Co-operation and has requested that they place Auror and Unspeakable operatives throughout the region in question."

Firenze regained his inscrutability. "Bane charged me to deliver an invitation to join our herd for a dawn ceremony tomorrow in our stone circle. Bryndorach, leader of the Schwarzwald herd, and his son and daughter will also be there."

Severus knew it would do Bane a great dishonour to refuse such an invitation not that he would ever consider refusing. To his knowledge, centaurs very rarely took humans to their most sacred places. Even Dumbledore had never seen the stone circle of the Forbidden Forest. "May I bring Hermione?" he asked, knowing that she would remember and cherish such an honour as one of her life's most significant events.

"Certainly. Bane expects that Hermione will be beside you." Firenze gave a secretive smile. "Your paths are entwined, and both are the stronger for it."

"Then we shall attend..."

With a loud *pop*, Tocky appeared. "Master Severus!"

Firenze deftly waved his hand to encapsulate the house-elf in the shared bubble of secrecy.

Severus made a valiant effort to keep himself from scowling. *What am I, the go-to wizard for the year?* He tucked one hand into his pocket, feeling the dragon brooch cool against his fingers. *Possibly.* "Yes, Tocky?"

"Master Tobias is been visited by a phoenix. Master Tobias has been needing cups of strong tea and lying down but not at the same times." Tocky picked at a stray thread on his pillowcase. "Tocky is thinking Master Severus should be told."

Severus' eyes narrowed. This could not be good. "What did the phoenix do?"

"The phoenix is leaving arrows, Master Severus."

Oh, no. "Firenze, I suppose I should go and see if there's anything I can do."

The palomino centaur bowed graciously and cancelled the secrecy charm. "Of course you should. I shall meet you and Hermione in the Entrance Hall two hours before tomorrow's dawn."

"Monsieur Severus!"

What else...? Severus waited until Petrus was within quiet conversation range. "Does it involve, by any chance, a phoenix?"

Petrus halted, astonished. He produced a phoenix feather, a cap from an ink bottle inscribed with Severus' name which Severus could not recall seeing since he was a fourth-year and a Muggle postcard. "*Oui...* How did you know?" He bowed to Firenze. "Monsieur *le* Professor."

"Fawkes has been very busy lately." Severus eyed Petrus' Hogwarts' crest armband, which was now black silk in acknowledgement of his fully fledged staff member status. Minerva had upgraded him on the spot after seeing that he was quite capable of keeping of law and order in the library. "Congratulations, by the way."

Petrus' countenance briefly took on the hue of rose sandstone. "*Merci*, Monsieur Severus. It was most unexpected, but Madame Pince told to me that Madame *la* Headmistress had been considering it for some time." Returning to his usual colour, he showed Severus and Firenze the postcard, then handed it to Tocky, who squeaked an exclamation over the amount of cleaning such a place would need.

"*Cathédrale Notre Dame de Paris*," Severus murmured, careful to use the proper nomenclature in Petrus' presence.

"If these are signs," Firenze added, knitting his brows in thought and casting his secrecy charm once more. "Fawkes has been leaving them like way-markers."

Petrus nodded. "*Oui*, Monsieur *le* Professor. Oriens has been visited also. Five days ago, *mon hibou*, Porthos, arrived with a message from Oriens: Fawkes had taken the clasp from his cloak and left one feather in exchange."

Severus shared a calculating glance with Firenze. "Way-markers. Petrus, did Oriens tell you when he would be resuming his duties?"

"*Oui*, he is leaving St Mungo's today and will be with Monsieur *le* Minister Shackbolt for most of tomorrow morning. He said that he would visit Hogwarts tomorrow afternoon." His eyes began to sparkle. "Way-markers are most effective when they are arranged in order, *non?*"

Severus gave a half-smile. "And to arrange the phoenix-delivered way-markers, we could begin by assembling those who have received them."

Firenze's flanks twitched as he raised one fore-hoof, his blue eyes alight with purpose. "Assemble the ones *we know of*. I shall put the idea to Bane," he said, doing a quick headcount and muttering names to himself. "I recommend that we keep this gathering distinct from the Order of the Phoenix for the time being, though we should let the Minister know as a matter of diplomacy. We may discuss who, when, and where after the dawn ceremonies."

Severus reached into his pocket again and closed his fingers around the dragon brooch. "I agree your recommendation is a wise one." *Chiron's cauldron! He's almost excited*, he thought as Firenze cancelled the charm and saluted a farewell. He couldn't help a smirk as he watched the centaur leave: Firenze was trying very hard *not* to gallop.

"Hermione!" Severus pulled up mid-stride as he entered his father's rooms. He was not entirely surprised: Hermione had visited Tobias a number times in the hospital wing and had offered to "give poor Poppy a break" by escorting the Muggle on long walks through the less frequented parts of the castle.

Tocky hurried over to close the door, then happily rubbed his hands together as he set about preparing tea and biscuits.

Hermione darted across the room and threw her arms around her wizard. "I was just telling Tobias about the goddess Artemis," she said, pointing to the bow which now hung on the wall beside the fireplace. "I finished the Care of Magical Creatures N.E.W.T. early the practical component lasted an hour and a half, but the theory was an absolute doddle."

"As I told you it would be. I'm surprised you didn't stay to re-write the textbooks."

Hermione pulled a face, seized a cushion from an armchair, and smacked him in the chest with it. "There was a *limit* to the amount of parchment we were provided with. Draco thought it was hilarious, sod him!"

Severus appropriated the cushion and dropped it back where it belonged. "Tobias, I hear you have received another visit from a..."

"*Flamin' bird!*" Toby snarled, holding up his quiver filled to capacity with black-fletched arrows.

"...phoenix." Severus calmly eyed Tobias until the Muggle settled himself and lowered the quiver to the floor. "You're not the only one." In response to a pair of questioning stares, Severus waved Hermione and Tobias into seats. He noticed Tocky hovering near the coffee table, a loaded tray in his hands. "Whenever you're ready, Tocky."

The house-elf placed the tray on the table and fussed with a tea cosy. "Tocky thinks Master Severus is about to say important things... Perhaps Tocky should be leaving?"

"Not at all. If Tobias is required to fight, as are the other recipients of phoenix-delivered items, I would prefer it if you stayed close by him in the event that I cannot."

The house-elf nodded mournfully, his grass-green eyes serious.

Hermione sat forward. "Who are the other recipients? Do we really have to fight?"

Toby drew one of the arrows from his quiver and showed Hermione the deadly, barbed point. "These ain't toys, lass." He replaced the arrow and experimentally flexed his right shoulder.

"Fawkes has visited three centaur herds, Petrus, and Oriens. Firenze gave some indication that he thought there may be more, but who or what they may be is an open question." Severus produced the scroll and showed the seal of the Order of the Phoenix. "Hermione, you coined the phrase: 'a deepening shadow'. We have news that the shadow is indeed growing in strength. Within it are an uncounted number of Dementors, an unknown number of Death Eaters, and an Unspeakable of single-minded intention."

Toby stood up abruptly and stalked into the bathroom. He returned holding the Llygad by its silver chain. "It's all to do with this bloody thing, eh?"

"Yes." Severus blinked as the dangling crystal flashed in the firelight. He shook his head. *Not again...* Was it his own Sight which he was still a little reluctant to accept, having always prided himself on practicality of mind trying to manifest? Or was it the power in the Llygad calling on him *to listen...* Trying a different approach, he willed himself... *to relax... to allow...*

Cold. Bitter, vicious, lethal cold. Cold to make the body scream in pain. Cold to stop the blood in the heart. Cold to tear the mind apart and leave it grovelling in a quagmire of madness. Cold to devour the soul. It poured out of a great, grey void which hung, as smooth and fluid as quicksilver, above a crumbling city. Standing in front of him, Severus saw a slender figure, cloaked and hooded in black. The figure turned, the hood hiding any features in deep shadow, and held up the same spearhead that Severus had seen in the vision of Macsen's treasure. Hermione's words echoed from where he could not tell: 'Darkness flees from light, cold withdraws from fire's heat.'

He gasped, shivering violently as he came out of the warning revelation. Tocky snapped his fingers and the flames in the fireplace doubled in height and volume. Hermione's arm slid around his waist as he instinctively moved to its warmth.

Toby had turned slightly pale. "God's Teeth, lad, I hope whatever *that* was'll prove useful."

Severus inclined his head. *Northern Ukraine... a city in ruins. I must inform Kingsley to narrow the search.* "I believe it will." He took the Llygad from his father's hand. "A source of power, once discovered, will always have those who covet it." He drew the dragon brooch from his pocket. "And there will be those who shall prevent them." He turned to Hermione. "I think it's time you met my new Patronus

The Gathering – Part 1

Chapter 23 of 32

Hermione gains some more insights into centaur culture. At Tocky's hesitant request, Toby tells a story from his past.
Severus gets the opportunity to put a troubling experience to rest – and decides what should be done with the Resurrection Stone. Kingsley receives ominous news from his Russian contact.

A/N's

French English (on-line translator)

Bonjour Hello/Good day

Certainement pas Certainly not

Cidre Cider

Je ne pouvais pas comprendre I could not understand

La femmes The females

Mon hibou My owl

S'il vous plait If you please

Très bon Very good

Une selection A selection

Tower of London ravens: Legend says that the kingdom and the Tower will fall if the six resident ravens (with a seventh in reserve) ever leave the fortress. The ravens all have names, service records, and the primary feathers of one wing partially clipped so they can't fly very far. They are very well cared for (possibly a bit spoiled) by Yeomen Warders.

Canon characters are the property of J.K. Rowling. I make no money from them. Pugsley Addams is the property of the cartoonist Charles Addams. I make no profit from his character.

Thanks to TeaOli the Brave for beta-reading, sorting out my commas (again), and being a real inspiration to keep improving my writing skills.

Hermione pulled her cloak tight around her body and pressed as close as she could to Severus without actually pushing him into the trees. By the light of her wizard's softly illuminated wand, she could see the leaf strewn path marked with centaurs' hoof prints, the sharp glitter of ice, and an occasional drifting snowflake the first of the season. Some distance ahead of them, Firenze's hooves crunched a steady pace on the brittle ground. She could barely make out the centaur as a slightly paler shadow moving easily through the forest without the aid of light. Her teeth began to chatter.

"Warming Charm, my dear?" Severus murmured, obliging without waiting for her to accept the offer.

Hermione roused herself. "Silly me, I should have thought of that myself it's so early, and I'm still sleepy." She could *feel* Severus' amused smirk.

"If a certain *someone* hadn't insisted on having her wicked way with me last night and again even earlier this morning you might have had adequate rest," he purred

contentedly.

Hermione nudged him in his layer-swathed ribs. "I didn't hear you objecting, nor did you pause to lecture me on the importance of a good night's sleep. Besides, the early morning tryst was *your* idea."

"Not mine... *his*," Severus remarked pointedly. "I was asleep at the time and found that I had little choice in the matter."

"*He* being your conspiratorial friend."

"I never thought of describing him that way... but now that you mention it..." He gave her a sidelong glance. "I didn't hear *you* objecting. Indeed, when I woke up, you were having quite a good time with him."

"I'll have you know that I was sound asleep until the nocturnal shenanigans started. I was trying to settle him down."

"That's not what *he* thought you were doing." Severus brushed a snowflake off his sleeve. "Conspiracy! If he was not actually a part of my body, I'd be overwhelmed with jealousy." He curled one arm around Hermione's shoulders, sharing the Warming Charm as well as their combined body heat. He wondered if it was possible to transfer gratitude and love directly from his own heart to hers. If it was *not* possible, he could be in quite a pickle: how could he continue to hold so much without that vital organ actually bursting?

The night before, when he had seen Potter's peace offering and the surprisingly concise, courteous covering note that came with it he found that he had resignedly waited for some wheedling plea to be transmitted from Potter *via* Hermione. Instead, Hermione had relayed the gist of her conversation with Harry, plainly stating that she had made a pre-emptive refusal to participate in any form of coercion. And that was that. For a moment, Severus had stood in mute surprise, his capacity for speech temporarily disengaged while his senses joyously floundered in the realisation that his witch would *never* attempt to manipulate him not even for her best friend. The sheer relief and sense of liberation had made him light-headed enough to need to lie down, whereupon Hermione had leapt on him to make sure that he was all right and then brought him to quite a different level of consciousness with heated, unashamedly wanton kisses.

He had to physically wipe the smile off his face when he heard Firenze come to a halt and stamp a fore hoof three times. As the centaur had instructed, from now until they reached the Stone Circle, silence was to be observed.

Bane stepped out of the shadows bow in hand and a full quiver slung over one shoulder. A wide-eyed young centaur with a broadsword at his back waited respectfully behind him, nearly fidgeting with excitement. At a nod from Bane, Firenze signalled Severus and Hermione to follow. The young centaur bowed to the humans and took his place at the rear of the small procession.

With Bane leading the way, they took an apparently random route through the deepening forest. The surrounding trees grew closer and closer together until they brushed the centaurs' flanks a huge, dignified assembly that seemed to *watch* them as they passed by. Leafless twigs and branchlets rubbed together in soft, creaking exchanges even though there was no breeze as though the lignacious sentinels were talking to each other and discussing those who walked between them.

Hermione glanced at Severus, who drew a breath and looked around, communicating that he felt a little apprehensive as well. Firenze had told them about this part of the Forbidden Forest: the trees here were known as the "Standing People" and treated with great respect by the centaurs. The thought of sentient trees made Hermione's skin prickle. She wondered if the Whomping Willow had originally come from this part of the Forest. Was it kidnapped *abor-napped* as a seed, or a sapling, merely to guard the opening of a secret passage? Could human-assisted displacement explain why all known representatives of *Salix bruta* were so damnably tetchy? She jumped when a hanging branchlet of a silver birch tugged at her hair. Standing still, she carefully disengaged it, holding it for a moment before letting go. Glancing behind her, she saw the young centaur smile approvingly.

At last, the path Bane took began to widen, and the scrutinising press of the Standing People was replaced by a wide avenue of yew trees, their ancient boles resembling frayed hawsers of corded shadow. At the end of the avenue, a low hill formed an island of cleared ground. Circling the top of the hill like a crown, an imposing silhouette of standing stones stood black against the paling sky.

Sister Clarise held her breath as she surveyed the devastation. The wind moaned and cried between lightless houses like a persistent requiem and piled drifts of snow against the frozen, lifeless bodies of humans and livestock with detached gentleness. In the timber plantations surrounding the village, even the hardy pines had perished. Denuded of needles and their burden of snow, they stood like grey, rattling skeletons risen up to denounce a murderer.

Sister Clarise's blood chilled as she felt the remnants of insatiable, devouring hatred... It clung to *everything* a damning testimony as vivid as a fresh bloodstain. *Too late*. Distressed and afraid, she reached for the warmth of the spearhead concealed beneath her habit. *Too late for these*, she thought. *But the quest must be completed*. Unexpectedly, the warmth of the spearhead spread over her entire body, bringing with it the gift of courage. *It is not done yet... but it shall be*. Whispering a prayer for the souls of the dead, she continued on her way.

For the second time that morning, Hermione cautiously sampled the dark amber mead being passed around in a drinking horn, searching for the identity of an elusive taste. It reminded her of summer-warm grassy hills, the laughing flash of sunlight on water, drowsy breezes heavy with the drone of bees, and just a hint of smoke. Sharing mead had marked the start of the dawn ceremonies and, obviously, sharing mead concluded them as well. The young mahogany bay centaur who had introduced himself as "Röthvar, son of Bryndorach" as soon as speech was permitted took the drinking horn from her and topped it up from a stone ewer before handing it to Magorian.

"Heather honey," Severus whispered. "A true single flower honey was used to brew the mead. Little wonder the ancient gods were said to be fond of it."

Hermione nodded and licked her lips, multiple layers of flavour still lingering on her tongue. "I bet it has healing properties, too."

"It does," Magorian said, nodding his thanks to Röthvar and turning slightly to address the two humans. "After the Battle of Hogwarts, we cleansed our wounds with mead and dressed them with husks and heather honey. When we learned that Firenze had lost blood and was being cared for by Madam Pomfrey, we sent him mead infused with thyme to help him make it up again."

Hermione chewed her lower lip as she watched Röthvar serve his sister. "May I ask a question?"

Magorian cocked his head, a little surprised. "Of course."

"You'll live to regret that, Magorian," Severus muttered with the dogged patience of one who knows how to suffer for a cause. "The trickle will become a flood."

"I thank you for the warning. At the first sign of peril I shall move to higher ground," the centaur replied, casually swishing his tail and giving Severus a *yes-I've-heard-the-legends* look.

Hermione sighed and shook her head, resolutely pursuing her enquiry. "Why is Röthvar doing all the serving? He's a guest, isn't he?"

Magorian nodded. "Yes, he is. Even so, our tradition is that young centaurs should learn the grace of service the lessons being humility, courtesy, and observance. While he is in our lands, he is under Bane's direction. Röthvar's elder sister, Esnyë, will have performed service back in her homeland hence she is free to move about as she will. Besides, our young thane had not met humans before: he considered this morning's duties to be quite an adventure."

Hermione longed to ask about the shy gathering of female centaurs who had clustered together and appraised both herself and Severus intently from a distance. Esnyë had stayed exclusively with the other females and appeared to be an encouraging influence with her confident movements and gentle gestures. However, Hermione could sense the fragility of the female centaurs' participation they were wary of Bryndorach and his son, and even more wary of human company so her questions were best left unasked. With a small ache of sadness, she watched them retreat into the forest. Looping her arm through Severus', she looked at him to make a speculative comment, then stopped in surprise at the slightly devilish expression on his face.

Toby dutifully recorded the number of repetitions of each exercise Jean Granger had sent to him to aid his recovery and was pleased to see that he was ready for the next level. When he began what he had described as the "geriatric" exercises in the Hospital Wing, Hermione had drawn up a chart for him so he could monitor his progress visually. Toby liked charts for that very reason, and the one Hermione had designed was a real purfer. Finishing up with a series of stretches, he decided to take a walk along a circuit of corridors that Minerva had deemed safe provided he keep Tocky with him.

He put on the Prussian blue cloak and fastened it without needing to consult a mirror. He had no objection to wearing the cloak these days as the Warming Charm woven into it was a very welcome thing in the raw morning cold of the castle. Acknowledging this, he could not help but reflect upon his attitude to magic back in Spinner's End. Moving to the fireplace, he picked up the boxed set of Gobstones Filius had loaned him. Eileen had been pretty damn good with the things, according to the Charms professor.

"Master Tobias?"

"G'day, Tocky," he answered pensively.

"Master Tobias is been looking unhappy. Tocky is wondering if it is because of the phoenix," the house-elf postulated.

"Nah, mate, not 'cause of that. Besides, I couldn't get the bow to a full draw just yet. Maybe that's a good thing, eh? Means we 'ave some time Sev'rus reckons that Fawkes wouldn't give me t' bloody arrows if I weren't meant to use 'em." Toby could see that Tocky still wanted to know what had him out of sorts. "C'mon," he said, heading for the door. "I need to wander for a bit."

"Master Tobias is bringing Gobstones?"

Toby couldn't help grinning at Tocky's puzzled, slightly concerned expression. "Yeah. Looks that way, don't it?"

House-elf and Muggle set off at a brisk pace, their breaths showing briefly with each exhalation. By the time they had traversed five corridors and several staircases, Toby felt that he had pushed his recuperating body hard enough for the time being and had earned an extra serving of black pudding for breakfast. Minerva had insisted that he partake of the "delicacy" every day during convalescence, saying: "It will get your blood back up". Toby had saucily informed her with a brash wink that *his* interpretation of her statement might differ to what she actually meant, at which Minerva had left the Hospital Wing in a slight huff, and Poppy had scolded him for the second time in as many hours. Now, Toby made a point of consuming black pudding to ensure that, if given the opportunity, he could look Minerva in the eye and tell her that his blood was getting up very nicely, thank you.

At the highest landing of an especially long staircase, he sat on an oak bench positioned below a stained glass window, stretched his legs out in front of him, and opened the box of Gobstones.

"Master Tobias is going to practice?" Tocky asked, still pondering a reason for his master's strange behaviour.

Toby shook his head. "Just thinkin'. Filius said me missus Eileen Prince, 'er name would've been when she were schooled 'ere was captain of the Gobstones team."

Tocky shrugged forlornly. "Tocky is knowing nothing of Hogwarts' previous students except for Crabbe family." The house-elf shivered as he mentioned his previous masters. "Else Tocky would certainly be telling Master Tobias all about her. Tocky is sad to know she is gone." He fidgeted anxiously.

"What's the matter, lad?"

"House-elves is not supposed to... But Tocky is wanting to ask..."

"Spit it out, then."

Tocky twisted a stray thread around his fingers. "How did Master Tobias meet Mistress Eileen?"

"Ow did a workin' class Muggle like me get together with a pureblood witch?" Toby raised an eyebrow at the now squirming house-elf. "God's Teeth, Tocky, you 'aven't done anythin' wrong. Sit up 'ere and I'll tell you." He waited until Tocky climbed onto the bench and settled himself with his hands tucked firmly under his spindly thighs. "Let's see... It were about forty year ago..."

"Back then, once a week, meself and t' other local lads would go down to the dance 'all for a bit of fun. Between the dances and the picture theatre, there weren't much else to do around t' mill in those days. Me old mam 'ad recently died but I reckon she'd been gone longer than that 'cause me da' were taken by t' war. I don't remember much of 'im at all.

"Anyway, I first saw Eileen when she were walkin' past t' dance 'all one evenin'. She were checkin' things out, lookin' like she were curious or somethin'. I sung out to her and asked if she wanted to come and join in." Toby shrugged. "She looked t' other way and kept walkin', so I thought "Suit yerself" and left it at that.

"The next week, she were checkin' the dance 'all *outagain*, but this time from behind a bloody letter box, of all things. She really looked like she wanted to come over, but were maybe a bit shy, so I crossed the road to ask 'er... and the next thing I knew I were back at t' door. Couldn't work it out at the time, but *now* I think I know what she did.

"A few months went on, and it were gettin' like clockwork, 'cause she kept doin' the same thing. I figured I'd try again. So I got cunnin' and went 'round by a side alley and through the back of t' chippie. I reckon I surprised 'er, 'cause she just stared at me all confused. God's Teeth, she needed a feed, and she looked kind of sad. Then she just walked off without a word. I didn't follow... Didn't want to fright 'er, y' see.

"One day, I were out runnin' errands for the foreman, and I saw 'er 'angin' up linens in t' yard out back of a boardin' 'ouse a few streets down from t' mill. Earnin' a crust by doin' washin' by the look of it. So I sat on the brick wall surroundin' t' yard and asked 'er if she wanted to dance or not. I told 'er I was pretty sure she *did* want to and, if I were right, I'd claim 'er for the first dance. And I offered a feed of fish and chips afterwards. She started talkin' then. I'd just got 'round to askin' 'er name when Bessie Bruiser so we called the woman who ran t' boardin' 'ouse threw an empty bean tin at me and screeched at me to bugger off. Called me a tomcat, too. Flamin' cheek!

"Well, the mystery girl showed up on dance night, and we introduced ourselves properly. None of us 'ad much in the way of fine clothes, but we could turn out pretty well with what were at 'and. Eileen did too. Tocky, from the first dance, I were right taken. Lor' Crikey, Eileen moved like an angel... Like she were born to it and properly taught. I 'ad no idea she where she came from. No idea 'bout 'er magic, schoolin' or family she refused to talk about 'em except that raven 'air and black eyes were a family trait. Not too long after that, there were moves *other* than dancin'. I s'pose the rest is 'istory, as they say." He scowled and rubbed his eyes. "She must've been 'idin' from someone it's the only logical explanation for why a witch from a blue-blood family would shack up among workin' folk and try to live without usin' 'er power."

"Master Tobias loved her very much," Tocky observed.

"As much as I knew 'ow to at the time. Loved and lost, mate. Through my own doin'."

Tocky regarded him shrewdly. "Master Tobias misses her..."

Toby sighed, shook his head, then shrugged. He produced the brass ring he kept in his pocket. "I might, a bit. T' rest'll be a great mess of regrets and what-ifs. You keep quiet about it, okay?"

Tocky ran his fingers across his closed mouth, placed his hand over his heart, and nodded.

Turning his mind to other matters, Toby took one of the Gobstones out of the box and held it up to the light. "I need to know more about these things. Filius started me on the Classic Game, but 'e also said there's Jack Stone and... *Snake Pit*?"

Tocky nodded. "What is Master Tobias needing to know?"

"Rules, strategies, that kind of thing."

The house-elf frowned in thought. Suddenly, his ears twitched and he leapt off the bench. Running to the stairs, he looked down and pointed excitedly. "Tocky is thinking a librarian could help!"

"What is it?" Hermione whispered, pulling Severus to face her to try and hide his expression from the centaurs, who milled about in small groups discussing everything from planetary portents to the likely depth of the first snowfall. Behind the surrounding trees, she briefly heard the female centaurs mention the placement of artificial grype-nuts before they dispersed at a purposeful canter.

"You didn't see?" Severus teased silkily.

Hermione folded her arms. "Obviously. Not."

"It's quite a distraction when you do that," he noted, letting his gaze linger on her chest. He held his hands up in surrender as she glared at him with slightly exasperated amusement. "It looks to me as though Bane has a secret admirer," he murmured.

Hermione raised her eyebrows. "Esnyë?"

Severus gave her a single-eyebrow frown. "I thought you affirmed that you *didn't* see."

"I didn't see. Esnyë is the only female centaur I've met face to face."

"Guessing, Miss Granger? And I placed such faith in your deductive abilities..."

Hermione rolled her eyes. "Then, wizard, save me from guesses and tell me what you've seen, lest I strike a bargain with your conspiratorial *friend* and incite rebellion in your black silk boxers."

"Below the belt... I like it," he purred. "For your information, Esnyë has been covertly observing Bane whenever his attention is elsewhere. Unbeknownst to Esnyë, Bane observes *her* whenever she is not observing *him*."

Hermione and Severus shared a knowing eyebrow-raise, then quickly schooled their expressions to "respectful interest" when Firenze, Bane and Bryndorach approached them.

Bane raised his hand, a small black stone firmly held between thumb and forefinger. "Before we plan a gathering to discuss Fawkes' messages, I found *this* during patrols of the forest after the Dementors attacked," he said, his features clouding with a passing shade of antipathy. "It was pressed deep into a hoof print. It is a human tool made with human magic. We have no use for this stone of false resurrection, nor any desire to keep a thing whose purpose is to summon those who have flown beyond the stars."

In silence, Severus took the Resurrection Stone and held it up to the light. The faint etchings of the Peverell coat of arms stirred a bitter echo of repugnance: under these same arms, blood purity had been flaunted, murder committed, and a fragment of a fractured soul *stored* in the quest for immortality. He wrenched his eyes away with a suppressed snarl. A cold wind rolled out of the surrounding forest, swept up the hill, and mumbled around the standing stones.

"Severus." Firenze's blue eyes held a depth of solemn purpose. "While we burned the herbs to welcome in the true change of season, Alaya..." he gestured to the sector of the Stone Circle where the females had gathered for the ceremony "...felt the whisper of a soul with a message. She has the gift for such things. She told me there is someone who would speak with you."

Thinking that the "someone" would probably be Lily he really hoped it wasn't Albus Severus glanced enquiringly at Hermione, who mouthed a silent "Go on" and pointed to a spot a short distance away. With a small smile of appreciation for Hermione's understanding, he moved around the outside of the Stone Circle until he found a position sheltered from the wind. Without looking at the Resurrection Stone, he turned it three times.

"You're looking healthy, for once."

A woman's voice: but it was not Lily's. Guilt and... shame knifed through his heart. "*Charity*... Gods, I'm sorry, I..."

Severus paused as Charity impatiently waved him into listening. "I shouldn't stay long, Severus. Tell Hermione I send her my very best regards and wish her luck with the N.E.W.Ts. I didn't take it all *that* personally when she dropped Muggle Studies: I understand that the subject was not challenging enough for her." Charity looked him over. "Unlike yourself," she murmured in a sultry *I-know-what-you've-been-up-to* tone.

Severus felt a rush of colour tingle its way up from his collar to his ears. "I shall," he said. "And purely for Hermione's benefit, I'll tell her you look remarkably well and at peace."

Charity pantomimed a swoon. "Severus! If wizards did it for me, Veil or not, I'd make a move on you. That's the sweetest thing I've ever heard you say!" She laughed when the wizard grimaced, then regarded him with compassion. "I know there was nothing you could do. It must have been horrible for you... *I'm* the one who should apologize to *you* for losing my grip and appealing to you for help I could've gotten you killed!"

Severus folded his arms and shook his head. "You apologize to... That's ridiculous! It's not as if you *knew*!"

Charity adjusted her robes with a hint of indignation. "It's not ridiculous. And I *know* now. Lily made Albus tell me everything."

"I sat there, pretended to ignore you, and let you die..."

"Oh, take a dose of reality, will you? I'm sure you brew and bottle it along with your fame and glory! If you *had* stood up to defend me against Voldemort, a whole twelve-course-formal-dinner-setting of loyal Death Eaters and that snake how long do you think you would've lasted, hmm? Where would dear old Albus' plans have been then? By the way, I'll pull the old codger's beard for you, next time I see him."

Severus allowed himself a half-smile. "I'd appreciate it if you would. With a bit of luck, by the time I cross the Veil, the infernal meddler will have gone... somewhere else."

"Else he'll hang around just to plague you!" Charity cautioned good-naturedly. Her expression communicated contented warmth. "With life's luck and destiny's blessings, you and Hermione will not cross the Veil for a good many years. She's a very fortunate witch, having *you* by her side. You can tell her I said that, too! Now drop the Stone, dear friend. I would like to go. There's a lot of beard-pulling to do."

Severus let the Resurrection Stone fall to the ground. For a moment, he watched the spot where Charity had, in so short an encounter, assured him that her gift of uncomplicated friendship still held strong. He hadn't even known how to say farewell but he suspected that she would have heard him whether he had spoken or not. A sense of peace embraced him. Charity's final moments would never maul his dreams again.

Allowing his hair to cover his eyes while he recovered his composure, Severus considered what should be done with the Resurrection Stone. He felt the steady, inscrutable gazes of the centaurs and knew that they would read much into his decision. Concentrating on his breathing, he let his magic touch the steady pulse of power flowing outwards from the Stone Circle the power of the Earth and its constantly interacting elements, the blood-beat of a planet sustaining life. *Stone is strong, but even mountains are carved by the breath of wind and the caress of water. The mightiest boulder can be split by the growth of a tiny seed.*

Severus remembered overhearing Albus' advice to Potter while he loitered in the shadows after leading the headmaster to where the boy sat staring into the Mirror of Erised. Picking up the Stone once more, he returned to the three centaurs and took Hermione's hand. "Like the Mirror of Erised, this Stone holds a power that would lead the vulnerable to dwell on dreams, exist in memories, and forget to live," he said. "The Resurrection Stone was crafted to transgress Nature's law and will, over time, bring only suffering on both sides of the Veil." Spotting a half-grown Whomping Willow brooding by the bank of an ice-ruffled stream at the foot of the hill, Severus instinctively knew what to do: he threw the Resurrection Stone at the willow.

As expected, one of the tree's branches whipped out and caught the stone. The branch curled as the willow examined its prize. Then, with a *crack* and a leaping flash of green light, stone yielded to wood, and the powdered remains of the Resurrection Stone merged with the frosty earth to become part of the resurrection that would commence with Spring.

Toby forced himself not to retreat as Petrus landed with a smooth backsweep of his wings. In spite of feeling quite comfortable around house-elves, interactive portraits, centaurs, unicorns, and ghosts, he still had a little way to go before he could feel at ease around a Being of stone who looked as though he could kill a man with one careless swipe of a taloned hand.

"*Bonjour*, Monsieur Tobias, Tocky. Pardon the indoor flight *s'il vous plait*, it was quicker than walking up the stairs," Petrus explained with a gracious bow.

"Reckon I'd do the same if I 'ad a choice," Toby mused. "Bon-jore to you, too," he said, mustering what was hopefully courage.

A long-eared owl soundlessly flew over the stairs and settled on an elaborately carved newel post with a polite hoot.

"Ah, *très bon*! Here is *mon hibou*. I named him Porthos." Petrus reached towards the owl, and it climbed onto his forearm without hesitation.

"Porthos, eh? 'E was a bit of wine and women bloke, that one."

"You know the book, Monsieur?" Petrus asked, delighted at the prospect of literary conversation.

"Got to know it pretty well," Toby affirmed, remembering being stranded in the town of Cunnamulla thankfully with non-perishable freight when floodwaters cut every surrounding road for several weeks. A dog-eared, coverless copy of *The Three Musketeers* unearthed from a motley collection of books in the truck stop provided a welcome distraction from enforced residence. He eyed Petrus curiously. "I 'eard you'd come from a cathedral I would've thought you'd name yer owl *Aramis*."

Petrus took a step closer to Tobias, causing the human to really test his nerve by keeping to the one spot. "Regarding the cathedral, Monsieur Tobias: *oui* and perhaps *non*." He shrugged and flexed his wings. "*Cathédrale Notre Dame de Paris* where I first... how to say this... knew that I am alive. I felt the touch of earth and water, I opened my eyes to the fire of the sun, and the wind was blowing with great strength. A long time ago, I was told that I was originally found in the deserts of Arabia under a strange circumstance... I remember nothing of it." Petrus grimaced and shook his head. "Forgive me, Monsieur, if I do not like to discuss it. Perhaps I was destined to be a slave..."

Petrus glanced at the stained glass window as a pale lance of sunlight broke free from the piling clouds and, for no more than a second, turned the design into a glorious blaze of colour. "Aramis... He was the most scholastic of the musketeers given to deep reflections on the Holy texts," he said, apparently cheered by the fleeting display. He raised his arm, causing Porthos to open his wings. "This *hibou*, he is not so much that way. I notice that he prefers to serenade *les femmes* when they rest after delivering the letters. He is also very fond of food."

"Ah, I see. Not into the wine as well, is 'e?"

Petrus scratched Porthos' head affectionately. "Not that I have the certain knowledge of. But like the musketeer, he is most dedicated to his duty, is very strong, and I *know* he is loyal to the death."

Toby had a sudden flash of insight. "Porthos wouldn't be yer favourite musketeer, by any chance?"

Petrus stared at him, open mouthed and prick-eared. The usually neatly hooked tip of his tail hit the floor with a soft *thump*.

In a storm of ginger fur, Crookshanks burst out of an ambush point and pounced on it with glee.

Porthos flew to the newel post, raised his head-feathers, extended his wings, and dramatically hissed his disapproval of the half-Kneazle's ignoble tactics.

"This... This is true, Monsieur Tobias," Petrus said, then added apologetically, "Am I so transparent?"

"You? Nah. Out of everyone I've ever met, I reckon you're the most opaque. I liked D'Artagnan's style, meself."

Calming Porthos with a gesture and a few phrases of softly spoken French, Petrus obligingly slid the end of his tail under a hall rug, sending Crookshanks into an ecstasy of frenzied carpet-fighting. "Bold deeds of almost reckless daring... *Oui*, I can see it," he said, his eyes glowing as he looked Tobias over. "Monsieur D'Artagnan would have been enthralled with the tale of Tobias the Archer."

It was Toby's turn to stare with incredulity. "The... *What*?"

"It was incredible valour, Monsieur Tobias. Do not tell to me that it was anything less, because I will never believe you," Petrus stated, angling his ears back and placing one foot firmly forward. "However Monsieur, as you go about the castle, you should be aware that your deeds have... how do you say... grown in the telling?"

Toby groaned inwardly. Being the subject of tall tales was one of many last things he wanted. "By 'ow much?"

Petrus cocked an ear and folded his arms. "Three Death Eaters with one arrow."

"So it's only grown a *little* bit," Toby commented dryly. He sighed and rubbed his eyes. "Portraits?"

"*Oui*, Monsieur. And from the gossiping portraits to the untamed imaginations of the excitable young students."

"Well, that's grand, that is. Right *bloody* grand."

Petrus nodded. He straightened the rumpled carpet as Crookshanks gave in to temporary madness and raced away with his bristling tail held at a ludicrous angle. "*Oui*, everybody thinks so. Now, Monsieur Tobias, Tocky tells to me that there is something I may assist you with?"

Toby nodded and showed Petrus the box of Gobstones. "Yeah. 'Ave you got anythin' in t' library on these little devices?"

"Ah, there are twenty shelves filled with books detailing the history and techniques of this sport, Monsieur Tobias from novice to advanced some written by the international champions!"

"I'll stick to techniques for the time being, I reckon. S'pose I should start at novice level I've been gobbed on before and it's bloody messy. What's the process for borrowin' books?"

"For you, Monsieur Tobias, I will take care of the administration myself. Shall I make *une selection* for you and have Tocky deliver them after breakfast?"

"*Oui*... Um... yeah... please. That'd be good... Thanks."

Petrus bowed once more. "It is a pleasure, Monsieur."

Opening the folder in which he had filed the raven's message just one week previously, Kingsley sighed heavily and stood up, motioning the Russian Unspeakable to remain seated by the fire. "No need to get up, Valentin, you look like you need as much rest as you can get. Again, thank you for acting so quickly at short notice and on the basis of an anonymous message." He handed Valentin the raven-delivered note.

The Unspeakable shrugged stoically. "Things have improved very slowly since the fall of the Iron Walls our resources are still very limited," he said in heavily accented English. Having spent a gruelling six days in the Ukrainian winter, concealing his magic and searching for the truth of rumours, he was exhausted to the point of collapse. He read the message and handed it back. "It was fortuitous that we had noticed all was not well and were pushing our Ministry to investigate. Miserable weather and bad vodka could not account for the sudden spike in suicides and mental afflictions seen by our Squib operatives. Your message put spurs to our Granians. The Muggle population has been *is being* hit very hard."

Kingsley nodded. "And not just by raids on their villages."

Valentin nodded slowly and rubbed his chapped hands before the fire. "Cold camps are wretched places in such a climate. Winter has the land firmly in its teeth, now." He indicated the report he had brought with him. Producing his wand, he tapped the document once to produce a copy, and handed it to Kingsley. "All of the targeted villages share the common trait of being small and isolated. The few survivors say they were attacked by *nezhit* the undead. These undead are *not* Inferi, which is a small spark of good news. I followed tracks from one village and caught up with a group of them. True to the villagers' words, they showed a certain absence of *soul*: with my sight-glass, I could see the emptiness in their eyes."

Kingsley picked up the report and speed-read the summary. "They are a mixture of Muggles *and* wizards..."

"*Da* yes, Minister. I saw magic used to gather wood and make fire." He hesitated before emphasising the most disturbing item he had noted. "They travel, and attack, with Dementors." He shivered and summoned his reindeer skin cloak. "And that is not the worst thing..."

"You believe that the Dementors are responsible for the emptiness. And are somehow *using* the humans?"

Valentin nodded, his expression as sombre as a forgotten grave. "Your Patronus-source was correct about the ruinous city. There was only one place I knew of that fitted the description: the dead city of Pripjat. I made it to the bridge, but could go no further. The cold is so intense, the despair and... *hatred*... so heavy, that it threatens to crush body and mind. I hadn't the strength to withstand it, Minister. I am sorry." The Unspeakable lowered his eyes in shame.

Kingsley placed a consoling hand on Valentin's shoulder. "There is enough here for me to begin assembling a plan of action." *I hope Severus and company can work out what Fawkes' way-markers mean.* "Go and have something to eat other than black bread and salted pork fat."

Valentin managed a wry grin as he stood and bowed. "With pleasure, Minister. Especially in the absence of Ukrainian vodka: it burns like dragons' bile and kicks like a rabid Re'em." He handed over a package wrapped in brown parchment marked with the seal of the Durmstrang Institute. "These records took a little time to obtain, Minister. I hope you find what you seek."

The raven strutted importantly across Kingsley's desk and pecked at the parchment wrapping.

"You are going to keep him?" Valentin asked, indicating the sooty bird.

Kingsley distracted the raven with an Owl Treat. "I tried letting him go so he could find his own way home, but he started flying in and out of the grounds of the Tower of London and caused quite a bit of fuss and bother. There are superstitious Muggles about who say that the kingdom will fall should the ravens leave the Tower."

"Maybe he likes London and wants to stay."

The raven cawed and tucked into a bowl of plums.

"Hey! Those are mine, feathered thief!" Kingsley warded the bowl to prevent further pillaging. "Perhaps I *should* send you into Her Majesty's service where a Yeoman Warder can keep a sharp eye on you!"

Severus gave up trying to stride. A little over a foot of powdery snow made it ungainly and undignified if not impossible. Behind him, Hermione questioned Oriens on the methods of Vedic Arithmancy, rattling off formulae and theorems for the Unspeakable to match with examples from his own schooling. He knew Hermione would be searching for common principles between the Arithmantic teachings of East and West. She had a fascination for how the methods of calculation, derivation and dimensioning had evolved a fascination that had not been blunted by an extremely "Nastily Exhausting" Arithmancy N.E.W.T. the day before. He *still* hadn't told her about the Sight-visioned children. Part of him genuinely didn't want to distract Hermione from the last labours of her formal schooling, nor did he want her to think he would impinge on her career prospects of course he wouldn't. But another part of him worried that she might interpret the prospect of offspring the wrong way and conclude that he only wanted her to carry his heirs, given that his bloodline was far more illustrious than he would ever have imagined.

He caught up to Petrus, who had gone on ahead in short bursts of flight, and balanced on a large rock to escape the snow for a moment.

Petrus shook his head as Hermione paused to draw a complicated symbol in the snow. "When Oriens and Mademoiselle Hermione began to talk of the dimensioned matrices with poly-directional vectors... *Je ne pouvais pas comprendre*"

"It's probably safe to say that most Beings wouldn't," Severus offered, silently willing Hermione to put her right mitten back on before her fingers turned blue.

Petrus scooped up a double handful of snow, held it in his cupped hands until it melted, then lapped it up with fastidious delicacy.

Just what are you, exactly? Severus wondered as he watched the stone Being. *Apparently made of stone, yet with enough life heat to melt snow* He had only touched Petrus once while screening him for Dark Magic down in the Ministry vaults. He had noted that Petrus' "skin" was perhaps a little warmer than a typical human, had the texture of smoothed sandstone, and yielded slightly to pressure at least, when he was animate. "So you *do* take in sustenance," Severus commented, stating the obvious to prompt further explanations.

Toby slogged through the snow and gratefully leaned against a leafless tree to catch his breath.

"*Oui*, Monsieur Severus, though I do not need to. It is nice to do so." Petrus licked his lips. "Water tastes so sweet when it is freshly melted." He shook his hands to dry them. "I must admit some small partiality to the *cidre* of Normandy but it must be taken in a bowl to be properly savoured."

Severus could only agree with that recommendation. During his first year of apprenticeship he had been sent on an expedition with Pugsley then a senior apprentice to gather rare seaweeds from the Normandy coast. Their mission accomplished after several tide-dodging days, the two weary, ravenous wizards had feasted luxuriously on mussels steeped in cream, and slow roasted Rouen duck washed down with many bowls of potent *cidre*. "And solid food?"

Petrus shook his head. "I have tried it several times, but it is not to my liking." He rubbed his stomach. "It makes too much heat inside."

"Sounds good to me," Toby grumbled. He gave Petrus a crafty look. "So y' like cider, and yer not so keen on food. What about..."

"*Monsieur Tobias!*" Petrus protested, his face and ears taking on a definite iron oxide tinge.

Toby grinned innocently. "What? 'Ow do you know what I was goin' to ask?"

Petrus narrowed his eyes. "Because the little warning bells, they told me to beware! You know the identity of *mon* favourite musketeer *and* you have the look of mischief."

Severus reluctantly interrupted the beginnings of banter for the sake of punctuality. "I doubt that Petrus is the type to kiss and tell," he said as Hermione and Oriens caught up exchanging conclusions on imputation techniques to identify power series in Transfiguration Spells.

Petrus strolled past Toby and nudged him lightly. "*Certainement pas!*"

Toby nudged him back. "I've 'eard about you librarians," he muttered. He squinted at a movement in the forest. "G'day, Firenze!"

The palomino centaur threaded his way through the snow draped trees. "Good day. I was beginning to wonder what had become of you all."

Severus rolled his eyes. "There were some minor impediments to progress in the form of a steep hill, snow, and a little bit of Arithmancy."

"Arithmancy?" Firenze shrugged thoughtfully. "Transient cryptomorphic impedance can show up in the most unexpected places."

"Unlike ley lines," Toby put in without having the slightest idea about the subject matter. He had noted Severus' slightly desperate expression coincide with Hermione's gasp of interest. A distraction was needed. "Firenze, don't you feel the cold?"

"Ley lines have been known to move usually in response to earthquakes otherwise, yes, they are very predictable," Firenze answered, ushering the small group into the relative shelter of the trees. "I *can* feel the cold, Tobias; I simply do not respond to it in the ways that humans do."

Severus felt Hermione's mittened hand slide into his gloved one as they walked with Firenze to the appointed place. Wanting her to himself for a while, he loitered until the others were a slight distance ahead of them. "Sorry, I got a bit carried away," she said, looking at him and biting her lower lip.

"There are worse things to take an interest in than Arithmancy." Severus couldn't keep the affection out of his tone as he used his free thumb to gently release her lip. "I cite Miss Brown as an extreme example of one given to indulging in superficial pursuits."

Hermione nodded, wincing at the memory of dormitory conversations that seldom went beyond fashion, boys, make-up, boys, hair care, and boys. "Poor Lavender! But I shouldn't have called her a bimbo."

"Yes, you should."

Hermione lightly punched her wizard's arm. "Snarky-pants! There's a rumour she was trying to get back together with Ron, but he seems to be the property of another witch."

Severus scowled, though he was secretly quite pleased to hear it. "As written in the *Daily Prophet*?"

Hermione squeezed his hand. "Where else? Don't act as if you don't know you read the *Prophet* at breakfast!" She coloured a little, still coming to terms with the fact that she had finally persuaded Minerva into allowing her to surrender her room in the Gryffindor Tower. Hermione's confidence in the lasting strength of the bond she shared with her wizard had convinced the pragmatic headmistress that there would be no need of a "safe retreat" should things not work out. She was certain to the core of her soul that she would be breakfasting with Severus for many years to come.

"*Not* the gossip column. *Nosy Niffler*, forsooth! I haven't forgotten what Skeeter wrote about you on what passed for front page news."

"You don't know what you're missing!" Hermione laughed.

"I beg to differ, Madam."

"As I was saying... Don't groan like that! Ron is the property of Bronnie Thatcher the Harpies' new number two Beater. Sporty, strong, likes a pie and a pint... child-bearing hips..." Hermione looked down at her steadily plodding snow-boots and frowned.

Severus saw an opportunity. Using his Legilimency, he made his presence known at the edges of Hermione's mind. *May I? I'd rather not be overheard* A slight flurry of startled thought brushed past him, then the answer came:

Of course.

You showed a certain despondency when you mentioned...

Bronnie's breeding potential.

Not quite how I was going to describe it. This troubles you?

No, not really. It's just that... You know when I told you about my recurring dreams, and how I could see myself with two children?

Severus nodded.

Well, I can't see them any more. All the other memories of the dream are fading ghostly, really but the children have disappeared completely. It's not as though I've committed murder or anything... Or regret my decision don't ever think that... I just wonder... Hermione shrugged.

Noting a jumbled pile of unasked, interrelated questions, Severus took his best guess as to what his witch might have been going to say. *You wonder if you might yet have the opportunity to...*

Hermione looked up at him, her eyes searching his even though their minds were still linked. *Will I?* Her thoughts almost tripped over themselves. *Have the opportunity?*

Feeling a misty echo of future hopes, Severus took a deep breath and let Hermione touch the strange mixture of emotions that raced through his mind taking physical manifestation as a raised pulse, anxious stomach, and a postural shift indicating a slight stirring of pride. Warily, he held up two fingers.

Hermione clamped her hands over her mouth to muffle an involuntary squeak. *You've seen them! Oh, Severus, why didn't you tell me?*

Severus struggled to explain himself. *I didn't want you to think that I'd put any... pressure on you... to... delay your career prospects... Because... Because of my ancestors and all that guff about continued blood lines and...*

Hermione pushed him playfully. *You've been hanging around exclusivist purebloods and their sacred family trees for too long! I don't think that at all! Nor do I believe you'd insist on domesticating me. I just wasn't sure if you'd ever planned on...*

"Oi!" Toby waved at them from a rounded stone archway. "Are you comin' in, or would y' prefer it if we dug you both out of a bloody great snowdrift later on?"

Severus withdrew from Hermione's mind and looked around. The snow had begun to fall again, and both of them had acquired a light dusting of delicate crystals.

"Just tell me," Hermione whispered, "All I want to know is: are they healthy?"

"From what I could see, they are indeed," Severus replied, escorting her through the stone arch and into a warm, earth-walled cavern.

In Hogsmeade, people hurried to get out of the weather as much as the bulk of necessary woollens would allow. Mothers paused to cast anti-slipping charms on young children's boots and shoes, patiently telling them that *now* would *not* be the best time to stop in at Honeydukes. A group of wizards emerged from the warm, ruddy glow of The Three Broomsticks and agreed amongst themselves that it would be a "Five Charm Night" alluding to the number of Warming Charms one would need to stay comfortable.

In a narrow lane snaking its grimy way into Knockturn Alley, a Dementor waited unseen. In its bony, clawed hand was a scroll sealed with spell and ward addressed to Severus Snape.

The Gathering – Part 2

Chapter 24 of 32

The recipients of Fawkes' messages gather to decipher hidden meanings and, in the process, form the outline of a plan.

Severus receives a message that he was expecting and a package that he wasn't expecting at all.

Oriens comes through with good information and puts his life in Fawkes' talons. Arawn is quietly optimistic... so are the Dementors.

French English (on-line translator)

Amplifiée Amplified

Bourdon The heaviest of the bells in a musical arrangement. The bourdon produces the lowest notes.

Croyez-moi, une fois suffit Believe me, once was enough.

Résonance Resonance

Other vernacular

Out'ouse (out-house) A backyard toilet.

The Narrow Sea The English Channel

Canon characters are the property of J.K. Rowling. I make no money from them.

Thank you, AmyLouise, for advising on the proper designation of French plurals...

And a huge parcel of gratitude to TeaOli, whose beta-skills never fail to add a precision to my work that would otherwise be swamped in commas.

They were slightly smaller than the centaurs of Bane's herd, but they looked rugged and agile, weather toughened and wise. Both were grey flanked with well-muscled legs and broad hooves. Their human features were tanned walnut-brown, and their eyes had the farsighted look of those whose only boundaries are marked by the distant horizon. Their hair was blond, straight, and worn long in the manner of Hermione speculated as she weighed the conflicting historical accounts and lack of proper evidence the ancient Merovingian kings. Feeling a light touch at her elbow, Hermione gave Firenze her full attention.

"The Camargue herd traditionally has two leaders of equal status: one male, one female. Etüyen keeps law; Breyün keeps wisdom. The Keeper of Wisdom has always been female," the palomino centaur whispered as Bane concluded the introductions.

Hermione thanked him appreciatively. The insights she had been given into centaur culture promised a rich depth of history, tradition, knowledge, and experience. No wonder that the centaurs had refused the entirely *human* definition of Being status a definition coined under the same administrative ethics that had caused so much discord in the first place. *Ghosts have their own definition that they seem to be happy with*, she thought. *I'm sure we could do the same for centaurs* She nodded politely when Bryndorach informally saluted her. *Nobody in their right mind would group centaurs with hags Hags! and vampires. Memo to me... Fix this as soon as possible.* Knowing that further deliberation would lead her onto a soap box the size of an international shipping container, she turned all of her attention to her surroundings.

After the ceremonies at the Stone Circle six days previously, Bane had proposed "The Giant's Barrow" as a suitable meeting place for the recipients of Fawkes' messages. Upon questioning, Bane had assured Hermione that he was certain no giant had ever lain in state there, but it *had* been the place where Hagrid and Grawp had initially hidden after escaping militant Death Eaters. It was a spacious earth cavern with supporting columns made of expertly fitted dry stone some bearing signs of Grawp's attentions arranged at regular intervals along the walls. The columns reached up to form round arches which spanned the roof and gave an upside-down forest of tree roots something to tangle with. As she mused on who might have excavated the Barrow, Bane added dry branches to a fire burning in the middle of the floor and renewed a charm to direct the smoke to go outside.

She felt Severus take her arm and followed his lead to the fire where everyone had begun to gather in a circle. She nudged him gently, then directed his attention to where Breyün stood watching him with incisive analysis.

"You have the look of your forefather," Breyün said to Severus when his eyes locked with hers.

"Your people knew him?" Severus asked with equal directness, instinctively knowing of whom she spoke.

"When Vortigern's shadow-wraiths massed on our borders on their way to attack Ambrosius' army, we were threatened by that which we had never encountered before." Breyün nodded to Etüyen, who held up an aurochs horn bound with silver. "It was your ancestor who gave us the means to fight it and drive it from our lands. Years later, when he returned from the realm of the Byzantines, he brought with him centaurs who had been sold into slavery. With royal gold and a prince's privilege, he had bargained for over fifty yearlings *stolen* from the forests of the land beyond the Narrow Sea. Our people led him and his charges by secret ways through salt marsh and fen, under the shrouds of night and mist so that he might return them to homeland and herd in secret. Our memories are long, descendant of Merlin."

Acutely aware of Bane and Oriens' open astonishment, Firenze's silent shift to respectful attention, the abrupt jingle of Bryndorach's chain mail, and Petrus' hissed *Ave Maria!* at the appellation Breyün had bestowed upon him, Severus drew the dragon brooch out of his pocket. Without giving any hint as to what it was, he displayed it on his open palm.

The Camargue centaurs looked at each other and nodded. "It was Merlin's," Breyün confirmed. "He always wore it. The red dragon cipher was given to him by his father..."

"Ambrosius," Severus murmured, deliberately dispelling any supposition that he was entirely ignorant of what lay in his hand.

"The red dragon crossing the sky," Bane whispered to Firenze, who gave his herd leader an unsurprised nod of affirmation.

Etüyen addressed Severus in tones of regal importance. "Bane and Firenze told us of what transpired during the meeting held after the attack in the Forbidden Forest. The red dragon is yours by birthright, along with the bright power the planets spoke of."

Severus scowled, sealing the memory of mosaic, statue, and crystal cave behind his Occlumency. "While the cipher is completely benign, the '*bright power*' is another matter altogether. I must admit: I don't know what it is, who fashioned it and why, or how best to use it."

The five centaurs shared knowing glances. "One truly driven by the Dark would think himself *sure* of its use," said Breyün, laying a warm hand on Severus' shoulder. "You are not such a man. Trust the power, Severus, and let it show you what must be done."

Severus' eyes narrowed in suspicion. "How do you know I can trust it?"

Breyün unflinchingly held his gaze. "Have you experienced anything to confirm that you cannot?"

"No. Not yet." Severus glanced at Tobias, who shrugged uneasily. Rousing himself, he transfigured a stone into a table, then produced a map from the sleeve of his robes. Placing it on the table, he enlarged and unrolled it. With his wand, he touched a symbol on the legend. The map's elaborate details shifted and buckled. Mountain ranges, forests, rivers, and valleys took on a three-dimensional aspect.

Hermione leaned in to have a closer look, giving a small gasp of delight to see tiny trains inching their way along cobweb-thin silver threads of railway lines. Cities and towns pululated with moving forms no bigger than specks of dust.

"It's actually a world map," Severus explained. "I had a look at it yesterday and left the scale and extent commands on northern England. It's accurate to street level," he continued, pointing to a floating label that said "Manchester" in genteel copperplate script. "It was originally produced by an obscure logistical support section in the Department of International Magical Cooperation. Fortunately, they still exist and were able to update the map to present-day. I ground-truthed it against places I'm reasonably familiar with."

Hermione was captivated. "Where did you find it?"

Severus nodded towards Petrus. "Ask our librarian he's been excavating the stacks in search of the useful and interesting."

Petrus bowed and climbed onto a plinth Oriens had transfigured for him. "It is an adventure of great discovery and a most enjoyable means of passing the time," he said, curling his tail in contentment. "The items brought by the phoenix, I thought perhaps some of them related to places? If so, the map would be a useful thing."

"Indeed." Severus included everybody in a sweeping glance. "Phoenix feathers aside, let us take an inventory of the items Fawkes has delivered." He nodded to the leader of the Schwarzwald herd. "Bryndorach, if you would begin?"

The centaur produced an acorn and fir cone. "Centuries ago, when Vortigern held *this* land in a tightening noose, our people resisted the tyranny of the human war-brothers Horsa and Hengist. We had refused to fight for them as mercenaries, so they set about wiping the very memory of our existence from the land. But we did not fear them any more than we feared death and fought them with skirmish and ambush where the forest grows thick and dark. It was Ceōrval of the Forest of Eidyn Bane's ancestor who came to us offering allegiance. On that day, a pledge was made between the herds of the Schwarzwald and the Forest of Eidyn the remnant of which is now called Forbidden: that if one called for aid, the other would answer. The signal was to be an acorn and a fir cone, placed together on the heart of a Stone Circle." Bryndorach hefted his double-bladed axe. "The signal was given, and so we stand ready."

"Even though it was not *us* who gave the signal," Bane said, briefly clasping Bryndorach's forearm in a gesture of solidarity. His expression grew stern. "The freed slaves Breyün spoke of... Some of them were our people. We remember what Merlin did for us. He protected the homelands of the southern herds against the Saxon's fire and swords and gave us the horns to banish the shadows ... the Dementors. We fought for him willingly at the Ambush of the Horns." Bane's eyes held a fierce fire as he directed his next statement to Severus. "We will do so again for Merlin's descendant."

Hermione gripped Severus' arm as the atmosphere in the Giant's Barrow stirred and pulsed. For a moment, only the soft, resinous hiss of the fire divided the earth-scented silence. As Severus turned his attention back to the map, she could sense something like the weighty lull of an ocean tide before it begins to turn. Holding her tongue

between her teeth, she watched Severus touch his wand to another symbol on the map legend and place a yellow dot over the Forbidden Forest and then another over the lands of the Schwarzwald herd.

"The phoenix gave us these," Etüyen said, his voice complementing the mood rather than breaking it. He placed a dried water-reed on the table. Straight stemmed, the reed's terminal frond curled back over itself in a shallow "S" shape a perfect replication of the Rune of Waiting. Next, the Camargue centaur deposited a stone shaped like a long spearhead, and with evident distaste a ragged shred of dull grey cloth which seemed to exude cold like a cursed object. "Taken from one of the shadow-wraiths," the centaur murmured, the muscles in his hindquarters flexing as he added with a restrained growl: "A *Dementor*."

Severus picked up the stone. "I believe I know what Fawkes was referring to when he left this." He adjusted the map again and directed another yellow dot into position above the Camargue in southern France. "As most of you know, when I examine the object of bright power the Llygad y Ddraig I am shown images: scenes which often relate to events long ago, but do not appear to be confined to history. In one particular revelation, I saw the four objects of Macsen's treasure."

Breyün closed her eyes and smiled as though revisiting a bittersweet memory. "The Sword of Kings, the Grail of Light..."

"The Spear of the Stronghold, and the Platter of Replenishment," Petrus finished for her. "The Spear and the Platter, these are yet to be found."

Breyün nodded. "The Sword has gone home through the waters. The Grail has gone home through the empyrean. No one knows where Nimuë hid the Spear and the Platter."

"The Spear *has* been found," Severus stated with a commanding certainty that seemed to speak of its own accord. He surveyed his instantly attentive audience. Only Hermione regarded him with something other than bated breath she had already made the connection between the stone Fawkes had delivered and what he had told her after his last vision, when they were alone together. "In another *revelation*, I saw a void above a ruined city. Out of the void a rift came waves of cold hatred, hungry for an uncountable number of souls: the harbinger of an invasion of Dementors. In front of me, I saw a person: man or woman, Muggle or wizard, I couldn't tell. Whoever that person is has found the Spear and has it in their possession." He handled the spearhead-shaped stone. "This stone represents the Spear." He scowled at the map. "And Fawkes delivered it to the *Camargue* herd the location must be significant."

Petrus tossed his postcard of *Cathédrale Notre Dame de Paris* onto the table. "*La France. Monsieur Severus*, it could be that the phoenix warns that Arawn will assemble the Dementors somewhere in France. Perhaps even Paris."

Severus mentally rearranged scattered pieces of information in search of a best fit. He pressed the point of the stone into the ragged shred of cloth. *If I were to trust Fawkes, I'd be certain that he would not deliver a symbol of the Spear and a Dementor at the same place, at the same time, without there being a tangible reason* He recalled the vision of the void. *The Spear must have a crucial role in our as yet unformed strategy. But how do we find the person who has it?* He stared at the water reed. "And the Rune of Waiting... Waiting for what? A challenge? Another sign?"

"Dementor sightings were becoming more frequent in Paris and Calais up to one week ago," Oriens put in. "Since then nothing."

Hermione considered the sudden departure of Dementors from the Battle of Hogwarts. They hadn't departed for good *then*. "Supposing 'nothing' doesn't equate to absence. What if it simply means that the Dementors are staying out of sight?"

Severus arranged all the objects to one side of the map and folded his arms. The fingers of his wand hand flexed slowly as he thought. "They're *waiting*."

A sudden movement at the entrance to the Barrow had wands in hands and weapons raised. Petrus bit back on a snarl... then his ears swivelled forward in surprise as a silver lynx bounded into the Barrow.

"Password!" Kingsley's voice demanded, indicating that the message about to be relayed was one of great importance.

"Black arrow," Severus responded immediately, relying on his intuition that the Patronus' message concerned the very subject that he and his present company had been pondering.

The lynx sat bolt upright before the fire. "My Russian contact has come through with information. Arawn has got an army not only of Dementors but partially *eaten* Muggles and wizards the latter presumably fugitive Death Eaters. Numbers are guesswork: but there'll be more than four hundred humans based on survivors' estimates."

Everyone except Toby drew a breath. *Survivors?*

Toby stared very hard at the spot everyone else was looking at, but couldn't see or hear anything. Whatever it was seemed to be capable of speech and had just made a very dire announcement. He pressed his fingers into his left forearm. Under many layers of insulation, he could feel the movement of the red dragon engraved into his arm-guard. While he had left his weaponry behind, it hadn't seemed right to leave the arm-guard in his rooms especially since the little dragon had appeared very excited at the prospect of an outing.

The lynx laid its ears back a gesture that Petrus subconsciously copied and began to pace. "As for Dementors... We're talking about... possibly thousands. They're coming out of the abandoned city of Pripyat in the northern Ukraine. From what my contact experienced when he tried to get close to the city, that's where the rift will be. Everything he said about that place supports what you saw, Severus. Looks like Oriens was right about those verminous parasites coming through a recently created doorway without so much as wiping their feet!" The lynx hissed and spat. "How the *blue blazing hell* do we close something like that?" The lynx's claws appeared to dig into the floor. "They've been moving through the most inhospitable parts of the Ukraine, heading south towards the Romanian border. Feeding off isolated Muggle villages as they go." Kingsley's Patronus hunkered down unhappily. "Severus, whatever that Llygad thing is... I could sense the power in it. If you *can* use it to stop them and not kill yourself in the process go ahead. I'm calling an extraordinary meeting of the Order, tomorrow morning at Grimmauld Place. I'll send confirmation by owl. Keep me as informed as you can. I'll maintain secrecy regarding the Fawksian Fellowship."

All right... Regroup, Severus ordered himself as the lynx vanished. He directed his internal resilience to use heavy odds as a honing tool for strategic thinking. He noted his father's blank look of uncertainty and gave him a stoic nod. He touched his wand to a map symbol made up of a compass rose and a question mark. "Pripyat," he said. The scale shifted to include the Ukraine, and a red flag appeared above the city in question. "Show national borders." Severus eyed the Romanian border lands rugged, wild, and sparsely populated. "Arawn *possibly* has a vanguard stationed in the northeast of France. If we call the rest of them the body of an army... He would have to mass them somewhere. We now know they came out of Pripyat, then headed for Romania... but where to from there?" He pondered out loud.

"I think I know," Oriens said baldly. The Unspeakable, who had remained perspicaciously reticent since entering the Barrow, approached the table and traced one finger over the mountainous country along Romania's western border. Continuing the traced route southwest, he cut across northern Serbia and crossed the River Danube into Croatia, stopping at a densely forested area east of the Adriatic Sea. As soon as his finger touched the spot, a red, triangular icon hovered above the place: *Warning! Restricted Area. Enter at own risk.* "They will gather on the edge of *this* forest."

Unspoken speculations hovered. No one was sure how to go about questioning an Unspeakable's decisively delivered judgement.

"There are many things about this place that as an Unspeakable I cannot tell you," Oriens said without raising his eyes from the map. "What I *can* say is that the clasp which Fawkes has borrowed I say 'borrowed' because I'm fairly certain I can get it back was carved from the wood of a certain tree growing in the deepest part of the same forest." *It was made for my grandmother by her...* He raised his head. "Arawn and company will not go into that forest. Not unless he gains the upper hand."

"Or, more likely, the Dementors gain the upper hand," Severus growled.

Oriens nodded. "That is a very dangerous possibility." He indicated the warning sign. "For the moment, they will use the location's reputation as cover for their presence."

Bryndorach traced a straight line between the "Restricted Area" and Paris, then Calais. He snorted and stamped a forefoot when the Calais line passed right over his herd's territory.

"What reputation does that forest have? Is it warded, guarded?" Hermione asked.

Oriens gave her a small smile of apology. "That's information I can't give you. I'll need to brief Kingsley, after which I'll Portkey over and see what Fawkes has, no doubt, arranged. If I spot Arawn's friends before I venture into the forest, I'll send my Patronus to give you an exact location and numbers. After that, if you don't hear from me within three days, you can be sure that I'm on the other side of the Veil. I'll leave sealed instructions for the Minister to open should I not make it back."

Petrus' eyes widened in shock. "*Non...*," he whispered, shaking his head.

Oriens moved to stand beside his friend. "I've faced far more dire dangers," he said. "While I'm reasonably sure that I'll return unscathed, there are *always* exceptions to things we assume are predictable." He gave a pensive Hermione a wry look. "Even Arithmetic Laws... under certain conditions."

Mindful not to place Oriens in a situation where he would have to refuse information, Severus pared his thoughts down to bare bones. "In terms of a defensive strategy, can the indicated forest give us some sort of advantage if Arawn's forces are massed there?"

Oriens answered carefully. "That depends very much on the outcome of my mission. If the result is favourable, we will have an advantage one with *surprise* built into it."

Toby reflected on the lengthy catalogue of his own experience. "In a fight, that's one of the best advantages to 'ave."

Looking his father in the eyes, Severus shared a silent moment of understanding. Both of them had employed that particular advantage more times than they cared to admit. Sighing, he turned his mind to tactics. "There are two locations, Paris and Calais, where Dementors have made a reasonably sudden disappearance. We need to establish whether they have truly departed, or if they are in hiding and waiting on a signal."

A murmur of agreement swept around the fire.

Severus levitated another branch into the blaze. "I'll send my Patronus to Kingsley requesting a survey of Paris and Calais for Dementor activity. However," he said, scowling thoughtfully into space, "we should try to give him some idea of *where* in those cities to look. Our resources are not unlimited, infallible... or expendable." *Stick that last point in your jar of sherbet lemons, Albus.*

Hermione examined the map. "Instructions for use...," she muttered, touching her wand to a picture of a magnifying glass. "Zoom to... Oops! Wrong way...There! That's what I wanted!" She pointed to the now breathtakingly detailed city of Calais.

Severus quirked an eyebrow.

"The Eurotunnel shuttle service runs between Calais and Dover," she said, still thinking at a furious pace. "Muggles use it to travel between England and Europe in a bit over half an hour," she told the centaurs and Petrus. "If Arawn wanted to smuggle Dementors into England without anybody noticing, that would be the route to use. I'd suggest focussing efforts around the vicinity of the tunnel." She shivered and rearranged her scarf. "It's not as though wizards would frequent the tunnel. I can't say *I'd ever* use it, now that I have access to Portkeys."

As he jotted down Hermione's idea on a piece of folded parchment, Severus tried in vain to keep the pride out of his smirk. "And set wards at both ends," he added. "Which leaves Paris." He eyed the postcard. "I suppose it would be too obvious to propose that the cathedral is a temporary haunt for Dementors."

Petrus climbed down from his plinth. "*Oui, Monsieur* Severus. Too obvious and perhaps even impossible."

Severus cocked his head. "Impossible? Why?" Even as he asked the questions, some of his own extracurricular research a boy's own adventure in trying to make History of Magic more interesting prodded at his memory. Intersecting ley lines formed nodes of power so palpable, even Muggles could sense them. Many such nodes were readily identifiable in settled areas: they usually had a place of ceremony or worship built right on top of them.

Petrus' ears pricked enthusiastically. "There is power there, *Monsieur* Severus," he said, pointing to the image of the great cathedral. "Ancient power... power that came into being when the world was born. Power for making and supporting the opposite of what *les* Dementors are." Petrus angled back one ear and briefly lashed his tail. "I begin to think of something, but it is most difficult to explain... Have you heard the people say that when the bells of worship ring, evil is driven away?"

"I've heard of it," Hermione said, looking to Severus to see if he knew of it too.

"How effective is it?" Severus asked, sensing something useful that was just out of definition's reach. "I've also heard that gargoyles were supposed to repulse enemies which certainly proved true in the Battle of Hogwarts, much to Minerva's delight."

Petrus nonchalantly stretched his wings. "It proved true for *Cathédrale Notre Dame de Paris* as well, *Monsieur* Severus," he said, referring to a turning point in his own history with dignified gravity. "As for the effectiveness of the bells..." He shrugged. "Against *les* Dementors, I cannot say. I never saw one of their kind until Arawn took the artefact from the vault. *Croyez-moi, une fois suffit*. But it is true that when the bells, they are rung, the power acts to... *amplifiée* the tones."

Oriens rubbed his jaw in contemplation while the centaurs whispered to one another about ley lines and nodes. "I think I see your reasoning, Petrus. Severus, could we trouble you for a demonstration of the alternative method of Dementor repulsion?"

Severus wandlessly cast a pulse of infrasound, raising his eyebrows when the centaurs ceased their whispering to stare at him and Petrus gave a small yelp of excitement.

"It is the same *résonance*!" Petrus clapped his hands together, eyes glowing with delight. "The same as Emmanuel!"

Hermione frowned, then noticed that Severus had already called up Paris on the map and had created an inset featuring the cathedral in question.

Bane handled an aurochs horn with newfound wonder. "We heard the same resonance when we sounded the horns Merlin charmed for us," he said. "Forgive me if I don't give you all an immediate demonstration I believe these were meant to be used outdoors." He turned to Petrus, who was gazing into the fire with a rapturous expression. "Would you enlighten us further... Who is Emmanuel?"

"*Le bourdon*," Petrus whispered. "Emmanuel carries the notes of the other bells... bearing the burden, marking the time and the measure. He would sing with Marie... Marie's song would soar to the roof of Heaven only because Emmanuel's strength gave her the proper foundation and the directions to return home."

"He's talking about the bells in the cathedral," Hermione explained to the centaurs, picking up a long twig and using it to point to the three-dimensional bell towers. "There used to be two large bells," she continued, recalling her brief sortie into the history of the building while gathering information on Petrus' background. "In the north tower, Marie: the great church bell. In the south tower, Emmanuel: the bourdon." *All thirteen tons of him, not counting the half-ton clapper*

"Marie is no more," Petrus said mournfully. "I read that it is so. How could they do such a thing as to break her apart and melt her down?"

"But we still have Emmanuel," Severus interjected sharply, a tactic taking shape in his mind. *A resonance Dementors really don't like, amplified by an unknown number of*

intersecting ley lines. "He could prove very useful. However, before we conscript him, we need to verify the presence of Dementors in Paris, which leads us back to the question of where best to look."

Firenze dismissed a thought with a swish of his tail. "Location of sightings might not be the best guide."

Oriens agreed with him. "When I looked at the distribution of the Paris sightings, they were pretty much random not clustered at all."

Eyeing the inset of the cathedral, Toby flexed his right shoulder and silently cursed the wizard who had inflicted the damage as having among other unsavoury attributes all the charm of "an out'ouse rat with a gold tooth". He curbed his mental cursing as a connection barged and blustered its way into an idea. *Eurotunnel... Underground... Out of sight... Out'ouse rat. Shit.* "Check the sewers!" he shouted.

Nine startled stares answered him.

Toby pointed to the main map which showed Paris in its entirety. "Check the sewers for those bastard things! If they're gonna stay out of sight in a bloody great city..."

"Yes. That would indeed be their kind of place," Severus muttered. He locked eyes with Tobias. "Good thinking, though I really do wonder how you made the connection."

"Easy," Toby answered airily. "It comes from maintainin' inner discipline."

Severus eyed him sceptically. "Erkling shit."

Toby nodded sagely. "Close 'nough. See? You're gettin' the idea."

With a sigh of forbearance, Severus added another dot point to the message he would dictate to his Patronus. He gave Hermione a sidelong glance. "I'll suggest that it may be worth checking the Animagus registers. If there are any rats in the lists, they could be press-ganged into service and sent down for a look," he added.

Hermione wrinkled her nose and grimaced. "Oh, the poor things... They can't *all* be as deserving as Wormtail!" Her expression took on a wicked cast. "A beetle Animagus could do a fly-through," she suggested.

Severus added the potential merits of beetles to his notes with a grin that was bordering on evil.

Petrus circled the table, drinking in the sight of his former home. He lashed his tail and flexed his taloned fingers. "If these defiling entities are found, *Monsieur* Severus, will it be impossible to remove them?"

"If they are found," Severus emphasised. "I have the outline of a plan, but we need hard facts before we can structure it any further." He turned his back to the fire, determined not to follow Albus' example in keeping obsessive levels of secrecy to the point of endangering lives. "The same goes for Oriens' mission we need to know what we're dealing with before we can formulate the best strategy. For the moment, accurate information is everything." He heard Bryndorach speak his name. Running a hand through his hair, he returned to the table where the centaurs were poring over the map.

"If Oriens *does* find these Dementors and partially eaten humans," Bane began, using Hermione's twig to circle the Restricted Area, "a pre-emptive attack should fall to our people. Our abilities are best deployed far away from Muggle cities. We can prevent the body of the army from joining with the vanguard. We have the horns that Merlin charmed, and we can bring in reinforcements to our numbers from the Ünkhari." He pointed to southern Hungary. "They are not so much a settled herd as a number of small, highly mobile bands. They are fey fighters and utterly indomitable." Bane blinked away a sudden glaze of bitter regret as his eyes lingered on England. "Our herds are not what they were..."

"For what it's worth, Bane," Toby offered, "if even a quarter of those 'umans are Muggles like meself, and they've got 'nough wits left to actually *look* at you... well, you'll scare 'em into a flat out panic."

"Panic and chaos among the enemy's ranks would be a desirable outcome," Severus agreed.

Toby suddenly wished that he *had* brought his bow and arrows. "My bloody oath! Don't take offense or nothin', but even now, if I saw armed centaurs comin' at me in attack-mode... I reckon the fright'd drop me before I 'ad a chance to run for it."

Bryndorach shouldered his war axe with a menacing flourish and fixed Toby with a stern look, though his eyes held a spark of comradely mirth. "Are we really so terrifying?"

"Severus! Thank goodness you're back!" Minerva swept across the entrance hall as Severus, Hermione, and Tobias thanked various deities for the gift of doors that shut out the weather. Firenze shook a thin layer of snow off his back, stamped his hooves and vanished the resulting slushy puddle. Flicking melting snow out of his ears, Petrus crunched an icicle between his cheek teeth while examining the Hourglasses for the latest House points tally.

Severus raised a wary eyebrow when the headmistress anxiously took him aside. "Bad news?"

"Kingsley wants to see you. He told me that as soon as you returned, you should go to his office as a matter of urgency. He wouldn't say what it concerned, and quite frankly, I would rather not know."

Rolling his eyes, Severus re-fastened the heavy cloak that he had been looking forward to shedding. "Patience and penance," he grumbled, pushing away a stab of envy at those who were at liberty to enjoy home, hearth, and good company. "I hope Kingsley has put the kettle on." He took Hermione's hands. "I can't say how long this will take..."

Hermione silenced him by kissing him lightly. "Both of us know the meaning of duty," she said. "Not always convenient but best attended to sooner than later. Send me a Patronus when you're heading back." She held him close for a moment to whisper impishly: "I'll make sure the bed's warm."

If the Minister for Magic noticed the unusual amount of colour in Severus' countenance, he chose not to mention it. As soon as his newest head of department was comfortably seated and fortified with a piping hot cup of tea, Kingsley pointed to a sealed glass jar containing a scroll. "*That* is addressed to you, Severus," he said quietly. "It's been scanned for curses and hexes, but I thought that given the mode of delivery, you might prefer to do your own screening before you touch it."

Severus inclined his head. "I take it that it didn't arrive by owl?"

Kingsley frowned apprehensively. "The wards were briefly disturbed near the old entrance. When a group of Aurors went out to investigate, they found the scroll..." Kingsley stood and paced restlessly. "It was... wedged... into a hitching-bar where visitors used to tie their Aethonans."

"Wedged?"

"With a reasonably fresh human thigh bone."

Oh. Severus drained his tea and performed a standard set of detection charms. Finding nothing, he opened the jar and levitated the scroll. The next detection sequence would not have been out of place at an Aurors' annual conference, and the final screening would have been entirely appropriate and advisable at a Dark Revel. "Were any

Dementors sighted?" he asked, looking around for Kingsley, who had moved to stand as close to the fireplace as he could without getting singed.

The Minister frowned and shrugged. "The fog was so thick nobody would have seen one. Trouble is, at this time of year, fog and cold and a touch of seasonal misery are not unusual. You could stand in a *queue* of Dementors and never know they were there." Kingsley shivered and dropped into an armchair. "Gods! That's not a nice thought."

Severus unclasped the scroll and began to read. He scowled at the contents and read it again before handing it to Kingsley. "I thought as much. Of *course* Arawn wants me to liberate the power in the Llygad y Ddraig. For what purpose, he doesn't say, but we can assume that it will be for him to use as he sees fit." He gave Kingsley a pointed look. "Or as the Dementors see fit. My acquiescence will result in the removal of an unspecified but extremely destructive threat." He took the armchair opposite the Minister and waited until Kingsley had finished reading. "Minister, what would you have me do?"

Kingsley felt the full weight of his position settle on his shoulders. "Advise me. When Arawn writes that meeting his demand will remove the threat... should we believe him?"

"No. I very much doubt that he alone would be able to contain not only several thousand hungry Dementors, but partially consumed humans that are obviously blooded and ready to fight."

"Then we truly have no choice but to make a stand."

"Choice, no. Strategies for defence and pre-emptive attack..." Severus shrugged. "As I said in the message my Patronus delivered, information is the priority for now."

Kingsley handed the scroll back to Severus. "I sent word to the French Ministry, and they've agreed to work with our Aurors in Calais and Paris. There shouldn't be a problem getting a passport for Petrus leave that one to me. We've located fifteen rat Animagi, all fit for service and willing to go Dementor hunting. I got a Howler from Rita Skeeter."

"Will she cooperate?"

"She will," Kingsley said definitively. "I too have my methods of persuasion." He eyed Severus shrewdly. "At your exoneration, Albus' portrait said you could always be counted on to come up with a workable plan."

"I have what one could call a work in progress."

Kingsley gave a tired smile and nodded. "As much as I'd like to, I won't pressure you for details until you've got enough for discussion." He summoned a package from his desk. "On another subject altogether... It's probably a bad time to give you these, but I thought you might like to have them."

Severus accepted the parcel and looked it over, noting the seal of the Durmstrang Institute. "What...?"

"A copy of your uncle's academic records. It was quite a common thing for old wizarding families to send their offspring to separate schools especially if there was a history of feuding or of being high-profile targets a way of not keeping *all* the Ashwinder eggs in the same freeze-charmed canister. Drusus Prince was top of his class each year in Potions. He was a champion duellist and received the Fairest Player Award in Quidditch three years in a row. He was a brave and honourable man. There are several photographs of him and some clippings from the Durmstrang newsletter."

Severus folded back the wrappings and quickly located a photograph. In it, a youth of about sixteen peeled off his Quidditch headgear and grinned triumphantly. A wave of familiarity mingled with a shadow of loneliness. *Definitely one of us...* Severus examined his uncle's youthful likeness with curiosity and a little jealousy a slender young wizard blessed with good looks, straight teeth, and popularity. Photographic teammates swarmed around Drusus, roughly mussing his raven hair and hoisting him onto their shoulders.

Severus noted the laughter in his uncle's fathomless black eyes and wondered if the same emotion had ever shown so eloquently in his own.

If Severus had been alone, he would have found perusing his uncle's academic records a melancholy occupation, but Hermione's presence brought both comfort and a sense of something being set to rights.

Beside him in bed, Hermione shifted to a cross-legged position. Carefully tucking blankets around her waist, she unfolded a newsletter and smoothed it out in front of her. Absorbed in Drusus' published essay detailing the medicinal use of alpine plants by mountain trolls, she didn't notice Crookshanks uncoil himself from his "snail shell" posture at the foot of the bed and pad purposefully towards her. She tutted as the half-Kneazle placed a feather-light paw over the very word she had been about to read.

For the purpose of distraction, Severus gently tweaked Crookshanks' tail, an action which earned him the privilege of being sat on. He smiled when Crookshanks softly butted a photograph of Drusus and collapsed in a purring pile of warmth.

"Your uncle has Crooks' approval," Hermione observed.

Severus gave a rueful shrug. "I wish I'd had the chance to know him."

Hermione folded the newsletter and slipped it back into the folio which Severus had propped on his knees. "There are some pretty striking similarities in the natural ability department, so maybe he's not as distant as you'd think." Hermione bit her lower lip for a moment. "Have you ever looked at your mother's records?"

"I have, though it was a long time ago... Charms, Potions, and Gobstones were her forte along with a string of detentions for accessing the library's Restricted Section without permission. Why do you ask?"

"I thought it might be nice to get a copy of them and keep them with Drusus' folio."

Severus arched a semi-critical eyebrow. "Sentimentality..."

Crookshanks sat up, stared towards the foot of the bed and meowed questioningly.

The two humans exchanged a glance that asked: "What now?"

Pop! The glow of a Patronus showed through the bed curtains.

Scrambling into quilted dressing gowns, Severus and Hermione hurried out to find Oriens' serow occupying the top of the wardrobe.

The antelope-like creature dipped its head. "Password!"

Severus gave the response: "Ukrainian Ironbelly."

"I'm sending this same message to Kingsley and to you, Severus. Arawn's forces are right where I thought they'd be. That's the extent of the good news." The serow leapt down from the wardrobe, much to Crookshanks' fascination. "Numbers: I estimate between six and eight hundred humans, with Dementors appearing to be three times that number. They're organised and, by the look of it, disciplined, but I can see that they do not expect to be challenged.

"The terrain is a high plain, accessed through a reasonably wide valley to the north it's not as defensible as a mountain pass. There are sparsely wooded hills bounding the east and west. There is a potential route of retreat: a rocky tract flanking the border of the Restricted Area. This might give us the upper hand if Fawkes has not flown in

vain, it will be an impassable obstacle.

"The Dementors will be harder to deal with. Simplistically, we have to mass them together, channel them back to the rift, force them through, then seal it. I wish it were that simple. It has only been done once before. Master Vu, Sage of Borobudur, has been studying the historical account with the Magical Defence scholar, Theravāda of Angkor Wat. They will provide any assistance they are able to give. Remember, three days..." The serow shook its bristling mane and began to fade.

"Be careful, Oriens," Hermione whispered, gripping Severus' hand tightly.

Arawn waited as the Dementor approached. Its shroud flapped limply in the wind. *Is it done?*

The Dementor inclined its head. *Your words are delivered as instructed.*

"Then we should not have too much longer long to wait," Arawn mused, eager to hear what Snape would come up with as a response.

This is well. The humans grow restless... The Dementor turned towards the encampment. The wind picked up and roared through the nearby forest. The soul-eater pointed to the seething mass of trees. *We do not favour those.*

"When we have victory, they will be your playthings," Arawn said, with a prickling sense of discomfort. He would admit only to himself that there was *something* about the forested Restricted Area that raised the hairs on the back of his neck.

He fingered the Llygad y Ddraig, wanting to taste its power, draw it out, and feel it bind with his own magic. *I'll have you yet.*

The Dementor retreated to join its companions where they clustered on a prominence of icy rock and communicated between themselves. *Our kingdom is built on destruction, our strength on hatred. The gates were opened, and we came. We are here. We sense the things we hunger for, and we are hungry. Wizard, do you think you can control us when we are so many? As one, the Dementors surveyed the partially eaten humans. Feed a little more as the wizard taught us and we will see through their eyes, hear through their ears and touch through their skin. Then, we will consume the blue crystal's power, and all things will yield to our need.*

Using landmarks described in a song his grandmother had taught him when he came of age, Oriens located a lichen-spotted stone monolith at the very edge of the forest. He carefully pushed through a tangled thicket of winter-brittle undergrowth, revealing a narrow path wending its way through the trees, marked with the tracks of roe deer and wild boar. His grandmother's song could not help him now.

He followed the track, keeping all his senses attuned for the slightest movement or sound. A subtle shift in the air brought him to an instant halt. A small blur hissed past his throat and lodged in a tree trunk next to him. Oriens kept absolutely still, knowing that the blow dart had been a warning a warning tipped with poison that could stop his heart in a mere five seconds. The next dart would not miss.

"I follow the directions of the fire-bird," he said, placing his life in Fawkes' talons.

A voice answered from the grey gloom: "If you are the messenger, tell us of one of the things the fire-bird left."

Oriens knew that he was surrounded. *Fawkes, I hope you've done what I think you've done* "The fire-bird left something belonging to me a clasp carved from the wood of the tree at the heart of this forest. The design shows a wreath of oak leaves surrounding twin acorns."

After a short silence, a lithe form emerged onto the path: cloven hoofs, goat-like haunches covered in rough brown hair, a lightly muscled upper body adorned with intricately braided vines, saturnine features, and wild hair which could not conceal a pair of short, curved horns. Pale gold eyes with slitted pupils regarded Oriens with wariness and challenge. "I am T'eylun, son of Tulién, whose ancestors have been part of this forest since its first tree sprouted. Who are you?"

"I am Oriens, a wizard born of human parents with magic in their blood. My mother's mother was the half-human Anouis. Anouis was the daughter of Mourâven who later sired Tulién."

Using his heavy-booted stride and billowing robes to good advantage, Severus cleared an impressive boulevard through an otherwise obstinate throng of inattentive, chattering students.

Dismissing excited, awed whispers and suggestive giggles from one or two female students with a contemptuous sneer of complete disgust, he marched up a broad flight of stairs and randomised his route with a number of evasive shortcuts. Checking that none of the school-robed pestilences had followed him, he made his way up to the barrel-vaulted hall and paused outside Tobias' rooms. The door was slightly ajar, and he could hear the Defence Against the Dark Arts Professor describing the warped philosophy that had led to the recent war:

"So you see, Tobias, Voldemort had ceased to acknowledge the gradual progress of wizarding society and regarded Muggles as evolution's mistake an impurity. A disease. He was convinced pureblood wizards would drift into inferiority unless a conscious and pure minority seized control of every aspect of life."

"What'd 'e mean by 'conscious'? Thinkin' just like 'im'?"

"Unfortunately, yes. He believed that blood corruption was so entrenched that incremental improvements were no longer possible and that magic itself was in decline. He didn't abandon the idea of progress as such, but radicalised it with the belief that advances could only happen through a series of purging catastrophes. To him, our society had to be utterly destroyed, then rebuilt under strict guidance. Personally, I think that's the reason he sought immortality so he alone could keep an eye on things."

"To make sure it were done right forever."

Severus knocked briefly and entered the room. "Exactly," he said in response to his father's conclusion. He nodded to the professor: "Fergus."

Fergus grinned mischievously. "I saw the light on and thought I'd drop in."

Severus folded his arms and narrowed his eyes in suspicion.

Fergus held up his hands in surrender. "All right! Listen, there's talk of a Gobstones showdown between Filius and our Muggle here."

Toby winced. "Don't scowl at *me*, Sev'rus. I didn't bloody start it."

Fergus looked slyly pleased with himself. "It's just talk at the moment, but you know what Hogwarts staff are like once they get wind of something to bet on. I've just arranged to give Tobias a bit of coaching in case the talk becomes walk." He consulted his pocket watch. "Class in half an hour I'll be off, then." With a cheery wave, he left the room, closing the door behind him.

Toby rounded up a stray Gobstone and put it safely back in its box. "Interestin' bloke, that one. Did y' know 'is mam's a German doctor and 'is da' were rear gunner on a bread delivery truck in Belfast?"

"I knew of the German-Irish mix, but I hadn't given a thought to the occupations of Fergus' parents," Severus replied, producing a cloth-wrapped parcel from under his

robes. "I have something for you," he said, handing it to his father.

Toby pushed the cloth aside. "What the...?" He held up what looked like a short-sleeved tunic made of overlapping metal scales.

"It was retrieved from the vault of Bellatrix LeStrange. Made for the Goblin Wars, I suspect. It will repel the vast majority of hexes and minor curses. I have tested it, but if you remain unconvinced, I can always test it again. While you're wearing it."

Toby met his son's impassive gaze. "I believe you no need for more testin'. You want me to try it on, I s'pose?" Sighing at the quirked eyebrow response, he pulled the armour over his head, steeling himself as it slid into place like a living thing.

"How does it feel?" Severus inquired.

"It feels okay lighter than what I'd've thought... But/feel stupid."

Smirking, Severus summoned Tobias' bow and handed it to him. "In the middle of a battle, there is no such thing as dignity. See if it impedes your movement at all."

Toby strung the bow and slowly drew the bowstring back to his jaw. "No problem movin'. I'm workin' on gettin' my speed up to scratch else I'll be no bloody use to anyone." He put the bow down and wrestled out of the armour. "I were thinkin'..."

"Was it difficult?"

"Smart arse! I reckon it's time you took the Llygad back."

Severus frowned. "There's still..."

"T' forms and t' pro-cedures can go 'angl!" Toby scowled peevishly. "There're times when paper and useless palaver get in t' way of a job that needs doin' this is one of those times."

"Your personal safety was the main concern," Severus pointed out as his father went into another room and muttered a series of strong opinions on the bloated nature of bureaucracy.

Toby reappeared, holding the Llygad y Ddraig in one fisted hand. "Nothin's gonna 'appen. I reckon that if Eileen 'ad bound me to the thing, I'd know it by now."

Severus nodded slowly. There was so little time left on the parchments for the magical object separation procedure that it was highly unlikely any evidence of binding would manifest itself. "May I ask what is prompting you to hand it over now?"

Toby stood in front of his son and shrugged. "Just feels like it's time... Nothin' more than that." Without any ceremony at all, he passed the silver chain over Severus' head and positioned the pale blue crystal so that it rested just below his sternum. "It's all yours, mate," he said, giving Severus' shoulder a brief squeeze as he turned away. "Tocky? Ah, there y' are. Put t' kettle on, lad."

All things considered, the Order meeting had gone reasonably well, though Severus had found his patience tested by Potter's constant, expectant staring. He had been more concerned about Hermione, who found herself facing several Weasleys including Ron. However, to Severus' relief, Ron had conducted himself with an only slightly distant civility; he made no move to berate Hermione or challenge Severus to a duel. Molly had given everyone a welcoming smile, but it was obvious that grief and worry had drained her usual enthusiasm for company. Looking at George, he could see why. George seldom raised his eyes to anyone, and his few suggestions were given haltingly as though he expected his twin brother to reappear and finish his sentences for him.

The discussions had centred on the threat posed by resurgent Dementors: a threat added to by an unexpected alliance between them, rogue Death Eaters, and partially consumed Muggles. Kingsley had kept the existence of the Llygad y Ddraig a profound secret as he did Severus' rather astonishing ancestral heritage. The "Fawksian Fellowship", as it had been dubbed, was never mentioned. Severus had looked upon his immediate superior with real respect as Kingsley presented strategic information without alluding to where it had come from. A small murmur of surprise had greeted the announcement that the Ministry would be receiving distinguished visitors from Borobudur and Angkor Wat. Unspeakables had been despatched as envoys to every wizarding Ministry between Calais, Belgrade, and Moscow. All of wizarding Britain was on secret high alert.

Severus had received a curious look from Minerva she knew of the Llygad y Ddraig, its connection to the Prince family, and the planetary portents witnessed by the centaurs but had evidently decided to keep her thoughts to herself. After all, she had enough to do with running the school. He had felt his heart constrict a little when he noted how jaded the older witch looked, and had given her a small smile when she glanced at him again. She didn't know it yet, but he had a little job lined up for her that she would find very enlivening indeed.

Severus put his arm around Hermione's shoulders as they walked up to Tobias' rooms to brief him on the results of the Order meeting and what role he would be expected to play. "Feeling better?"

Hermione chewed her lip. "A little. Single combat...", she whispered. "And we haven't heard from Oriens."

"*Muffliato*. Three days haven't passed yet we just have to wait a bit longer. But whether we hear from him or not, we have to move decisively. As for the challenge which I have not yet sent... who knows, he might even refuse me it was the only way I could think of to get Arawn right where I want him: away from the body of his troops... army... whatever you want to call them. With him away, the centaurs should be able to pull off an ambush.

"We now know that the Paris sewers are hosting Dementors. I never thought I'd see the day when I'd thank Rita Skeeter Gods, I *have* to get a copy of that memory from Kingsley! The Calais infestation is only small, more like a scouting party, and can be dealt with comparatively easily. We'll take Petrus over to his cathedral tomorrow night and see how much help Emmanuel might be in liberating the city. Have you got the ley detection dust?"

"Yes. Firenze gave it to me early this morning while you were delivering the armour to Tobias. I forgot to mention it when I guessed what you were planning." She wiped her eyes brusquely. "If Arawn accepts your challenge, I don't think he will honour the conditions."

Severus narrowed his eyes. "He won't. Not. For. One. Second." He quirked an eyebrow. "And neither will I." He pulled Hermione into a shadowed archway and held her tightly. "Remember, Hermione, I did see our children... and Charity seemed sure that we both had some years to go before we cross the Veil. Don't lose heart or courage... not now."

Hermione buried her face in his chest. "I couldn't bear to lose you," she mumbled.

"Fifty years from now, I'll remind you that you said that."

Sister Clarise found a sheltered nook in the re-grown woods some distance from the bridge. The spearhead was warm all the time now, as though its magic knew that the perishing cold could kill her. With a mind trained by relentless hours of discipline, she closed down her external senses enough to blunt the impact of the waves of roiling hatred disgorging out of the lightless city beyond the bridge.

She chewed on a hunk of unleavened bread. All she had to do now was wait...

The Red Dragon – Part One

Chapter 25 of 32

Petrus has a little fun in his favourite cathedral. The Llygad y Ddraig has an important revelation for Severus – and he shares it with Hermione. The centaurs receive reinforcements. There is news of a secret ally. Severus and Tobias share a startling thought, and Minerva is excited about a task that appeals to her very much.

A/N:

French English (Google Translate)

Les petit cadeaux Little presents

Exagération Exaggeration

Finalement Eventually

Jardin du Luxembourg The Luxembourg Gardens, Paris

Je ne sais pas I don't know

Légendes Legends

Mon ami My friend

Mon Dieu My God

Pureté Purity

Saviez-vous Were you aware/Did you know

S'il vous plait If you please

Other translatables

Dahn Down (Northern UK dialect)

Mind yer beeswax Mind your [own] business

Nowt Nothing (Northern UK dialect)

The scene that Severus and Hermione witness in the Pensieve is summarised and re-worded from pp. 428–434 of Mary Stewart's book *The Last Enchantment* (1979). Unaltered dialogue from Ms Stewart's work is marked with an asterisk (*). The presence of the Llygad y Ddraig and the existence of a child are my additions.

As always, thank you, TeaOli, for the time and effort you put into beta-reading. I appreciate it – and so do the characters!

Thanks also to AmyLouise for stepping in to help with my web-based French.

Canon characters are the property of J.K. Rowling. I make no money from them.

The *Cathédrale Notre Dame de Paris* was usually peaceful after the tourists had left and the evening Mass concluded. One would have expected to hear the respectably slow creak of aged timbers, the tuneful whisper of night breezes as they explored mighty structures and elaborate adornments, and the occasional flutter of a sleepy pigeon but one would *not* have expected to hear a running commentary that lapsed occasionally into French or Latin, numerous questions in English, and silky baritone urgings to focus on the real reason for their visit.

Hermione took a detour to re-light a votive candle that had gone out before its wax was consumed. "May your prayers be answered," she whispered as the little flame took hold. She shrugged, forgetting that Severus and Petrus could not see her. "I thought it would be a nice thing to do. Who knows, in return I might get a bit of help climbing the stairs to Emmanuel's place." She turned away from the candles and bumped into Petrus' unmistakable form. "Sorry! I hope he's expecting visitors."

"*Oui*, I told him we were coming," Petrus said, lightly patting her shoulder to assure her all was well. "*Saviez-vous*, it is said," Petrus whispered in excited tones, "that when Emmanuel was recast in 1631, the pious ladies threw their golden jewellery into his molten metal, offering prayers as they did so – and the *pureté* of the gold and the prayers, they are now part of his voice. I would very much like to hear it."

Severus checked that the French Aurors had temporarily suspended the Muggle security systems. Finding that they had, he cancelled the three Disillusionment Charms and pinched the bridge of his nose. "Just not tonight. You promised you wouldn't."

"I remember, *Monsieur* Severus," Petrus chanted, rolling his eyes when Severus wasn't looking. "I shall save the enthusiasm for the proper time."

Thank my illustrious ancestor. Severus stalked up the nave towards the high altar, casting his eyes over the dimly illuminated windows. He was quietly pleased that he and Hermione had spent some time in the cathedral during daylight hours while a Disillusioned Petrus roamed the roof and bell towers – and no doubt availed himself of the chance to fly over modern day Paris. The windows were truly works of time, devotion, and the kind of exacting precision that Severus instinctively admired. The intricate rose windows in particular had held him in a state of contemplation for over an hour, until he noticed that Hermione had dozed off in the jarringly modern chair next to him and had begun to recite ancient runes in her sleep.

He halted a short distance from the altar, critically eyeing the kneeling statues of Louis XIII and Louis IV – until Hermione stood beside him and began to voice quiet outrage

at the Louis IV's opulent, impossibly expensive expansion of *Château de Versailles*. Her anti-excess lecture was interrupted by Petrus' sudden flight-assisted arrival between them and the altar.

Petrus clasped his hands together as he regarded the two humans, and then he looked around the empty cathedral and gestured an instruction to be seated to an invisible audience.

Standing side by side, Severus and Hermione looked at each other quizzically, then at Petrus their minds drawing a complete blank as he began some sort of welcoming...

Severus' eyes widened as he interpreted Petrus' Latin. He knew that the stone Being didn't have the authority to make any sort of binding pronouncement as such... but this unexpected rehearsal of a nuptial Mass set his stomach into what felt like a Celtic knot. He glanced at Hermione, who stared at Petrus with her mouth slightly open and her cheeks a beguiling shade of pink. Feeling unexpectedly coy, he took her hand and turned to face her. *Well, I suppose we asked for it, standing side by side before the altar in a Parisian cathedral.*

After several demure attempts, Hermione raised her eyes to look at Severus, her lower lip caught firmly between her teeth. She faced him and took his free hand as Petrus recited an age old prayer with the soulful grace of a poet. She felt her wizard's presence at her mind's door and opened herself to hear what he might say:

Hermione... I will... I do

Simple words that carried the promise of a lifetime of love and unswerving devotion.

Hermione felt suspended between one breath and the next, measuring time in heartbeats while she held Severus' slightly anxious gaze. She knew that this was no real ceremony, but the reality of his statement ran through her body and soul like a warm, golden light. *I do*. Her delight burst out of her in a flurry of motion as she threw her arms around his neck... *Severus Tobias Snape: I do!*... and kissed him with a raw, unchecked passion rarely witnessed in the venerable cathedral.

Petrus interrupted himself mid-verse: "*S'il vous plaît!* I have not yet begun the liturgy of the Word!" Finding himself completely ignored, he shrugged and strolled away to address the silent statue of Louis XIII. "Ah, but that was fun! Always, I wanted to try that Mass. Some of the celebrants, they did not say the prayer with the sentiment it deserves." He took another look at the couple who were still caught in an ardent lip lock and covered the statue's eyes. "Ai, *Mon Dieu!* Perhaps I should have kept the silence, *non?*"

"Who's there?" Toby demanded, turning his back to the wall at the sound of a fretful moan. Beside him in the scone lit corridor leading to the staircase where Petrus had offered his assistance, Tocky narrowed his eyes and looked around, his ears and fingers twitching.

"Up there," the house-elf whispered, pointing. "Is a ghost on the highest window ledge. Tocky has not seen him before."

Toby looked up and spotted the ghost of a boy in school robes and it did not escape his notice that the robes were torn and marked with the ragged, blackened sign of fire. *God's Teeth!* "G'day! Are you new 'round 'ere?" he called.

The ghost looked down fearfully. "I didn't think so... I'm lost... I don't know how I got up here, and I can't come down." He made a frantic grab at the wall and whimpered when his hand went straight through it. "I fell through the tower!" he wailed.

Flamin' bloody 'eck. Stone the crows and strike me purple. "Were you in t' castle when the fightin' were goin' on?" *'E can't be more than fifteen year old...*

The ghost nodded. "I was... Then I wasn't. Then I woke up, but it didn't feel like waking up... I'm dead, aren't I?"

Oh bugger. Toby had never felt the burden of honesty as much as he did in that moment. He looked up at the young ghost. *'Ow's a bloke s'posed to tell a lad...?' "Fraid so... I'm sorry."*

The boy peered over the edge of his window ledge. "It wasn't your fault. You're the first person I've talked to since....," he said, frowning. "I can't remember how it happened. You're not a wizard, are you?"

"Nah, lad. Muggle. 'Ere on special business by t' permission of t' 'Eadmistress."

"Headmistress? I thought we had a headmaster... Snape." The ghost looked frightened again. "How long have I been dead?"

Awkward... "Yeah, Sev'rus were 'eadmaster up until t' battle. Just so y' know, 'e were loyal to the light... as a spy. When 'e were made 'eadmaster it didn't sound fun 'e tried to save as many lives as 'e could without it bein' obvious. That's what Minerva t' 'Eadmistress told me. Sev'rus doesn't say much about it." Toby sighed and shoved his hands into his pockets. "T' battle were a bit over six months ago. Been lost all that time, 'ave you? S'prised you didn't run into t'other ghosts."

The boy made a tentative effort to climb down from his position, but thought better of it when half of his leg disappeared into heavy stone. "Everybody hated Headmaster Snape even the other professors. But I did wonder about him, once... I defended a Muggle-born from the Slytherins, and Amycus Carrow caught me. He set me up as target practice in Defence Against the Dark Arts but the Carrows just called it 'Dark Arts', which says it all, really. Before he could give the order for the class to throw curses at me, Headmaster Snape interrupted all furious and bombastic and said that I'd stolen from the Potions store. I hadn't, I swear it, but he dragged me out of there by the collar, made me write a six-foot essay on counter-curses and gave me a week of detentions with Madam Sprout." The ghost shrugged mournfully. "I guess I didn't learn much from the essay."

"Anyone can be caught off guard." Toby knelt, pretended to fiddle with his bootlace and whispered to Tocky, "Go find Miss Myrtle and ask 'er to come 'ere."

Tocky nodded and vanished with a snap of his fingers.

Toby leaned against the wall as if settling in for a neighbourly chat. "Can you remember anythin' else? Yer name? Some of yer friends?"

The ghost's expression brightened a little. "My name is Paulus van Rijn. Before you ask, yes, same family as the artist. I'm in... I was in... Hufflepuff." Paulus cautiously manoeuvred into a kneeling position, not yet game enough to try standing. "Sir, whom do I have the pleasure of addressing?"

What artist? Toby clamped down on a wince. "No need to be so formal, lad. M' name's Toby Snape."

Paulus' eyes widened.

"Yeah, before y' ask, same family. Sev'rus is..."

A come-hither giggle announced the presence of Moaning Myrtle. "Hello, Tobias."

Tocky folded his arms and scowled disapprovingly.

Myrtle gave a soft gasp when she spotted Paulus. Keeping her eyes on the boy, she glided over to Toby and hovered close enough to make him shiver. "Was it *you* who asked for the ban to be lifted from my bathroom?"

Toby nodded. "Yeah, I 'ad a word with Sev'rus about it. 'E snarked and snarled for a bit, but 'e agreed to undo it. I take it that 'e 'as?"

"Oh, yes. He has. But he's still *horrible* even if he *is* your son." Myrtle sniffed primly. "But you're *nice*." She simpered and fidgeted, making no attempt to disguise her flirtatious behaviour. "Do you have your own bathroom?" she asked with dangerous innocence.

"You mind yer beeswax, lass." Toby pointed up to the window ledge and an anxiously watching ghost. "Now then, up there's a new ghost by t' name of Paulus. Roughly your age, I'd reckon. 'E's worked 'imself into a right tizz 'cause bein' dead is... well... all so new, and 'e's feelin' lost and out on 'is own. I thought you might like to take 'im under yer wing for a bit until 'e gets used to it."

Remembering Myrtle's usual moniker and how much it seemed to upset her, Toby waved at Paulus to get his attention and winked to emphasise Myrtle's unofficial title: "Miss Myrtle 'ere might be able to sort you out get you off that ledge for a start..."

Paulus nodded his understanding. "Miss Myrtle," he said with a polite half-bow.

Myrtle cocked her head and tossed her hair, a faint smile touching the corners of her mouth at the civilised address. "I've seen you before, Paulus, when you were alive. You're a Hufflepuff, aren't you? Before I died *and* after I died *Hufflepuffs* were the only ones who never called me names. None of them called me *four-eyes* or *ugly* or *miserable*, *moping*, *moaning* Myrtle!"

Paulus shook his head. "Most of us wouldn't. I guess teasing is something we're not cut out for, but we receive it often enough. I think that's the real reason our animal is a badger tough skin, you know. In our common room, I heard about what happened to you... with the Basilisk... It sounded awful."

"Ooooh, it was terrible!" Myrtle floated up until she was on eye level with Paulus. "Welcome to death, I suppose. Most of the ghosts around here were old, or boring, or old *and* boring when they were alive. And they never talk to *me*," she added with a small cry of misery. "But Sir Nicholas can be quite pleasant. Peeves is *abominable*. Do you remember how you died? You might not, at first. But it will come back. I've been helping some of the younger students deal with their post-war nightmares. They're good children when one gets to know them. They call me 'Aunty M'."

Toby and Tocky exchanged a crafty glance. Together, they stealthily made their escape.

Hermione opened the pouch Firenze had given her and sprinkled a thin layer of ley detection dust on the floor. Casting the charm the centaur had taught her during many hours of intensive tuition, she stood back as powdered diamonds and iron pyrite began to shift like beach sand in an onshore breeze. Sparkling and flashing, the dust aligned itself into a very dramatic pattern. Hermione examined it and announced her findings: "There are two primary leys running in straight lines. A north-south and an east-west so they're cardinal primaries." She concentrated as her eyes followed the lines and the interlocking spirals that flanked them. "They intersect somewhere under the cathedral. See the five smaller traces?"

Severus and Petrus nodded.

"Those are secondary leys. They can take random paths at times, but tend to follow watercourses, fault lines, and magnetic anomalies. Look here," she said, pointing to one with a distinctive rippling texture. "This one is running parallel to the River Seine."

"Is there any way to find out where, exactly, the primary leys intersect?" Severus asked, motivated by curiosity rather than a real need to know.

Hermione took a handful of dust from the pouch and whispered a charm over it. The dust formed a loose sphere. Setting it carefully on the floor, Hermione motioned the others to observe. The sphere spun clockwise three times, then began to roll towards the central portal of the western façade. It stopped some eight feet before the portal and dissolved into a conical mound.

"The Portal of the Last Judgement," Petrus whispered, circling the mound. He looked up, his tail describing a lateral sinusoidal wave as he considered what it all might mean.

Hermione summoned the dust and marched it back into its pouch. "An intersection of primary leys results in a node of upwelling energy Earth's own power but it tends to spread out once it surfaces, so it feels like the surrounding area is full of it. We get a strong sense of it here in the cathedral. Because the primary leys are also cardinals, the node of intersection is particularly powerful. Some of the more sensitive Muggles would be able to feel it very strongly."

"*Oui*," Petrus agreed. "I have seen this... Some are overwhelmed and fall to their knees. Others will weep. Some look entranced, and others, their faces light with joy. And, *Mademoiselle*, there are people who feel it and are very afraid. And the point of the intersection is right here..." He took a few steps toward the portal and gave the doors an affectionate rub. "Perhaps it is why this portal, it was given a name so formidable."

Severus began to pace. "Given Petrus' observation that the power amplifies the resonance of the bourdon... Would I be correct to assume that this upwelling of power is focussed by the tolling of Emmanuel similar to the focussing of magical power through a wand?"

Petrus shrugged. "*Je ne sais pas* I have never used a wand, nor do I think that I have any power to focus."

Hermione frowned and bit her lower lip. "Actually, I'll ask Firenze about that. It sounds very feasible."

Severus quirked an eyebrow. "Thank you, Miss Granger, for your vote of confidence." He gestured upwards. "I think it's time we paid our bronze friend a visit."

In the dark, dripping labyrinth of the sewers, a jostling swarm of Dementors clustered around one of their own, waiting for the message it would give. Rats shied away and, fur bristling, scampered into any inlet or crevice that would put distance between them and the *things* that had invaded their home.

The messenger hovered close to slick black stones. *It will not be long. The wizard is sure of this. We shall wait. When the word is given, we move immediately.*

The other Dementors crowded closer, pressing in their impatience. *We wait. We hunger.*

Its errand completed, the messenger drifted up an access hole and pushed aside the heavy, metal cover. Merging with the night, it scanned the immediate surrounds, one bony fist clenching in ravenous anger as its senses detected the untamed power of Earth's pulse. It could trace the outlines of a stone structure that rose above the source of the power. The structure stood on an island, embraced by the muscular arms of a river. The Dementor retreated back into the sewers with a lifeless swirl of rotting rags. The *Cathédrale Notre Dame de Paris* meant nothing to it.

Hermione shivered in the cold air and looked down to the streets far below, noting that the horned, winged monkeys in the gallery of chimeras looked rather sinister at night. The flight up to a secret access door high up on the south bell tower had been her first experience with broomless flight, and while she had been quite safe in Severus' arms, it had been one of the strangest sensations of her life.

Petrus held out his hand and assisted her up to the door. "In return for the lighting of the candle, some help *did* come to you, *Mademoiselle* Hermione you had no need of the stairs at all!"

"Uh huh. You knew about the secret door all along. You could've told me!"

Petrus shrugged and flicked the end of his tail.

"You're going to say that I should have asked about alternative routes, aren't you?" She placed her hands on her hips and glared at him until he retreated through the doorway. With a knowing smile, she followed and picked her way around a geometric arrangement of huge supporting timbers to where Severus waited looking slight and boyish next to the hulking bourdon. Around them, the wind moaned faintly through the slats in the bell tower. Hermione could feel the node's influence a deep, slow, rhythmic beat of power. A little dizzy, she sought Severus' hand. He turned to her, eyes shining like polished obsidian.

"Use Occlumency if it gets too much," he advised. "It doesn't block the sensation completely, but it will prevent you from being overwhelmed."

Hermione nodded and gulped. "It pulls, then it pushes, and it spirals, rises and falls," she whispered.

Completely unfazed by the palpable energies, Petrus stood next to the great bell. "Emmanuel, *mon ami*, it has been such a long time." He gestured to his human companions. "Come closer, *s'il vous plait*. It is quite safe."

Severus and Hermione approached Emmanuel with careful steps. The power from the node made it feel as though they were walking through treacle. Severus reached out and brushed his fingers over the cold metal.

"You need to do it a little harder, *Monsieur* Severus like this..." Petrus made a fist and gave Emmanuel a sharp blow with the outside edge of his hand. For a breath, nothing happened. Then a soft, sonorous hum filled the air. Barely audible, it was joyful and solemn, welcoming and defiant. "And *that* is just *un petit* whisper," Petrus stated proudly. He stood back with his head bowed. "The Earth's ancient power, it responds."

Severus and Hermione could feel the fluid shift of energy rising, building, it coiled around Emmanuel and seemed to gather itself like some great primeval beast preparing to leap. For a moment, the tone of the bell took on an extra dimension clear as crystal and pure as light power given voice. Their blood tingled in their veins. As the soft hum subsided, the power quietened: a dancing flame withdrawing to take its rest as a glowing coal. Both wizard and witch felt a brief moment of loss and longing.

"If that was just a whisper, no wonder Quasimodo went deaf," Hermione muttered, trying to dispel the mood.

"He did not go deaf!" Petrus snorted. "Quasimodo, he knew how to protect his ears because I told to him a method most sensible!"

Hermione almost shrieked, "*Quasimodo was real?*"

"Ah, *oui*, though he lived a century before the time Monsieur Victor Hugo used to re-tell several..." Petrus cleared his throat and attempted to look innocent, which made him appear less than angelic "...*légendes* about... unusual occurrences... here." He briefly angled his ears back. "Cotton wadding and sealing wax," he said. "He told to me that he often forgot to remove the protections... but I think it was because he did not want to hear what the people said about him."

Hermione looked stricken. "Was he really... you know... like Victor Hugo described him?"

Petrus nodded soberly. "There was only a little of the *exaggeration*."

Severus considered what a young man of Quasimodo's description would have had to deal with every day of his life. As an eight-year-old languishing in Muggle school, he had often sought refuge from a gang of tormentors and the increasingly spontaneous and vengeful things he could do to enemies in what passed for a school library. He had found a calico-covered copy of *The Hunchback of Notre-Dame* in the back of an old cupboard which smelled of mothballs and coal tar. Reading it, he had felt a small pull of empathy as he remembered unsuccessful attempts to make friends with stray cats. He gave Petrus a half-smile. "And the only ones he truly could talk to were gargoyles. It seems that one of them answered him."

Petrus showed the tips of his canine teeth in what the humans knew to be a smile. "Until he ran away to be with a farm girl who would come to worship from beyond the city walls. She spotted him watching from the shadows one Holy Saturday. She began to secretly leave *les petits cadeaux* for him to find. In return, he would carve animals from wood and leave them for her. Ah, the trouble I had persuading him to go and talk to her! *Finalement*, he did... and discovered that she could see what most of the people were blind to."

Hermione shook her head in disbelief. "You mean... He fell in love? Did she love him?"

"But of course!" Petrus cast his arm in a broad semi-circle to indicate the city beyond the bell tower. "This is Paris," he stated, as if it were the answer to everything.

As the eastern sky began to grey, the waiting centaurs trained their senses on the sound of galloping hooves. Those that had been resting after the long journey to the south-west border of Hungary got up and joined their companions, many of them eager to have their first meeting with the legendary Ūnkhari.

Three centaurs pounded out of the deep gloom, seeming to dance as they slowed to a prancing trot and reared in salute. Each centaur carried a round leather shield marked with protective symbols, a long knife, and a pouch full of slinging stones. All three were bay dun in colour, and the skin of their human parts a similar hue. Their features could be described as Mongolian, harking back to a lineage shared with distant kin living in the wide, treeless plains and tundra far away to the north. Their head hair was styled in a bristling crest which continued down their backs in a black dorsal ridge that decreased in height until it merged with their tails.

One of them stepped forward and pressed his right fist over his heart. "Bane of the Forbidden Forest! Bryndorach of the Schwarzwald! Etÿyen and Breyÿn of the Camargue! Well met when shadows threaten show us the enemy!"

Returning the salute, Bane honoured the greeting. "Tāk of the Ūnkhari, we thank you for your allegiance. Break the night's fast with us before we talk of enemies, for the planets have said that the time of fighting is not yet upon us."

Tāk grinned broadly and lead his two companions into the makeshift camp, dark eyes flashing with eager anticipation as he looked around. Everywhere, centaurs from distant lands sharpened blades, tested bowstrings, arranged stockpiles of provisions, hefted ewers of mulled mead and discussed the techniques of war and healing. A taut sense of readiness permeated every action. The centaurs were ready to fight.

Arawn smiled to himself as the Death Eaters bawled instructions at their huge charges who seemed to be more interested in fighting over an unfortunate Muggle's remains than paying any heed to wizards and witches. Trolls were uncivilised at the best of times, but these had to be the ultimate barbarians of the species. Even the Dementors made a great show of ignoring them. He fingered the Llygad y Ddraig thoughtfully.

So far, no resistance had been encountered by the scouting party in Calais, or the vanguard in Paris. Nobody suspected how much *real* force he had at his command. He had not yet heard back from Snape which meant that the ex-Death Eater was probably plotting something so Arawn decided it was time for his next move.

"Scabior! Rabastan!"

The two Death Eaters loped towards him immediately, presumably thankful to leave the trolls to noisily lick the wounds they had inflicted on each other while brawling over raw bones.

"Go across to Paris and activate the Portkey. Make sure it takes you to Calais and not to some other location. And while you're in the middle of salubrious surroundings, do feel free to enjoy the *Jardin du Luxembourg*."

"Just us two?" Scabior asked.

"I'd suggest taking a few of our more restless half-souls," Rabastan said, referring to the partially consumed humans. "They're salivating for some action."

Arawn nodded. "A good idea. Just keep out of sight until I give the word which depends on when your old friend Snape gets off his arse and responds."

"*Friend?*" Scabior sneered, grinding his teeth. "That Muggle-spawned..."

"Don't underestimate him," Arawn warned, feeling the arrow wound in his thigh spasm painfully. "As soon as I hear from the half-blood, I'll send the scouting party across into England. They know what to do once they get there. I cannot see Snape giving his cooperation without being forced so make sure the Paris vanguard is ready to do some serious damage. I'll pay you a visit in person before I deal with him."

Rabastan tucked his thumbs into his belt. "What happens to *him* after the dealing?"

Arawn eyed the Death Eater coolly. "Assuming he lives after I've finished with him, whatever takes your fancy."

Hermione woke reluctantly to find Severus gently shaking her shoulder. Her first thought was that he didn't look annoyed or vigilant, so there was no immediate danger. To the contrary, his expression was one of mingled, shifting shades of awe, dread, and sadness. "What's wrong?" she asked, her words slurring a little as she dragged them from the depths of sleep.

Severus held up the Llygad y Ddraig. "It showed me...", he began. His eyes locked with hers. "I know what this is."

Hermione sat up, properly awake. But before she could say anything, Severus summoned her clothes.

"Get dressed," he said softly. "We'll use Minerva's Pensieve. It's in my memories now and... I want to show you."

Noticing that Severus was already dressed, Hermione hurried to put on enough layers to shield her from the leaching cold of dark stone walls. She glanced at her wizard occasionally, only to see him staring at the floor as though he were struggling to make sense of something that both troubled and grieved him. She looped a scarf around her neck and dropped a kiss on his head. "Right. Let's go."

Without a word, Severus led the way to the fireplace and took a handful of Floo Powder.

Hermione eyed him sceptically. "Does Minerva know you're about to do this?"

Severus shrugged evasively. "She said I could Floo to her office at any time and that if I need to avail myself of any facilities there, I have her full permission to do so."

"Aren't *you* the golden boy?" Hermione teased.

"I can't imagine why Minerva didn't recognise that fact decades ago," Severus rejoined. "I dare you to dare me to ask her about that. Headmistress' Office!"

Hermione counted a few seconds, then followed before Crookshanks could wake up enough to assert his gods-given right to investigate and, in the process, get under her feet.

She stumbled into the gloomy office just as Severus was lighting some candles. He held one finger up to his lips and pointed to the heavily snoring Albus, who was slumped awkwardly in his painted chair with a large jar of peppermint humbugs lodged possessively in the crook of one arm.

With ghostly stealth, Severus and Hermione made their way to the Pensieve. Hermione wordlessly cast Muffliato, earning a nod of approval from her wizard. Severus carefully extracted a string of memories and placed them into the shallow stone bowl.

As the memories coiled in silvery wreaths, Severus took Hermione's hand. Together they entered his memory of what the Llygad y Ddraig had revealed to him:

"That's Merlin," Severus said, pointing to a rail-thin, obsidian-eyed wizard whose grey hair was streaked with white. He nodded to the woman who stood holding Merlin's hands. "Nimuë."

Hermione moved a little closer, looking from Merlin to Nimuë to Severus, and back again.

"This memory takes place before the vision I had of Macsen's treasure," Severus whispered. "Possibly only days or weeks before," he added, looking pointedly at Nimuë's heavily pregnant state.

Hermione made a conscious effort to breathe. *These are Severus' ancestors, as is the child she carries...* Her thoughts faded as Nimuë spoke:

"Magic," she kept saying, "it's magic, stronger than any I could ever know. And you told me you had given it all to me. I should have known. I should have known. Ah, Merlin, Merlin..."

"*Known what?*" Hermione hissed, too enthralled to wait for an explanation.

"That Merlin wasn't dead," Severus replied simply. "Watch. Listen."

Merlin drew Nimuë into a close embrace while she repeated over and over: "It's you. It's really you. You've come back..."

"It was only the malady, Nimuë..." Merlin's voice was soft and consoling. "It deceived you all..."

"He's talking about the malady that had plagued him ever since Morguase poisoned him," Severus explained in response to Hermione's wordless, round-eyed plea for information. His wand hand flexed. "The effects Merlin described suggest that it was a variant of the Draught of Living Death." He nodded towards Merlin again. "Now comes the explanation..."

Merlin stroked Nimuë's hair tenderly. "It was not magic. I gave all that to you..."

Nimuë raised her head from Merlin's chest, her eyes tragic and brimming with tears. She reached into her gown and drew out a pale blue disc of milky crystal flanked by two silver dragons whose jaws gripped a long silver chain. "Yes, and how you gave it! You had told me to learn all that you had to tell me. You said that I must build on every detail of your life, that after your death I must be Merlin... And you were leaving me..." Nimuë impatiently brushed away the grief that spilled over her cheeks. "But then, even all the power and knowledge you gave me could not show me that we had buried you living and sent me back to get you out. Merlin, I should have known, I should have known!" She wiped her eyes. "I went back to Bryn Myrddin, did you know?" I went to your sealed cave and I called for you for so long... but there was no sound."

Severus stood behind Hermione and wrapped his arms firmly around her. "The Llygad y Ddraig holds the power of perhaps the greatest wizard of all time and his lifetime of memories. Contrary to the lore books, Nimuë did not usurp Merlin's power, nor did she seek to destroy him. It's true that she would have had to draw out his power as he slipped under the malady's influence... to all appearances, dying... But she could only have done so if he had responded to her and given it willingly."

Hermione bit her lip and tried to will her threatening tears away. "The Llygad... That would be why... sometimes, you see memories from Merlin's lifetime... but at other

times, his power works through *you*, and you can see things that are yet to be." She turned to look at him and frowned. "But what about your sixteenth-century ancestor?"

Severus gave a small smile. "The Llygad does indeed act like a Pensieve in its own right. Sir Sixteenth Century would have placed the memory there because hiding Merlin's royal cipher was an important event." He scowled. "It was a risky venture to show the cave so clearly."

"Perhaps he used the Llygad himself, and Merlin's power showed him that you would be the one to claim the cipher," Hermione reasoned.

"Perhaps he did. Look. The memory changes..."

Merlin and Nimuë sat close together on a low couch. A lit brazier cast a warm glow over them as Merlin told of his eventual, not uneventful escape from the under-hill tomb.

Curled snugly in the circle of Merlin's arm, Nimuë took his free hand in both of her own when he had concluded his strange tale. She nodded to the Llygad y Ddraig, which lay on a small table between the couch and the brazier. "There were dreams, or visions," she said, knitting her brows as she stared at it. "Then other dreams, other visions, crowding and confusing..."

Merlin's jaw clenched briefly as she explained how his Sight had warned her of the theft of King Arthur's sword and guided her through the perilous journey to bring ~~the~~ Caliburn back to the high king's hand. She told him of being forced to stay in Luguwallium instead of following the prompting of a dream that featured a breach in the rock slide that King Arthur's men had caused to seal the cave at Bryn Myrddin because Morguase had arrived with her five sons: one of whom, Merlin's power and vivid memories of a decades old prophecy showed, would bring the end of King Arthur's reign.

Severus noted that the very mention of Morguase's name made Nimuë shiver.

Nimuë told of how she had tried to reach into Morguase's mind to learn what potion she had used on Merlin, daring to hope that knowledge might yet have a saving use. How, troubled by constant dreams of her lover's tomb, she had attempted to use the Sight to gain some sign of Merlin himself... But the Sight had taken its own course, showing instead a vision of living light in which floated a wondrous grail and a terrible warning of what would occur should it be claimed by the wrong hands. Spurred on by the warning, she had used Merlin's memories to locate the three remaining objects of Macsen's treasure the Grail, the Spear, and the Platter before Morguase could seize them and turn their power to her own dark purpose.

Hermione felt Severus' arms tighten around her. He seemed to be holding his breath.

Merlin exclaimed his surprise that Nimuë not Morguase had found the treasure first. Then Merlin recounted that only two days before, a shepherd boy had told him that the treasure had been taken by a *queen*. And he had assumed that queen to be Morguase.

At this, Nimuë looked at Merlin with a mixture of appeal and dread, one hand resting on her swollen belly. But Merlin merely smiled his understanding as though he already knew what news she would give, his dark eyes showing only compassion as she explained how she had needed to make a prudent and practical decision. Thinking that Merlin was truly gone, with the rumour of gathering enemies, no family to turn to and with Merlin's child thriving in her womb she had accepted an offer of marriage from a young king: Pelleas of the Isles.

"He is a good man," Merlin said when Nimuë fell silent. "Kind and jovial a good thing considering the burden of external power that you had to take up so suddenly."

"You told me that power was a hard master..." Nimuë sighed sadly and picked up the Llygad y Ddraig. "You won't take it back?"

Merlin shook his head. "The time of my *doing* is over, Nimuë. Now it is time for me to simply *be* until the gods see fit to call me home."

Nimuë's eyes clouded like smoke over water. For a minute or so, she was quiet, and then she blinked, swallowed and pressed his hand to her belly so that he might feel his child's movement. "You'll meet him and even tutor him at some time. I've just glimpsed those moments." She gave a tearful smile. "Pelleas knows whose son I carry. He said that he will honour the loyalty he has sworn to the high king and to you, as King Arthur's cousin and closest confidant by raising our child as the grandson of Ambrosius should be raised: as a prince of the realm."

Tāk washed down dried apple and oatcakes with a deep draught of mulled mead. "The portents in the skies warned us first and from the mountains to the plains, our bands began to gather. Soon after, we could smell it on the wind and read it in the patterns of cloud and snow. We have seen wild creatures flee across the land: their frantic pace and the fear in their eyes tell of a cold and deadly shadow. On a path from the east and the north, even the trees bear scars; their guardian spirits are weakened.

"But we bring harder news. Lūt volunteered to watch the shadow's progress she has the stealth of a wild cat and can vanish into the landscape like a minnow in swift water. She came back yesterday evening to tell us that trolls have been moving across the humans' borders in the company of the ones who would defy death."

"Death Eaters," Firenze murmured, tightening the strap on his quiver.

Lūt nodded in affirmation. "As for trolls, I counted eleven of them. Mountain trolls. Not many, but... We have fought them before... Âtu says you need a sure aim with the sling to blind them."

"Even with a direct hit to each eye, trolls are hard to bring down," Âtu grumbled, swishing his black tail. "We do not encounter them often and try to avoid them whenever possible."

"It's been many centuries since we encountered any breed of troll," Etūyen said. "Even when we did, they were only river trolls from the waters draining into the Camargue. They were more interested in poaching fat geese than making war with us."

Bane shook his head, troubled. "The forest trolls in our lands are no great nuisance... But mountain trolls are another matter." He looked to the leader of the Schwarzwald herd. "And your people?"

Bryndorach gave a mysterious smile and signalled to Esnyë, who nodded, wheeled and disappeared into the encampment at a swift gallop.

Bane watched her go, admiring her grace and strength. Feeling eyes upon him, he glanced to one side and caught Firenze studying him a little too knowingly. "What?" he growled, scraping a shallow furrow in the earth with a hind foot.

Firenze mildly contemplated the last saucily winking stars as they faded in the pale wash of dawn. "Have you consulted your alignments lately?"

"Chiron's Herbs! Leave *my* alignments out of this." Bane pointedly sidled and stared fixedly in Bryndorach's direction. "There are more important aspects to consider."

Bryndorach shook himself and stretched. "I thought we might encounter this problem when I looked at the terrain on Severus' map. In our homeland, we deal with mountain trolls reasonably frequently when they get it into their heads that haunch of centaur would be good for dinner. They don't have the intellect or the memory to learn from the thrashing we give them each time. Usually, a display of strength and some nonfatal arrow strikes give them the message. When they persist..." He held up one finger as the ground vibrated with the disciplined tramp of hooves. Ten of the Schwarzwald herd's brawniest centaurs presented themselves for inspection, heavy plate armour glinting as the sun's rays slid over the horizon. As one, they dipped their long lances which a human would have described as greatly oversized boar spears. "We call these warriors *trollmord*. I brought ten of them here. The other ten I left with my life-mate to defend my people at home, should the need arise."

Âtu raised his eyebrows. "By the Goddess of the Stars, these will be enough." He gave Bryndorach a look of careful curiosity. "Who is Severus?"

Etūyen discreetly nudged Breyūn. "That question was made for you, Keeper of Wisdom. Legends live on in story and song," he whispered.

The Camargue herd's Keeper of Wisdom gave an enigmatic smile. "They do." She addressed the Ūnkhari respectfully, "As we go down to the riverbank to plan our strategy, I shall tell you of a legend long past and a legend still coming into being. After so many centuries, Merlin's red dragon flies again with his descendant."

With a great murmur of hastily finished breakfasts and thudding hooves, the herd leaders and their immediate designates headed to a nearby river to plan their attack.

Rōthvar caught his sire's arm before he had a chance to leave. "Sire?"

Bryndorach turned to acknowledge his son. "Your eyes hold a question."

"The Ūnkhari move like the wind in the long grass, quick and supple... So why are their names so hard and blunt?"

"They roam freely, Rōthvar, over long distances. They give their names in song as they travel, so the spirits of mountain, plain, forest and river may know who passes by. Names like yours and mine would be lost in the noise of the journey."

The young centaur nodded as he absorbed this information. He nudged a pebble with a forefoot. "Sire, how did you know there would be trolls?"

Bryndorach's eyes lit with rough mirth. "My son, in mountainous lands no matter where in the world they are there are *always* trolls. Count on that."

As his sire cantered away to attend to his duties, Rōthvar's attention settled on his elder sister. Following Esnyð's line of sight, he discovered who held her gaze so completely. "Venus trine Bane, is it?" he teased. Laughing, he half-reared, shied, and dodged but wasn't quick enough to avoid a smack in the ear with a well-aimed oatcake.

Toby eyed the scale model of the *Cathédrale Notre Dame de Paris*. "So me and Tocky will be stationed 'ere?" he asked, pointing to a narrow walkway well above the dizzying, plunging lines of the flying buttresses.

Severus chewed thoughtfully on an olive. "That's the plan. Not afraid of heights, are you?"

Toby gave a short laugh. "Too bloody bad if I was, I reckon." He tore a bread roll in half and dipped it into a bowl of warm herbed olives, mopping up some of the savoury oil.

"We'll have Order members stationed here, here... and here," Severus continued. "Petrus is going to look after Emmanuel. Hermione will be stationed within sighting distance of you. Remember, we'll have two Aurors roaming the premises as well. Kingsley and his French counterpart will handle the situation in Calais." He quirked an eyebrow. "You have another question?"

"Plenty of 'em. But I'm wonderin' 'ow you know Arawn will stop off in Paris after 'e gets your message. God's Teeth, Sev'rus, y' don't even know if 'e'll respond in a way that gives you any warnin'."

Severus gave a benign half-smile. "Arawn has invested significant effort and resources in Paris. Our watchers saw two renegade Death Eaters in the Luxembourg Gardens, along with a motley tribe of blank-eyed Muggles. A Portkey was activated, and the Muggles concealed in the sewers along with the Dementors." He strolled to the window and counted snowflakes for a moment. "I'm sure he knows I have plans of my own though he will not know what they are. Uncertainty regarding my delayed response has forced his hand, and he has revealed enough for me to be quite certain that he will pay that city a visit and consult with his friends to ensure that they have complied with his instructions. But he will not do so until he hears from me."

"And 'e doesn't know that you plan to be in Paris as well?"

Severus inclined his head. "With a reception committee."

"Crikey. Yeah. I'm part of the reception." Toby eyed the cheese platter that Tocky had brought in. "Still, it seems to be a bit of a gamble."

Severus raised an eyebrow.

"I mean... Yer plan might shake those Dementor things out of their nest, but what then? Unless Fawkes shows up again with a whole flock of friends... what do you do after that? Let 'em all go? And then there's t' mongrel 'imself... not that I doubt yer abilities... Just make sure there's nothin' between you and t' back door if things go pear-shaped."

"Indeed." Severus cut into a hard cheese, producing a small booklet of slightly crumbly slices piquantly illustrated with whole peppercorns. "When Hermione comes back from her Ancient Runes workshop..."

"S'prised she can concentrate."

Severus sampled the cheese and murmured his approval. "She has to. She's directing the workshop." He nonverbally challenged his father to interrupt again. Taking Tobias' "who, me?" look as an agreement to be quiet and listen, he nudged the platter towards him. "When Hermione has finished her Ancient Runes workshop, she will be coming with me to attend a meeting over in the Ministry buildings. Two Eastern wizards Master Vu, Sage of Borobudur, and Theravāda of Angkor Wat have studied the methods used to thwart a large-scale Dementor invasion ten thousand years ago. The question is can we can replicate the method, or achieve the same procedure by another means?"

Severus paced, pondering the briefing Kingsley had sent to him concerning the "method". It sounded impossible. But then again, a great many things did until properly evaluated.

Regardless of whether or not the ancient tactic could be of help in driving the Dementors back to the void, Arawn and his forces had to be dealt with as a matter of urgency. They were a threat that had potential to build and that could not be allowed to happen. Severus gave a quiet sigh. Even Alastor would have seen Mad-Eye-to-eye with him on *that* point.

With respect to the Dementors, the present aim was to drive them out of populated areas, monitor their locations, and somehow work out what to do with them. If Master Vu and Theravāda could be of help, so much the better. As for closing the void that the creatures were coming through... *It has something perhaps everything to do with the Spear*, Severus thought. Putting his trust in what the Llygad had shown him what *Merlin's Sight* had shown him he knew he had to go to the dead city of Pripyat and... What then? Would the person who had the Spear in his or her possession know what to do with it? He considered trying to use the Llygad to see what he thought he might need to know. *I could try... But even Nimuë found that it was not an obedient oracle* He put the thought aside for the moment.

Through the Llygad y Ddraig, Merlin's Sight had revealed that the person was already in the vicinity of Pripyat. Or they would be when he got there. Severus scowled and shook his head irritably. It was all very nebulous. A floorboard creaked as he walked across it. Hearing Tobias' sudden shift, he turned to find his father staring at the offending timber with a horrified expression. "What is it?"

"Just remembered somethin'."

Severus narrowed his eyes. "Something to do with so innocuous an object as a creaking floorboard?"

"Yeah. Listen... When Eileen made that... that..." He paled and shivered.

"Golem."

Toby nodded. "You saw me memory of it, right?"

"Yes."

Toby sat forward. "Just before she told me to run for it... there was a dog barkin' and... and..."

Severus recalled everything he could about the witnessed memory. "A floorboard creaked upstairs in the master bedroom."

"And that floorboard would only creak... When?"

Severus' posture stiffened. "On a re-bound. I got to know it extremely well. It would only make a noise within several seconds of someone walking on it." He locked eyes with Tobias. "If there was someone there who shouldn't have been there, my mother would have known."

"But what if someone was? Someone she knew about... Or some-bloody-thing."

Father and son shared a simultaneous, unspoken exchange of the same breathtaking, skin-prickling suspicion...

A vigorous clatter at the door startled both Snapes into a combat stance, one with a clenched fist, the other with a drawn wand.

Hermione blustered through the door, wrestling with an armload of books, uncooperative robes, and rebellious hair. She thanked Tocky for letting her in, then stopped abruptly when she saw Severus and Tobias. Her brow furrowed with concern. "You two aren't fighting, are you?" she asked cautiously.

The herd leaders examined the battle plan one last time, committing every detail to memory. They stood back from the diagrams drawn in the rich, dark silt. With a whispered invocation, Tāk called upon the spirit of the river, pouring a little mulled mead into the waters as an offering.

The water near them began to churn. A hand-shaped mass sluiced up and over the riverbank and swept away all evidence of the centaurs' planning. As the water retreated, losing its form and seeping back down to the river in a thin lattice of foaming channels, a silvery light bounded out of a copse of trees and paused on the opposite bank, respectfully awaiting acknowledgement.

Bane recognised the Patronus immediately and signalled to his companions that it did not signify the arrival of an enemy. He called out over the water, "Oriens!"

The serow lowered its head in a graceful bow, fading as the Unspeakable appeared and mounted his broom.

Severus was still thinking about how to explain why he had his wand drawn when...

Pop! "Password!" A silver serow leapt gracefully onto the mantelpiece.

Anything he might have been going to say was lost in Hermione's exclamation of surprise and relief, "Oriens! Are you all right? Where are you?"

Severus sleeved his wand and methodically prised the stack of books out of Hermione's arms. "You have to give the password, Hermione, else the Patronus will not deliver the message."

Hermione straightened her robes with dignity, not wanting to admit that, in her concern, she had momentarily forgotten all about the necessity of ever-changing passwords and launched straight into a one-sided conversation. "Trouble at t'mill!"

Toby snorted and sat down again. Having heard the word "Patronus", he knew there would be little point in looking for or trying to listen to something he could neither see nor hear. "Always trouble at t' mill," he grumbled, scowling at his smirking son. "And dahn in t' pit. Mark me words, nowt good'll come of it," he added for Severus' benefit.

"We have an allegiance," the Patronus announced, pawing carved stone with an ethereal fore foot. "I located the centaurs and have contacted them in person. I had some concerns when I saw that Arawn now has eleven mountain trolls at his disposal, but it appears that Bryndorach had anticipated troll trouble and had brought some of his specialist fighters with him. The centaurs will start moving towards Arawn's encampment this evening, in scattered columns to lessen the chances of detection. They will keep back from the ambush point by a half-day's journey until we hear from you, Severus, and Kingsley. I've told them to leave the rocky tract near the forest open so that Arawn's crowd will think they have a means of escape when the centaurs launch their attack. cornered troops can have a tendency to fight to the bitter end, and we don't want that!"

"If Arawn's forces try to use the escape route or of they try going into the forest our new allies will let them think the escape is good. Trust me, it won't be. Please don't ask who these allies are. Information concerning them is classified at the highest level, and I am bound by oath not to give away their identity."

"There now, Petrus. How does that feel?" Minerva placed the last extracted memory into her Pensieve and anxiously looked her staff member in the face.

Petrus opened his eyes and stretched, swaying a little on his feet as he emerged from a meditative state. "No problems, *Madame la* Headmistress." He cocked his head and waved to an overly inquisitive portrait. "It is most strange... The memories, they feel like they are still there, but it is as if they happened to someone else... someone else in a dream."

Minerva pursed her lips. "Severus said he had experienced the same sensation after he'd extracted his memories of Lily. He reinstated the memories without incident quite recently, but Hermione said that he had a bit of a headache for hours afterwards possibly because the memories had been out of mind for some time. We'll avoid keeping these from you for too long, dear," she said, affectionately patting the stone being's hand. She addressed Filius, who had used a modified chair to comfortably access the Pensieve. "How long do you think it will take?"

Filius shrugged. "Somewhere between five hours and all night," he said, peering into the swirling, silvery clouds. He consulted a hovering scroll. "From Petrus' written description of how to ring bells, the trick will be in the timing... which in turn depends on the physical ratios of the bell in question something that Petrus can calculate just by looking at them. A study of his memories will help me devise the correct equations to embed his experience into a transferable charm that can be left *in situ* until activated."

Minerva couldn't hide her excitement as she consulted a parchment map, which showed every place of Muggle worship with intact bells and suitable gargoyles within a five mile arc of the *Cathédrale Notre Dame de Paris*. The arc was left conspicuously open to the east. The prospect of using what was now, officially, her favourite spell filled her with an impatience that reminded her of Christmas Eve. "Do hurry up, Filius!"

The Red Dragon – Part Two

Chapter 26 of 32

Peppercorns and propositions lead to a solution. Dragons? Severus has his doubts – but not for long. Arawn finds Severus' message extremely provocative. The centaurs show just how dangerous they can be. In the Central Carpathians, Fawkes pays an important visit.

A/N:

Stoush A fight or an argument (Antipodean slang)

Summat Something (Northern UK dialect)

Kew (Kew Gardens) The Royal Botanic Gardens, Kew (south-west London)

Severus' vision of Merlin summoning fire from the sky is summarised and re-worded from pp.241–246 of Mary Stewart's book *The Hollow Hills* (1973). Unaltered dialogue from Ms Stewart's work is marked with an asterisk (*). The involvement of a dragon is my addition.

Senior Auror McPhee is adapted from the character Nanny McPhee in the film *Nanny McPhee*, Universal Pictures, 2005.

Pugsley Addams is the property of the cartoonist Charles Addams. I make no profit from his character.

Canon characters are the property of J.K. Rowling. I make no money from them.

Thank you, TeaOli, for your advice on style and the sentence-smithing discussions that followed. Your suggested changes were enacted in subtle keystrokes, but they brought extra life to the drama and gave the scenes a touch of class.

Relieved that the Snape males had simply been startled by her dramatic arrival and had not been about to fight, Hermione plonked into Severus' vacated chair with considerable lack of grace. "That workshop was rather fun," she said, blowing a wandering curl out of her eyes.

Severus arched an eyebrow. "Because you were in command?"

Hermione stuck out her tongue.

"Very articulate," Severus muttered, pouring her a goblet of pumpkin juice. "Your linguistic abilities never cease to astound me."

Toby rolled his eyes, shook his head and devoted all of his attention to peeling the red wax coat off a wedge of Edam cheese.

Hermione ran her hands through her hair and sighed in mild exasperation as it immediately sprang back into wild disorder. "Just as well we finished early. It'll take more than a few charms to reverse this disaster. It happened as soon as we started revising examples of the use and abuse of the rune Hagall. Blaise thought it was hysterical until his textbook produced a wind storm and knocked him off his chair."

Severus gave a short laugh. "At least your classroom didn't become the site of a very localised, very intense hailstorm."

Hermione sat up, her eyes sparkling. "Did that really happen? Was it your doing?"

"Yes, and I would never!" Severus detachedly examined his fingernails. "Not *intentionally*."

"Of course not." Hermione gratefully drained her pumpkin juice. "Being the boss is thirsty work. Tobias, may I use your bathroom?" She tugged on a tangled lock of hair. "I really need to sort this out."

Toby pointed her in the right direction. "Elp yerself." He waited until she had gone in and closed the door behind her. "I 'ope things work out for you both... after all this is done with," he said without looking at Severus. "It seems so bloody unfair that you've got to walk such a rough road when you two are just startin' out."

Severus reclaimed his seat and propped his feet up on an ottoman. "I seem to encounter a great many rough roads, some more so than others," he reflected. He pointed to his heavy duty footwear. "It's precisely why I invested in these."

Toby broke off another hunk of bread to go with a slice of "peppercorn cheese" and regarded his son with real surprise. "You remember that?"

Severus nodded. It was one of the few memories that he had never tried to expunge because it had such practical significance. On Severus' fifth birthday, his father had sat him on the kitchen table and laced him into a pair of stout leather boots, thus granting an increasingly curious little boy permission to see what went on in the workshop because he would have "summat decent" to protect his feet.

Stolidly holding his father's hand, he had clomped around the kitchen with an expression serious enough to impress a magistrate while his mother had looked on in amusement. As he got used to the stiff, weighty grip of his first pair of boots, Severus had asked why his new footwear which would require the bulk of two pairs of thick socks until he grew into them needed to be so heavy.

Coming out of his recollections, Severus claimed a plump green olive. "You told me that some roads were muddy and slippery, some were steep and rocky, and others were well paved and swept every day but a good pair of boots would get me through all of them. It was advice worth listening to."

Toby shrugged and looked away, apologetically mumbling that he had just chewed on a peppercorn and it was making his eyes water. Recovering, he eyed his son's boots with the interest of a working man who had direct experience in the benefits of well made gear. "What're they made of anyway?"

"Dragon hide."

"You're jokin'! Did you kill it yerself?"

"No."

Toby frowned and tutted theatrically. "What kind of wizard doesn't kill 'is own dragons?"

"One that doesn't want to end up as dragon dung," Severus answered dispassionately.

Toby considered this answer very carefully. "Yeah. Fair 'nough."

"Speaking of peppercorns," Severus announced as a much tidier Hermione emerged from the bathroom, "we have a proposition for you."

"We bein' you pair?" Toby cut in, immediately sensing the need to play dumb, talk slow and think fast.

Severus tilted his head. "Hermione, perhaps you would begin by explaining a certain logistical difficulty?"

Hermione nodded. "Don't take too much notice of him, Tobias. I'm not about to try and snooker you into doing something that you'd rather not be involved in."

Severus rolled his eyes. "Gryffindors!"

"There's only *one* Gryffindor here," she pointed out with her sweetest smile. "The plural really isn't necessary." She looked Tobias in the eyes. "As you know, I've inherited a certain amount of property in Australia. I'm not in a position to give the place the care and attention it deserves, but at the same time, I don't want to put it on the market."

"Are y' lookin' for a caretaker?" Toby asked guardedly.

"Of sorts..." Hermione bit her lower lip.

Toby folded his arms, seemingly pondering while watching Severus with his peripheral vision. "'Of sorts', eh? And what do the *sorts* 'ave to do with peppercorns and propositions?" He concealed a smile when Severus' eyes widened slightly. "I might be gettin' on a bit, Sev'rus, but I'm none daft. Not yet, anyway. And with you two bein' magical folk, I'll wager they ain't ordinary peppercorns," he challenged, extracting a manifestly commonplace peppercorn from a slice of cheese and placing it in the middle of the table where everyone could contemplate it.

Severus took a deep breath. "They aren't. Some time ago, a cache of fruits peppercorns of a new species of pepper vine was found in Antarctica. It had been in extremely cold storage for over fifteen million years. Pugsley...What's funny?"

Toby quickly composed himself. "T'other day, Pugsley were chasin' 'is little lass through t' lib'ry... She were dodgin' under tables and 'round shelves and callin' out 'Bloody Baron' at t' top of 'er lungs. Tocky says that Malicia 'as a thing for the Bloody Baron and t' Baron's gone into 'idin' in t' kitchens!"

Severus closed his eyes. "At least we'll know where to find him if we ever need him."

"Sorry. Y' were sayin'?"

"Pugsley succeeded in persuading some of the peppercorns to germinate, and they are now growing into healthy, viable vines. A suitable habitat for the vines has been located on Hermione's property. In accordance with the *Magical Vegetation Act of Australia Section three, Sub-clause two hundred twenty-four* an experimental site must be kept within magical barriers to prevent the translocated species running feral and to contain any pathogens not detected during the quarantine period."

Toby gave Tocky a sidelong glance. "And t' proposition?"

"It has two parts," Hermione said. "I'd like to have someone on the property to look after it so that it doesn't turn into an overgrown disaster that's the first part. The second is to have the experimental site supervised and maintained, bearing in mind that the vines are a bit snappy when they're small. Not sure what they'll be like when they start to fruit, but inferences from other species suggest they get quite docile when the fruits form, presumably to allow dispersal by foraging fauna. Professor Addams and a team of Magibotanists from Kew will visit at regular intervals to run tests and collect samples. I'm not asking for any rent or anything... I think those tasks would be more than enough."

Toby poured himself another goblet of pumpkin juice. "So if I were to offer me labour... I'd need access to some form of magical capacity." He took his time absorbing Severus' inscrutable evaluation, Hermione's gaze of hopeful apology, and Tocky's wide-eyed, silent pleading. "As I said, I'm gettin' on a bit... I figured I wouldn't be able to roam from place to place forever. Now that I don't have the Llygad anymore, I don't 'ave to, I s'pose. Never made any plans, though. I reckoned somethin' would show up when t' time were right." He looked Hermione in the eyes. "I know people in that area, and I know that range in all its seasons. Yeah, I'll take it on if Tocky's willin' to do the magic."

Tocky threw his spindly arms around his adopted master's lower legs. "Tocky is being willing! Tocky is most happy to be serving Snape family forever!"

Beaming with delight, Hermione reached across the table and shook hands with Tobias to seal the arrangement.

"Talk about a peppercorn rent," Toby muttered as he turned to clasp his son's hand. "That's assumin' we all survive t' next stoush."

Dragons? The fire came from cooperative dragons? Even though Kingsley had warned him of the involvement of the fearsome creatures, Severus felt a flicker of disbelief cross his resolutely crafted expression of objectivity. He glanced at Kingsley, who opened his mouth to speak, then decided that he really didn't know what to say.

Hermione rested her elbows on the table, her features troubled and her eyes clouded with a distant sadness.

Master Vu raised an eyebrow and gave Theravāda a mystical smile, as if to say, *I told you they would react in this way*

"No one can command dragons... Unless one animates a statue of a dragon or makes one from Fiendfyre....," Kingsley finally managed, his tone conveying that he wasn't quite sure what to believe.

Hermione sat up straight and bit her lower lip.

Theravāda pressed his palms together respectfully. "Honourable Minister, the dragons were true, living creatures. They were not made by the hand and magic of any human." The scholar surveyed his audience without judgement. "In the East, we have ancestral traditions to honour dragon-kind. Throughout our history, there are many accounts of dragons and humans assisting each other. We never hunt them or trap them, nor do we seek them out to challenge their might in battle. To us, they are wise, ancient creatures embodying Hidden Nature and Creative Principle. To see them in flight is a powerful omen of great good, not something to be feared and hated."

Master Vu nodded amiably. "Together with the light of many Patronus forms, the elemental heat of dragon fire was instrumental in driving the eaters of souls back through the rift that resulted from Subānu's terrible curse. It is true that the dragons were not commanded by anyone they were asked to act. In the face of a relentless menace that would have bled the world of its life and its magic act they did."

Severus narrowed his eyes. *Darkness flees at the touch of light; cold withdraws from fire's heat. Patronus charms and... helpful fire-breathing dragons. Well Seen, Hermione, in spite of your distaste for Divination. Thankfully, your latent ability gave you second thoughts about shopping in Weasley Lane. Lucky me for once.* He folded his arms and scowled. *And just how is one supposed to ask a dragon for anything?* He glanced across the table and quirked an eyebrow. His witch had gone pale. "Hermione, if you have something to add concerning dragons, please do so," he coaxed.

Hermione let out the breath she had been holding. "It's just that... well... I've ridden a dragon with Ron and Harry. It's how we got out of Gringotts when we... took Helga Hufflepuff's cup out of the Lestrangle vault. The curious thing is," she said, fiddling with her quill, "when we first saw the dragon, it roared and spat fire at us. It was a prisoner chained to the ground and brutally treated. I think it was starving, too... But when we jumped onto its back, it didn't even snap at us." She looked around, lost as to how to continue her account.

"Did you and your friends do something to ease the creature's pain?" Theravāda asked gently.

"I... I don't know... Harry cast *Relashio* to break the chains that kept the dragon in the one spot and we all used *Defodio* so it could escape and carry us out... Maybe that was why? But the other thing I can't work out is why it flew north taking us in the direction we needed to go *and* giving us a head start in getting back to Hogsmeade. It was a Ukrainian Ironbelly that much was obvious even if its scales had gone all pale and flaky. It should have flown due east... Dragons never get lost." She gave a rueful smile and shrugged one shoulder. "I still wonder if it managed to survive... and I wish I'd got rid of the iron bands around its legs."

Master Vu tucked his hands into the sleeves of his pale blue robe. "Younger sister, all creatures recognise compassion when they encounter it. Dragons are no different he or she would have felt your concern as clearly as I can see it. Restoring the dragon's freedom would have certainly given you and your friends a point of favour. As for how your Ukrainian Ironbelly knew to take you north instead of heading straight across Europe, that will be known only to the dragon."

Hermione discreetly rubbed one eye and smiled hesitantly.

Severus marshalled his thoughts, dragging them away from questions he could not answer. He had heard about the escapade of the Ukrainian Ironbelly but had never considered *why* the beast hadn't thrown its passengers off its back and eaten them as an in-flight snack. It would certainly have been hungry enough to swallow three humans whole. He grimaced at the thought. His life debt would have been forfeited, and Hermione would have had to negotiate the Veil, regardless of how creepy she thought it was. It was a very lonely thought. "So," he intoned, feeling the Llygad grow warm against his skin, "what happened after the Dementors were herded through the rift and into the void? What power sealed them on the other side?"

Master Vu looked around at everyone seated at the table and nodded to Theravāda. The scholar consulted a scroll upon which he had written notes in the ornate Khmer script of his homeland. "As the dragons poured out their fire, charring the shrouds of the soul-eaters, a phoenix appeared. From where this messenger of the gods came, no one knows, but he brought with him a jewel of unsurpassable brightness which we think was plucked from the gardens of the sun. A gift sent to Earth from one of the seven heavens.

"The phoenix placed the sun jewel in the king's hand and sang to him. It is written that the king after much travail fought his way to the rift. With a mighty incantation, the words of which I have found and restored, he cast the sun jewel into it. There was a great cry of hatred, a blinding flash of light, and a roar that shook the Earth to its core then the rift closed and vanished. The king survived, but lost several fingers and the tips of his ears due to the intense cold."

The power to seal the rift... Severus considered the image he had seen of the bridge in Pripyat and the figure holding... "The Spear of the Stronghold... It was thought to have been a gift from heaven..."

Merlin's power surged through his flesh, blood, and bone. No wonder that Nimuë had placed the old wizard's power in an inanimate object to have two magical essences continuously housed in the one body would have been fatal. He caught Hermione's eyes and signalled to her not to be alarmed as he relaxed his senses to simply allow...

A rough land. Crags, caves, barren rock, stunted trees. Stinging sleet pelted down, taking turns with sheets of spiteful rain. Severus could read the terrain through Merlin's memory, even though in the vision he beheld, it was some hours into the night.

Merlin sat with his back against a curved wall of broken stone, his hands tied. A cloth gag prevented him from speaking, but his eyes surveyed his captors with the calm surety of one who knows he has the advantage.

Severus considered the fact that Merlin appeared to be somewhere between his late twenties and mid-thirties. *Chronological order is not important in what the Llygad reveals*, he thought. *It's showing me what I need to know at this very moment* Consolidating this thought as a rule for future reference, he set his mind to observation.

Eight undersized, wiry men with gnarled faces and coarse clothing milled around Merlin, two of them calming the wizard's frightened mare in a strange, lilting language whose syllables might have been wrought from the form of the landscape and the calls of its birds and beasts. They talked freely, leading Severus to wonder if part of Merlin's equanimity was due to an understanding of the language an understanding that the men seemed sure their prisoner did not have.

Another memory crowded into Severus' mind, giving him the confusing sensation of being in several places at once: Merlin as a boy, sitting cross-legged in the outer cave, reciting words and phrases while a white-bearded tutor looked on, occasionally correcting his pupil's pitch and inflexion. *This must be Galapas he who taught Merlin how to wield power*, Severus concluded. As though it were something he had learned for himself, Severus began to understand the speech and knew it to be the old language of the ancient Britons. The intruding memory withdrew...

Unaware that Merlin could understand them, the men argued amongst themselves in short phrases: who did they have as prisoner, was he the one the soldiers sought and should they kill him?

Severus smirked to himself, interested to see what Merlin would do. *Obviously, this didn't end in murder.*

The men's arguments reached an apparent hiatus: they would send for someone called "Llyd" because he would know what to do...

The memory rippled and re-formed. The rain and sleet had ceased, but the ground was sodden, and the wind keen and bitter.

This must be Llyd, Severus deduced as a man clad in a jerkin of wolf skin strode towards Merlin and ordered the gag to be removed. At Llyd's command, two men ran to gather wood for a fire though Severus seriously doubted that there was anything dry to be found. *Ah, now we come to it...*

Llyd addressed Merlin in slow, broken Welsh, asking him who he was and what business did he have travelling through their mountains.

Severus had the sudden insight that Merlin had been travelling in secret and Llyd's men had been persuaded to find and intercept him. A fleeting vision of a jewel-hilted sword flashed through his mind. *He's searching for Macsen's treasure... to prepare Caliburn for the time when Arthur shall claim it. Yes, Merlin, that would put a bounty on your head, wouldn't it?*

The two wood gatherers stacked fallen branches into a sizeable pyre, glancing at Merlin now and then through eyes slitted with suspicion.

Bounty or not, Merlin calmly answered Llyd's questions in Welsh and allowed himself and his saddlebags to be ungently searched without any sign of resistance.

Severus' wand hand flexed as the men displayed what they had found: plenty of gold, the small harp that Severus had seen in the crystal cave, and the dragon brooch. One of them shoved Merlin into the light of a guttering torch and pulled aside the collar of his cloak and tunic to display a raven tattoo, black on the wizard's pale skin.

"A messenger carrying a harp, and the sign of the Dragon, and the brand of the Raven? And he rides alone out of Maridunum?" Llyd's expression was unreadable, even to Severus. "No. There is only one man it can be; the magician from Bryn Myrddin."

A muttered medley of half-fearful argument rose into the misting air...

"Him? The magician?"

"He is too young..."

"I have heard of that magician. They say he is a giant, with eyes that freeze you to the marrow."

"He's no magician, see how he's dressed. Besides, if he knew magic, he could have stopped us."

"...We will get the money the soldiers offered. They said they would pay us well."

One man held up a fistful of gold. "He has more on him than they offered us."

Severus scowled, forcing himself not to draw his wand. *Merlin must have a reason for his lack of resistance... Perhaps these wild men know where Macsen's treasure is hidden?*

Llyd's voice cut across the jumbled babble, stating that they were not thieves or soldiers' hirelings. They were Old Ones' descendants of the most ancient gods and they would do their own work as they saw fit. He eyed Merlin implacably. "That is a man who counts among men. We will untie him and talk." He gave the order to light the well-stacked pyre, but the flame would not take hold. The wood merely smouldered with thick gusts of dark smoke.

The Old Ones began to argue again concerning Merlin's errand, and Severus hissed when he heard the words:

"Knowledge is the only power we have. If he will not tell us of his own will, then we shall have to make him..."

Merlin's obsidian eyes hardened in a look that Severus could read as clearly as if it were his own. *Enough!*

Merlin spoke clearly and fluently in the Old One's tongue, "Stand back from the fire!" He ignored their gasps of astonishment and shocked, open-mouthed stares. The only sounds were the heavy shifting of the mare's hooves and a feeble sputter from the reeking pyre.

Severus held his breath. Merlin's eyes did not cloud over as they did when he used the Sight; they stayed clear and sharp. A thrilling tingle ran up his spine, then Merlin's magic flowed freely, running alongside his own in a heady charge of cool, honed power.

High above the gathering and the pyre, hidden in the night, its movement sensed in the blood and felt in the hollow spaces of the body, something huge dropped swiftly like a falcon to its prey.

A flash and a rain of burning sparks. Fire poured down in a roaring, twisting column. The pyre could have been anointed with oil, for the fire surrounded it and drove away the wet with a vast hiss. Rolling gouts of flame devoured the wood, illuminating everything in steaming light.

Severus tore his eyes away from the pyre to look up and saw the whip-like tail of a dragon as the beast departed in a thunderous rush of flight. *Gods... He called upon a dragon.* The thought was scarcely believable, and yet he had just seen it for himself. *And it came to his aid.* Awestruck, he swallowed and tried to still his trembling limbs, clenching his jaw to stop his teeth from chattering.

Merlin sat alone for a moment, then one of the Old Ones darted into the light and cut Merlin's bonds with a stone knife before scrambling back into the shadows. Llyd appeared and approached Merlin cautiously, his voice wavering a little as he spoke. "You are Myrddin called Emrys or Ambrosius, son of Ambrosius the son of Constantius who sprang from the seed of Macsen Wledig?"

The picture of contented serenity, Merlin raised an eyebrow. "I am Merlin Emrys."

Llyd shuffled uncomfortably. "My men took you in error. They did not know."

Merlin gave a wry half-smile and shrugged one shoulder. "They know now."

Severus laughed quietly. *They certainly do.* He felt the Llygad's influence fade.

His eyes focussed on his companions, the echo of Merlin's magic still trickling liquid lightning through his blood. "Asking dragons to drive Dementors... From what I have witnessed by virtue of the Sight, it is a possibility."

Severus saw no need to divulge just whose Sight it had been, or by what means he had accessed it. Singing in his memory was the wild, haunting chant he had heard Merlin send forth without uttering a single word.

Arawn stared at the Dementors in disbelief. He was used to them indulging in the occasional bout of restlessness, but this was different. They were retreating from something. In fact, they appeared to be parting to let something through while staying as far away as possible from whatever it was. He drew his wand and exchanged baffled glances with the Death Eaters.

"Aww, is that all it is?" The Death Eater known as Jugson pointed and doubled up with laughter. "Great big Dementors all scared of one little Patronus!"

Arawn turned to look at the luminous glow of a swiftly approaching Patronus. He ground his teeth as Jugson continued to chuckle. *Oaf! We shall all see how big you'll be when I send one of them after the pathetic shred that is your soul!* He stiffened as the Patronus swooped low.

A peregrine falcon, one of the raptors favoured by the ancient powers of wind and sky. *Myrddin of the High Places.* The name of the god stalked through Arawn's senses with the voice of the wind in the high crags of northern Wales. A brittle sense of unease sent its sharp edges through his mind.

The falcon circled disdainfully. "Arawn!"

A Dementor hovered behind him, writhing in discomfort in the blue-white light. *Wizard! Do not yield to it.*

Arawn used his mind link with the Dementor to assure it that an attack was not imminent. *Finally, Snape has deigned to answer us. The Patronus is merely a messenger. It has not been sent to attack.*

The falcon continued to circle. "To prevent the loss of innocent lives, I propose that we settle our dilemma one to one. You have two choices: civilised discussion, which will give you the chance to see reason and revoke any claim to the Llygad y Ddraig, or an honourable duel, in which I will generously give you every reason in the world to *surrender* your imaginary claims. While you consider your reply, don't bother with any more empty threats; the Ministry has found nothing to substantiate them. Don't forget to name a place and time, Arawn. I look forward to hearing from you." With a haughty flick of its tail feathers, the Patronus vanished.

Surrender? Empty threats? Arawn was speechless. And just who was *Snape* to talk of honour and civilised behaviour in such patronising tones? "The Ministry position must have gone to his head," he growled. "If it's a duel you want, Snape, then that's what you'll get! On my terms." He signalled the Death Eaters. "Prepare the half-souls and keep the trolls busy. I'll go on ahead to Paris and ensure that Scabior and Rabastan have everything ready. Join me there tomorrow night. We'll show the half-blood the meaning of substantial!" *I will command the Llygad y Ddraig.*

The Dementors formed their ranks once more. *The word is given. It is time. We shall feed. We shall take all and leave nothing.*

In the damp, dismal gloom propagated by such a large number of Dementors, no one noticed an agile figure keeping to the deep shadow of rock and fissure as it darted back into the forest.

"Oriens!"

Oriens put down his quill, blinking at the sphere of light which hung in front of him. "Here I am."

Teylun's voice held a tone of urgency, framed in the sougning hymn of a windswept forest. "I have news from our spy. The one called Arawn has received the challenge from Merlin's heir. He moves tonight, alone, to the place called Paris. He said he would duel on *his* terms, but our spy did not see him send a response to the challenge. He has directed his forces to join him in Paris tomorrow night. The centaurs have been alerted. They are ready and wait only for the signal."

The sphere had not even faded from sight when Oriens sent his Patronus to Severus and to Kingsley, relaying the information.

Hermione pulled her thick, woollen wrap close about her shoulders as the silver serow tossed its head and vanished. "I hate fighting. I feel as though I'm personally sending the centaurs straight into Death's arms."

"You're not," Severus murmured, brushing ash from her shoulders and hair. "If anyone can be pointed at, it would be Fawkes he was the one delivering messages and summons. Don't forget, the centaurs themselves proposed an ambush."

Hermione chewed her lower lip, her expression doubtful. "Do you think Theravāda is right about a phoenix being a messenger of the gods?"

Severus shrugged. "I've no idea. Ask Fawkes next time you see him. Perhaps he'll give you a very cryptic answer." He raised an eyebrow. "How did your parents take the news?"

Hermione had only just stumbled out of the Floo when Oriens' Patronus had arrived. She had postponed her own communications to hear what the Unspeakable had to say. "They aren't happy about it; of course they wouldn't be... They're worried and upset... I didn't mention anything to do with the Llygad, or Fawkes, or Merlin. I only told them that it's another potential uprising involving Death Eaters and explained Dementors as well as I could. Mum and Dad both asked that we look after each other." Hermione attempted a smile. "Dad said he wants a word with both of us when order is re-established." She wrapped her arms around Severus and held him as though she intended to never let go.

Kingsley's lynx bounded into the room on soundless paws. "Password!"

Severus gritted his teeth. "Blibbering Humdinger," he ground out. *Nobody would ever guess that one. Even with Legilimency, an interrogator would call it a preposterous hoax.*

The lynx appeared to look down its elegant nose at the imposition of such an outlandish password. Kingsley's voice did not reflect his Patronus' opinion. "I trust you've heard Oriens' message." There was the sort of breath-stilling pause that comes with leafing through sheets of parchment before making an announcement. "London is secure potential threats have already been very quietly addressed. Auror Proudfoot's team are standing by in Dover. *Monsieur* Roquefort's tactical response regiment have the infestation in Calais surrounded. We have a select group of our own Aurors there with them to back them up once they launch the offensive. That leaves the centaurs and you, Severus. I've just had another update from Oriens. Arawn has definitely left for Paris."

Hermione experienced a horrible, cold sense of *déjà vu*... Voldemort's challenge to Harry rose up in her mind like an Inferius clawing its way out of a grave-soiled burial shroud. *Oh, gods*... Reluctantly, she consented to her wizard's postural prompting and let her arms fall to her sides. She watched as he effortlessly summoned his Patronus two of them. *How can he do this?*

Severus gave her a grim half-smile. *Because if I don't, my love, we will be overrun*

Hermione drew courage from the brave presentation of Severus' peregrine falcons. *Have you made a habit of listening in when my thoughts are giving me curry?*

Only when you look distressed. Severus appeared to hesitate. He allowed his hair to mask his features. *I'm here for you, Hermione.* He looked her in the eyes. *No matter what happens, I'll be with you... Always.* He pressed his knuckles into the tabletop and eyed his fierce falcons as if they were wayward chickens. "To Kingsley and to Bane: Arawn is expected to arrive in Paris this evening and will look for his army to assemble there tomorrow night before executing his intention of crossing into England. I shall detain him on the French side. Bane, he is away from the main strength of his forces. Strike when you will with Chiron's blessing.

"Kingsley, I shall set up the reception party with headquarters at the *Cathédrale Notre Dame de Paris*. We all know our roles. Minerva and Filius are setting the periphery charms as I speak. Remember to wait for the signal before you and Monsieur Roquefort join us there."

As the ethereal messengers departed, Hermione slipped her hand into Severus' coat pocket and drew out the dragon brooch. "I hope Merlin's Sight allowed him to see you," she whispered. With fingers made nimble by practice, she unfastened his coat buttons and affixed the red dragon to his waistcoat so that it rested over his heart. "Be proud of who you are, Severus."

For a passing moment, Severus looked a little bit lost. "Don't know about *proud*," he said, taking her hands in his. He gazed at her longingly. "If I'm proud of anything I've done... it will be that I trusted you back in the Shrieking Shack, when I dared to put my many misgivings aside in favour of your reputation as a witch who would keep her word." He brushed away a tear that Hermione let fall unheeded. "Come with me," he entreated huskily, buttoning his coat. "I need to ensure that Tobias remembers to put on that armour."

I am never going to be free of him Severus concluded sourly, his eyes briefly meeting those of Harry Potter as Kingsley concluded his final briefing to the assembled members of the Order. But he had to admit even if half-heartedly the rigours of Auror training under Senior Auror McPhee were definitely having a positive effect. Harry's quiet attentiveness was both composed and thoughtful. While it was evident that the trainee Auror had to make an effort to hold his tongue on some points of strategy, there had not been a single insolent outburst.

Beside him, Hermione exchanged worried gestures with Ron, who gave a slight shake of his head and turned his hand palm upwards to indicate that he didn't have an answer to whatever it was that Hermione had asked.

Catching Severus' eye, the youngest Weasley wizard angled his head in George's direction, his eyes filled with concern.

George Weasley sat firmly enclosed in his own body language with an expression set in stubborn mutiny.

Severus watched him for a moment, then raised an eyebrow at Molly who replied with a silent, sad shake of her head. Arthur glanced at his son, then at Severus, and mirrored his wife's assessment. Severus read the situation as though it were a book. With George's obvious troubles since his brother's death, the remaining Weasleys were reluctant to let him participate in Order duties. Evidently, George had other ideas. Severus wondered if the young man was suicidal, but some vague gut instinct responded to a hint of steel in sky blue eyes and said that Death had not placed his mark on the remaining twin's spirit. If George Weasley had enough spark to resist being packed away in cushioning charms like a fragile ornament, he had enough spark to fight.

"Have you anything to add, Severus?" Kingsley asked, looking as though he really, really needed a good strong cup of tea.

Severus ran through a mental checklist, ticking off items one by one until he found one that hadn't been addressed. He scanned the map that Petrus had found, which now occupied pride of place in the centre of the long table. "Arthur, may I draw upon your appreciation for Muggle culture and beliefs?"

"I... Of course," Arthur replied, a little bemused at what was coming from Severus an unusual question.

"When Emmanuel speaks, the cathedral will be revealed as the focal point of our operations. We have ground patrols in place around the cathedral. Hermione, two Aurors, and a Muggle archer will guard the ramparts while Petrus rings the bell. However, as an extra precaution, I'd like to see Protego Totalis on that building from the highest point in its construction to the bedrock below the crypts. Every stone, every timber, every pane of glass, and every mote of dust." He looked at George as Arthur eagerly nodded his understanding. "I understand you have a close bond with a Thestral."

George raised his eyes, guarded and suspicious. "That's right."

"Would you help defend the *Cathédrale Notre Dame de Paris* if it should come under direct attack?"

"No!" Molly stood up, glaring at Severus and then turning her attention to George. "I won't allow it!"

"I will." The room fell silent when George loudly voiced his acceptance of the task. He steadily looked his mother in the eyes. "I want to, Mum. Hex away if you want to... but I *have* to do this."

Arthur clasped his wife's arm and, with Minerva's help, pulled her back into her seat. "It's better than sending him to harass Dementors, don't you think?" he whispered, not wanting to make a scene. "And I'll be close by to keep an eye on him," he continued, fishing out his pocket handkerchief and pressing it into his wife's hands. "That Thestral keeps watch over him, too. Anyone who wanted to get to our George would have to get past her first."

Severus maintained a mask of tactical detachment. Through his Legilimency, he had been the only one to hear George's unspoken protest to his mother's anxieties: *I can only get into half the trouble, now.*

A silver hare soared through the window. "We've spotted the target! He's talking with two Death Eaters. There's Dementors, too. Lots of. About a hundred and fifty so far, but we believe there's plenty more it's usually dark at night, but this is ridiculous! Cold, too freeze the balls off a Yeti. Chaz Darwin from the Institute of Magizoology is tracking Arawn *en-Animagus* he's a beagle, so he won't lose him. Keeping observations until Emmanuel. Will Patronus again if anything changes."

In the deepest recesses of a shattered, drained mind, instinct stirred instinctive fear at the impossible appearance of the figure on the ridge of a sparsely wooded hill to the east.

"*What* the freakin' hell is *that*?" The half-eaten Muggle's clumsily shrieked question drew the disinterested attention of his comrades.

Pair by pair, expressionless eyes turned to where the figure stood, outlined in a flickering nimbus of variegated light that shone brightly against the dulled pallor of a Dementor-plagued dawn.

A figure that was part human... and part *horse*.

Panic shivered through the assembled Muggles who felt its touch even as they groped to comprehend a growing sense of dread.

The Dementors acted quickly, strengthening their mind links with the half-souls and blunting human senses to a non-responsive state.

Death Eaters drew their wands, rubbing sleep from their eyes. *Bloody centaurs!*

Trolls pointed and growled, baring their teeth and slamming their spiked clubs into the ground.

The lone centaur raised a huge animal horn to his lips.

A commanding group of Dementors surveyed the centaur with calculating vehemence. *Control the humans. Keep them together. Contact...*

A single note rose into the frigid air, riding its currents and pouring down into the shallow bowl of the encampment. A single note of hope and courage. A single flame of pure light in a deep, dank well of sordid darkness.

The Dementors recognised it as soon as the magic-infused note touched them a power that barred their way and repulsed them. Like the touch of a phoenix, the fiery breath of a dragon, the blinding silver force of a soul's guardian summoned to defend and attack, the harmonic voice of the Earth's own power as it denied them the freedom to feed and left them cursed and ravenous.

It reached into the threads that bound their consciousness and form slicing, stinging, burning. A wave of Dementors surged towards the centaur, determined to smother the noise that irritated and pained them by the sheer force of their numbers. It was one centaur. One horn. One note. And they were a multitude.

The Dementors closed in on their target. The note waned and ran to echo.

Concealed on the other side of the ridge, several hundred horn bearers gave their willing breath to ancient magic, channelling their own power through the charms that Merlin had bound into the aurochs horns so many centuries before.

The massed sounding shook the air with a glorious, throbbing, unassailable harmony. Earth and rock trembled, and the trees of the forest leaned towards it as though drinking deeply. As if it had been summoned, the sun sent a red sliver of muted light above the grey horizon.

Bright with living magic, the music of the horns ripped through the Dementors with the fury of a fighting dragon. Tormented and blinded, they bunched together, colliding with each other in blundering desperation as they sought an escape. The noise was intolerable. The agony unbearable. Their mind links with the Muggles faltered and fell.

With an unearthly, ululating battle cry, the Ūnkhari poured over the crest of the hill, their loaded slings a blur of motion. Bryndorach's trollmord followed them in attack formation.

Magorian stood unmoving while centaur warriors thundered past him. Cancelling the Aurora Charm that had illuminated his body, he took his place among the horn blowers who would keep pounding the Dementors with continuous relays of charmed resonance.

Their instincts freed from the Dementors' influence, the Muggles stared in witless horror.

Swearing mightily, Death Eaters sent curses in searing bolts and snarling whiplashes, tinting the air with traces of red, green, and purple. In addition to shielding charms, they unconcernedly used any convenient Muggle or troll to protect themselves from the lethal barrage of stones deployed by the oncoming centaurs.

The trolls growled and spat, clustering together as the Ūnkhari pelted them with stones. Covering their eyes with one hand and squinting through the slits between their fingers, the trolls raised their clubs and charged.

Jugson sent an Entrail-Expelling Curse in a centaur's direction, only to have it intercepted by a panicking half-soul. The Muggle staggered and fell, trailing intestines from every orifice. A clumsy troll gave the unfortunate man a quick, accidental end by treading on his head.

Tāk easily caught a lurid purple curse on his shield, the protective symbols glowing white as Dark magic dissipated and died. He glanced at Lūt. *Now!*

Barely beyond the range of a troll's sneeze, the Unkhari parted like floodwaters around a mid-stream boulder. Some swept around the trolls to harass them from the rear. Others turned their attention to the Death Eaters who had formed loose groups to guard each other's back while they tried to coordinate a counter-attack.

Looking to left and right, the trolls grunted their surprise. Distracted and confused by the sudden evasive movement of the Unkhari, they did not see the trollmord bearing down on them with spears couched...

It was the clashing, grinding, flesh-rending impact that made the half-souls break and run. Like a herd of startled antelope, they fled towards the open land of the broad valley to the north. One Muggle clutched at his chest and breathed his last.

Six trolls fell, killed outright each with a spear through the heart. Amid the squealing, bellowing roars of the injured, an enraged troll dragged a spear out of its thigh and tossed it aside, turning to face the centaur responsible who had circled back to attack again, now wielding a heavy mace.

Without any detectable signal, the centaurs regrouped and surged away from the centre of the battlefield as quickly as they had overrun it.

Exchanging baffled shrugs with his fellow Death Eaters, Jugson mounted his broom and shouted above the relentless reverberations of the horns. "I'll get a look at this from the air and find out what in Belial's name we're dealing with!"

He ascended in a vertical climb that would have done credit to a Seeker. His skin prickled as he levelled off and beheld the sight of more centaurs than he had ever thought existed. He breathed the most savage oath he knew.

"No... Too many..." He swerved out of an arrow's path. Something like a Hurling Hex nearly shook him from his seat. He willed his shuddering broom into a swooping dive. "Retreat! Get out! Go! There's too many! The place is crawling with them! Retreat!"

To the north of the battlefield, watching from the eastern hill, Bane gave his order as Arawn's disoriented, absconding forces came within range. "Archers! Five flights, then charge! Drive them south to the rocky tract into the forest if you can!" On the flank of the western hill, Bryndorach gave the same order.

A hail of arrows hissed down in a deadly crossfire, mowing down those foremost in retreat.

In utter confusion, the surviving Muggles fled back the way they had come as a second flight, a third, and a fourth methodically reduced their numbers. Stumbling over the fallen, fighting with those still living, and snapping underfoot the wand of a Death Eater who hadn't maintained her shielding charms, they forgot about their fear of the forest whose brooding trees loomed to the south. They forgot about trolls and Death Eaters and magic and mind-numbing, soul-sapping cold. A fifth rain of arrows cut more of them down from behind. The only thing that mattered was escape.

Bane and Bryndorach called the advance. Sweeping downhill like a living earthquake and shooting arrows as they came, the centaurs quickly secured the northern valley a galloping wall of merciless wrath.

The horn bearers kept at their task with renewed enthusiasm. The swift-moving Unkhari rejoined the battle, paying special attention to stragglers and those who tried to escape in any direction other than south.

Bryndorach pounded through the chaos. In his path, a trollmord battled mace to club with a bleeding troll. With a sweep of his axe, the Schwarzwald herd's leader severed the ligaments behind the troll's right knee. Keeping his weapon moving as he galloped, he casually beheaded a Death Eater, ignoring the sharp tingle that ran up his arm as the rune-forged metal passed through the wizard's magical shields.

Ronan felt the blistering slash of fire then the cool caress of water. Breyūn's brief eye contact told him that she had just used her own magic to quench a curse that would have incinerated him alive.

Singing to himself, Fawkes flew high above the clouds, using his internal compass to direct him to the high peaks of the Central Carpathians.

A patch of cloud billowed and swirled. Emerging from the turbulence on strong wings, a young Ukrainian Ironbelly greeted the phoenix with a low, hissing call.

The phoenix replied in kind, flaring the tips of his flight feathers as the dragon briefly folded his wings and rolled twice before diving into an updraft with his wings extended to full display.

Fawkes joined the proposed game with glee, chasing the dragon's tail and flitting beneath the great beast's wings. Together, dragon and phoenix danced with the clouds diving and soaring, climbing and rolling, swerving, and plunging with folded wings. Occasionally, the dragon let a thin jet of fire stream into the air, where it marked his path like a trailing ribbon before fading to a misty trail.

Fawkes gave a questioning trill, and the dragon blinked his ruby eyes and rolled into a steep descent, the handsome iron-grey scales of his body collecting beads of condensation as he passed through the clouds. The phoenix followed the dragon through a serpentine maze of peaks, crowned with clouds and scarred by rock slides. Deep within this concealing sanctuary, the young dragon trumpeted an announcement.

An answering call deeper, longer, and bleached with the dry winds of age echoed from beyond a high peak draped with snow.

From several lesser rises and ridges, more Ukrainian Ironbellies raised their heads to investigate, extending their wings as the phoenix flew past.

Fawkes spotted the old dragon resting by the edge of a deep mountain pool. Spiralling down with a warble of farewell to his guide, the phoenix perched on a boulder and lowered his head as a sign of respect.

The dragon rumbled a greeting and performed the same gesture, then raised her scarred face to regard the phoenix with milkily clouded eyes as the bird told of impending events where a dragon's elemental power would be needed. The dragon commented in soft, hot, metallic hisses, being careful not to let fire come forth in anger when she told of sensing a great, rapacious hunger that threatened to devour all life and magic. She listened to all that the phoenix told her: especially when he sang of a wizard who had become a friend to dragons in return for defending a clutch of Welsh Green hatchlings from marauding human warriors while the parents were out hunting most dragons knew that story, but few European dragons believed it. Of particular interest, a descendant of that same wizard was soon to battle the devouring ones and he would do so under the sign of a red dragon.

Finishing his account, Fawkes whistled sadly when he heard the metal cuffs around the dragon's legs scrape against bare rock as she moved. He knew much about this particular dragon his twinkling-eyed human had mentioned her many times. The phoenix cocked his head to observe her while she took another draught from the pool which smelled of dissolved metal with a hint of sulphur.

The dragon's scales could no longer be described as pallid and flaking. Well fed as evidenced by a half-eaten deer carcass and free to bask in open air, she had gained in health and strength, her metabolism binding excess dietary iron into her scales to form natural armour of renowned strength. Bearing witness to the dragon's age, the iron binding process had become less efficient over time, allowing air and moisture to turn the iron from grey to red. The old dragon's head, wings, back, flanks, and tail were the colour of what humans used to call "blood-ore" while her belly and legs still held the grey tones of her youth.

Fawkes could do nothing about the goblins' bonds, or old age, but he could certainly help with the milky film in the dragon's eyes. He gave a string of melodious instruction, and the dragon sat very still with her eyes wide open. Fawkes flew up and perched on her head. Leaning forward, he let two tears fall one into each of the dragon's eyes.

The dragon closed both eyes, shifting her eyeballs left and right, up and down. When she opened them again, she hissed in delight and sent a triumphant jet of flame high into the air while Fawkes flapped to keep his balance.

Bane scanned the battlefield. *There she is!* Through the morning mist and glowing smoke of magic, he could see Esnyë retreating from a limping mountain troll shooting arrows as she dodged the creature's spiked club. Behind her, a Death Eater was creeping closer...

With a roar of fury, Bane charged, jinking left and right when the Death Eater saw him coming and responded with a string of curses. One curse struck a boulder which exploded and sprayed Bane's flank with stinging needles of shattered stone. He was out of arrows. "Esnyë! Behind you!" He cast his useless bow aside and slammed into a wounded Muggle who stood in his way, frozen with shock. Bane hardly noticed the impact, but it sent the human sprawling, knocked completely senseless. He galloped on, his hind hooves nudging his underbelly as he gave everything he had to speed.

He soared over a fallen troll. From a desperate melee to his right, someone called his name and tossed a trollmord's spear into his path. Without breaking stride, Bane caught it and yelled challenge to the lumbering monstrosity that threatened Bryndorach's daughter.

The troll turned and leered at him.

Esnyë seized the opening. In one swift motion, she swivelled and loosed an arrow over her tail. The Death Eater went down, her arrow lodged in his forehead.

Bellowing and drooling, the troll raised its club and shambled towards Bane.

Esnyë kept her focus, knowing that she had to distract the troll. Leaping into a gallop, she aimed and shot, striking the troll below its left ear. It slapped at the arrow, just as she shot again, this time piercing one of its eyes. It turned towards her with a murderous growl...

Bane used all of his strength and momentum to drive the spear home, angling it up and under the troll's ribs. But he didn't have the weight and experience of a trollmord. The force of the collision jolted him off balance and his hooves slid out from under him, bringing him to the ground with a lung-jarring crash.

Snarling in pain, the troll looked stupidly from one centaur to the other. Coughing blood, it gave a slobbering grin when it saw that one of them was down.

Bane struggled, desperately trying to breathe and get up. Esnyë covered him with her last arrow on her string, screaming defiance.

The troll stepped forward.

Jugson considered his options. If he deserted, he had no doubt that he would soon have a Dementor shadowing his steps with every intention of Kissing him. *Not desirable.* Still airborne, he shielded a half-soul from an arrow only to see a grey centaur with long blonde hair transfix the human with a fire-hardened driftwood javelin. *A sinking ship and a sea full of Krakens,* he thought desperately. He looked toward the accursed forest, into which broom-mounted Death Eaters and running Muggles were rapidly disappearing. It looked to be the safest place for the moment. It seemed that even the centaurs avoided crossing its fringe. He eyed the rocky tract where a few Muggles staggered and stumbled under a rain of arrows, then steered his broom into the deep green wilderness.

The Dementors could hold out no longer. The constant barrage of magic held them at bay, crippled and impotent. *Withdraw. We must withdraw.*

Back to the city. Call more of our brethren.

What of the humans...

Leave them. There are many more that we can turn into slaves...

Esnyë shot, blinding the troll's other eye.

Gasping for air, Bane staggered upright and shouldered her out of the path of a sudden backhanded swipe. The spiked club gashed his loin. A hiss of pain escaped through his clenched teeth. He turned to face the troll once more... *To the death!*

The blinded troll swung its club wildly. The end of the protruding troll spear caught in the rough ground. With a hair-stirring howl, the creature dropped to its hands and knees...

A mahogany bay blur. A gristly *slice* and a wet *thump*. Röthvar slewed to a circling halt, his broadsword a flashing arc of steel and gore.

The headless troll seemed to try to stand, and then it slumped to one side, wetting the stones and melting the snow with gouts of hot, dark blood.

His legs shaking with fatigue, Bane stared at the gruesome sight. He realised that Esnyë stood beside him with one hand resting on his back, her flank brushing his. Speechless with exhaustion, relief, and various clamorous thoughts on the best way to explain himself to Bryndorach, he slid his arm around her waist and pulled her closer.

Röthvar reared, pointing excitedly. "Look to the sky! Look!"

Bane and Esnyë looked. The darkness slid away. As though it were a parting taunt, bitter cold poured down over the battlefield, travelling on a soul-freezing, voiceless cry of pure hatred.

The cry faded. The mist lifted. A waxing half-moon emerged from behind a murky veil to momentarily greet the strengthening light of the sun.

A cheer rose from the battlefield a cheer of victory and raw delight, further enlivened by the wild yells of the Ūnkhari.

Lüt quickly bound a profusely bleeding wound on Etüyen's upper arm.

Magorian blew another long blast on his aurochs horn as the winter sky arched over them, clear, cold, and vivid blue.

Wincing through the pain of a wrenched shoulder, Firenze raised his bow to the sun in salute.

Bryndorach tore his eyes away from his daughter and Bane. He grinned at Ronan's slightly wary expression. "Don't look so worried," he huffed, thinking that it seemed only yesterday when Esnyë was celebrating her first year a gangly little flaxen chestnut with a will as strong as her dam's and a head full of adventures. He gestured upwards. "I think those portents *have* to be good."

Breyūn wiped sweat from her brow and watched, her quick mind fitting the sight before her to song and story so that its memory might be preserved forever.

In the forest, concealed by bough, bole, shade and tangle, pale gold eyes with slitted pupils patiently followed the progress of the fleeing humans. Snag lines were tightened. Darts tipped with lethal poison were loaded into blowpipes. Magic was whispered, and trees seemed to murmur Pan's name as they meshed their high branches with those of their neighbours, forming leafy nets that sealed off any airborne escape.

Appearing from nowhere, Fawkes flew low over the centaurs' heads, singing with all his fiery heart.

The Bell, the Spear, and the Book – Part One

Chapter 27 of 32

Severus receives some useful (rather gruesome) items. Fawkes has been busy again. While waiting for Arawn, Severus reflects on the rise and fall of Dolores Umbridge. Petrus has some fun in the south bell tower – much to Minerva's excitement and the Dementors' dismay. The Dementors in Calais get a very nasty surprise. Hermione recognises a very special dragon.

A/N:

Australian de-coder

Eukered Worn out beyond any hope of repair (archaic in most areas)

Shockies Shock absorbers

Undies Underpants

French

Alles vite Quickly/hurry

Merde! Shit!

Mon ami My friend

Pour la France! Pour Paris! Liberté! For France! For Paris! Liberty!

Trois... deux... une Three... two... one

Une moment A moment

Scottish

Gie it laldy Do it with gusto

Pugsley Addams is the property of the cartoonist Charles Addams.

'Senior Auror McPhee' is adapted from the character Nanny McPhee in the film *Nanny McPhee*, Universal Pictures, 2005.

Canon characters are the property of J.K. Rowling. I make no money from them.

Thank you, TeaOli, for beta reading and being endlessly patient. I made some post-beta adjustments to keep to the word limit. Any mistakes are my fault.

This chapter will be presented in three parts.

In the Polyjuiced guise of tourists, Harry and Ron strolled nonchalantly down a neat row of shops in the *Rue Saint Louis en l'Île*. Harry betrayed no sign of recognition when he spotted Senior Auror McPhee ensconced in the window seat of a small café. His supervisor added more water to a glass of pastis and gazed out over the gloomy streetscape, apparently lost in thought and oblivious to his presence.

Harry knew that she was not held in the depths of contemplation. Senior Auror McPhee for whom he had developed a profound and increasingly loyal sense of respect would not fail to notice a single thing. He quietly wished that she had been around during his years at Hogwarts.

At the next intersection, Molly and Ginny waved their thanks to a driver who had stopped to let them cross the road.

Turning the corner, Ron whooped and, dragging Harry with him, pressed himself against the window of a temporary exhibition featuring several sporty concept cars keeping up the appearance of a young Muggle male with an ease that Harry couldn't seem to settle into. "Blimey... look at *her*," Ron breathed, fogging up the glass and having to clean it with his sleeve.

Harry noted a bright red, low slung, oddly *femme fatale* creation that seemed to breathe leather, speed and Malfoy-esque wealthy disdain even while standing still.. "Yeah... So?"

"So?" Ron incredulously appraised his best mate. "Can you imagine how quick the journey from the Burrow to Surrey would be in *that*? Sod the old Anglia. Bloody thing has its own mind, half the time."

"Smarter than you, is it?" Harry asked, a glimmer of his old pre-war cheekiness showing in his eyes.

"Ha-bloody-ha. I'll have you know that the cranky old rustbucket has never once bested me at chess." His blue eyes narrowed and he turned back to the window. "See that mirror wall up the back there?" he whispered. Without waiting for Harry to reply, he continued, "Use that to scan behind us..."

"*Muffliato*. So you had an ulterior motive for checking out fast cars. Since when did you turn Slytherin cunning?"

"Since I heard about Snape's old man clocking you one *and* escaping. I had firsthand experience of the nasty little trap he engineered retrieving your wand came with a huge snake which was hell bent on filling my supervisor full of holes." Ron turned to wink at a pretty young woman walking an excessively pampered lap dog. "There's something about Snapes and snakes, I'm telling you. Still, it was sneaky, Slytherin-snaky cunning, and I aim to charm some for my own use."

Harry grinned. "You won't be charming the *mademoiselle*. She ignored you."

Ron shrugged. "Her loss."

Harry raised his eyebrows. Unswervingly faithful to Ginny, he couldn't understand Ron's roving eye. "What would Bronnie say?"

"Not much. We're not working... I mean, it's fun we both agree on that but we know it's not permanent, is all." Ron searched the mirror at the back of the showroom. "I'm kind of glad 'Mione had second thoughts. Being out of touch with her until Skeeter found a new headline to play with was a real eye opener. Merlin, I could almost see a future of: '*Mioneee*, can you write the introduction to my evidence for the Wizengamot?" He shrugged. "I'd always be tagging along behind her like a piece of baggage. Merlin knows, I spent enough years at the back of the queue tripping over my brothers' footprints it was like there was no fresh ground for *me* to make a mark on." He snorted softly. "Don't get me wrong; I love my family and you and 'Mione to pieces... but I want to be something more original than the youngest Weasley wizard who went to Hogwarts with Harry Potter and the brightest witch of the age."

Harry cleaned his glasses. "That's one hell of a teaspoon."

"Like the one Mum used one time to chase us out of the pantry she Engorgio'd it to the size of a broom... Hullo..." Ron tucked his hands into his jacket, bouncing on the balls of his feet as though trying to keep warm. "In the side street down from the shop of a thousand cheeses. Near the bread place."

Harry perused the mirror and saw the reflection of a shrouded form and a cloaked human loitering in the shadows.

"So what is it? BSA? Norton? Triumph?" Toby fired questions at Arthur while he scanned the fog-wreathed ground far below. "If it's a Vincent Black Shadow, I'll make y' an offer for it saw one when I were lad; it were t' grandest machine I'd ever set eyes on." He swore under his breath as a wall of grey mist obscured the view of the Seine. "Crikey, Scotland's the land of eternal sunshine compared to this." It was late afternoon, but a layer of baleful, bruised clouds and a meteorologically impossible fog had turned the remnants of the day into a convincing portrayal of an ill-omened dusk.

"It's part of what Dementors do, Tobias," Arthur supplied helpfully. "Even the weather gods are miserable when those things are around in great numbers."

"As for the late Sirius Black's motorcycle, it has 'Triumph' written on the shiny part, so that's probably what it is. You won't tell Molly that I have it in pieces in the shed, will you? I'm waiting for a chance to cast a few Reparos and see if I can get it working again."

"Sounds like it's really been thrashed about I reckon as far as parts are concerned, y'd be better off with *Replace-os*. The shockies and seals'd be eukered f'r a start." Toby scowled. "*Tell?* Wash yer mouth out! Listen, Arthur, there's a code of 'onour among blokes, right?"

Arthur nodded hesitantly.

"One of t' rules in that code is that a bloke shall never, *ever*, tell another bloke's missus what said bloke keeps in 'is shed. Secret bloke business, that is."

Arthur stood to attention. "Secret bloke business. Is there a rule book?"

"Of course. There's rules for readin' it, too."

"Does anyone ever break the rules?"

Toby slowly turned to look at Arthur, his eyes full of foreboding. "Only 'appened once. The penalty was... awful. Too awful to say."

Arthur was captivated. "What happened?"

"Well... all right... since you asked..." Toby looked to his left, then to his right, then behind him, then up at the thickening sky. "De-bloked," he whispered.

"Gods!"

Toby gravely shook his head. "Even they couldn't intervene."

Arthur jumped, groaned and fished a gold coin out of his pocket. "Auror patrol," he said, consulting it as though it were a timepiece. "They'll be here shortly, so I'd best get down below for a briefing." He held out his hand. "Stay safe, Tobias."

Toby shook the wizard's hand. "You too, mate."

Severus surveyed the empty square in front of the cathedral the *place du Parvis Notre Dame* and grimly wondered how the centaurs were faring. He repressed a shiver. Disillusionment Charms were no protection against the pervasive chill. Hermione's hand felt warm on the inside of his left elbow, a small oasis of comfort in a miasma of predatory despair.

"The French Ministry must have an excellent rapport with the Muggle authorities," Hermione said quietly. "The broadcasts for a severe and extreme weather warning sent most people into go-home-and-hide mode." She gave the sky a pale, angry glance. "Mind you, nobody could argue with the apparent evidence."

Severus silently agreed. "Arawn will be expecting his reinforcements this evening. More Death Eaters arrived before this morning's dawn." He couldn't bring himself to add anything further.

Releasing Severus' arm, Hermione circled a bronze star which marked the official centre of Paris. "*Point zéro des routes de France* All the distances for the national highways are calculated from this point," she said.

Severus shook his head, staring at the star because he couldn't see her. "Little know-it-all," he murmured almost lovingly. Scowling at himself, he restored his proper persona. "Point zero. Ground zero." A magical signal caught his attention a rhythmic sequence of dots and coils. "Oriens," he hissed. "Come. He may have word concerning the centaurs."

Locating her wizard by the sound of his voice, Hermione took hold of his sleeve and followed him to the threshold of the Portal of the Last Judgement. Used to the way his body felt in most of his moods, she could feel tension stringing his nerves and quickening his movements. She curled her fingers around his left forearm, feeling his muscles standing corded and hard where they usually rested close to his bones.

Without a sound, they crossed into the Portal and cancelled their Disillusionment Charms.

Within a few heartbeats, Oriens joined them, a slightly awkward bundle held gingerly under one arm. "The centaurs have prevailed," he whispered.

Severus nodded grimly. Sentiments of relief could wait until later. "Casualties?"

"On the centaurs' side, not as many as anticipated remarkably few, in fact. They had the advantage of surprise and used it well. It was a complete rout. They are marshalling their injured and seeing to those who will now mark their paths in the stars." Oriens touched the fingers of his right hand to his forehead, lips, and chest. "In case you don't know their traditions, they do not speak the names of the star travellers until the constellations complete their dance and begin it again." He glanced at Hermione. "Speaking names might tie the star traveller to an Earthly sphere, instead of allowing them the freedom to leave and roam with the ancestors."

Hermione nodded, a little embarrassed. "I think you read my mind..."

"Not so," Oriens replied. "It would be a logical question to ask when one seeks to work for the better treatment of non-human magical beings." He placed the bundle on the flagstones of the cathedral. "Firenze, of all centaurs, thought you might find a use for these."

Curious, but at the same time sensing the macabre nature of the useful things, Severus had a question of his own. "What of our allies in the Restricted Area?"

Oriens nodded, his pale gold eyes closing briefly. He was very still for a moment. "Let's just say that the spring growth will be quite vigorous for the next few years."

Severus and Hermione exchanged a weighted glance and a thought that would never be given voice *He was there! He was in the Restricted Area in that deep forest we saw on the map with whatever else lives there.* The hair stirred on the backs of their necks. A shade of ancient memory flitted between them, fading before definition could grasp it: the dappled green light of regal forests, the haunting strains of breath and reed, the watching eyes of creatures great and small, the thread of fear that commanded respect for a certain god...

Severus frowned and forced his eyes to focus, noting that Hermione appeared as diverted as he had been. Unsure as to what form of unmentionable power had caused such a spontaneous reaction, and finding no trace of magic to conveniently point at, Severus levitated the bundle Oriens had brought and unwrapped it with a twisting flick of his wand.

Hermione leapt back with one hand clamped over her mouth.

Severus raised his eyebrows.

A Death Eater's silver mask hung in the air, cleaved in two and smeared with drying blood. Next to it, the miniaturised head of a mountain troll favoured them with a dead-eyed grimace.

Sister Clarise opened her eyes. Accustomed to functioning with very little sleep, she was mildly surprised that she had succumbed to an unscheduled doze, during which she had dreamed of a huge dragon flying high overhead and of a phoenix sitting on a nearby tussock. She felt for the spearhead to make sure that it was still concealed in the woollen belt under her habit, even though she could still feel its sustaining warmth.

Slowly stretching her legs, she looked towards the tussock where her dream phoenix had sat watching her. Blinking in disbelief, she looked again. She closed her eyes, pinched herself and looked for a third time.

With shaking hands, she picked up the bright, glowing feather which rested on top of a neat parcel wrapped in woven grass. A stoneware flask stoppered with cork leaned against the parcel. "A phoenix's song," she whispered. "How I would love to hear it." She swallowed, thinking of sunlit days and the heady scent of flowers in the mountain meadows around the priory. Tucking the feather into her belt alongside the spear head, she picked up the parcel and read the distinctive pattern depicted in the weaving. "Centaur's?" She examined the knots securing the package. Deceptively intricate, the knots only needed a firm tug on one free strand to release them.

Sister Clarise felt herself smile as she unfolded the grass wrappings. Dried apple and oatcakes would make a welcome change to her meagre ration of hard bread and water. She pulled the cork out of the bottle and very nearly wept. "Mulled mead a rich gift indeed, phoenix, but do the centaurs know you have been making off with their food and drink? They don't part with this beverage easily." She inhaled the rich aroma of honey, heather, and summer. A single mouthful refreshed her body and soul. "May your herds be blessed with health and happiness," she whispered into the dark.

"Rabastan!"

Behind a pile of empty cardboard boxes, a beagle hunkered down and kept absolutely still. A rat leapt off the beagle's back and, following the sound of footsteps, concealed itself in a shallow drain.

Rabastan turned at the hissed sounding of his name. The Dementor beside him retreated a little as Arawn emerged from the slinking murk. "As you can see," Rabastan said, waving a hand at the low sky, "the Dementors have been very industrious."

Arawn folded his arms, his expression cold and calculating. "Any movement from the Ministry?"

Rabastan shook his head. "None. The French Ministry sent out a few Aurors, but they didn't hang around for very long. I fear the pull of the café was stronger than the need to actually find out why the weather is so suddenly inclement," he opined, shaking his head in mock disapproval. "They never thought of checking beneath their feet. Not that they even bothered to get off their brooms."

Arawn grinned. "Good. We'll hit central Paris and Calais simultaneously and be across the Channel before the British Ministry can rouse itself. Our main forces should be here within the hour." He paused, staring at two young Muggle men admiring cars in a display window. "So trivial...", he muttered.

Rabastan fingered his wand. "A pathetic *sub*-species. Given to drooling and sighing over mere baubles."

"They'll have something more pressing to sigh about very shortly." Arawn addressed the Dementor, "Empty the underground. It's time."

The Dementor inclined its head. Shroud swirling, it turned and vanished into the gloom.

Arawn produced his broom. "When the Dementors come forth in their full number, you may start with those two," he said, pointing to the two young men. "It appears that you still have some unsatisfied urges."

Severus ran his thumb over the warm Galleon in his pocket and drew it out with a scowl. Holding it up, he read: *Rattymagus to beagle to Order attack is on* On an irresistible impulse, he swept Hermione into his arms and kissed her deeply, willing his soul to touch hers with warm, fervent movements. He released her reluctantly, vaguely registering that Oriens had politely looked the other way. "Go, Hermione. You know what to do."

Hermione bit her lip and nodded. Running one hand over his chest, she whispered, "I love you," then barged roughly through the doors and into the cathedral before he could see the wetness in her eyes.

Without waiting for anything to be said, Oriens saluted, mounted his broom, Disillusioned himself and went to join the Healers who waited to attend to any injuries.

Severus summoned his own broom and took to the air.

"*Mademoiselle?*"

Swallowing hard against the lump in her throat and the icy, heavy knot in her stomach, Hermione nodded to the stone being kneeling before the altar. She collected her broom from where she had hidden it behind a saintly statue.

Petrus stood up, murmuring what sounded like an ending to a prayer. "Do you need a *une moment* to gather yourself, *Mademoiselle?*"

Hermione bit her lip. "No. Thanks..., but it's okay. I'll go up now." She looked Petrus in the eyes and touched his upper arm. "Good luck."

Petrus flexed his wings and bowed, his features grave and fierce. "And you, *Mademoiselle*. I will watch for your signal." He turned on his heel and, with a curling flick of his tail, disappeared into the ambulatory.

Arthur Weasley emerged from the shadowed choir with a pensive, moustachioed Auror. He looked back over his shoulder. "Not that I can sing to save my soul, or anyone else's," he admitted with bashful, boyish look. "I left George and Styx keeping watch over the riverbank. I should get back to them or Molly will skin me. Gods be with you, Hermione."

Hermione braved a stoic smile. "May they watch over you and your family." Her brow wrinkled as she carried her broom through the south transept. "Who is Styx?"

"George's Thestral. Or a Thestral with an uncanny sense of attachment to George. She gave me the creeps when she first started hanging around, but she seems to be his closest friend since...", Arthur sighed and wandlessly opened the door. "Well. Here we are."

Hermione mounted her broom. With a parting nod to Arthur and the Auror, she flew up to where Tobias kept vigil. Landing soundlessly, she smiled when Tocky's ears twitched, seeming to pull the house-elf around to facing her. Tocky waved and tugged at his master's cloak.

"Halt! Who goes there?" Toby shot gruffly over his shoulder, his theatrical tone suggesting that he already knew the answer to the question.

"Only me," Hermione answered, moving to stand beside him. She peered over the edge of Tobias' position. "Seen anything?"

"Nothin' yet," Toby muttered. "Whole lot of mist and misery, but that's about it. Tocky says there's none of them Dementors in sight."

Hermione chewed her lip and sighed. "'Yet' being the word."

Toby rubbed his jaw thoughtfully. "Reckon. So far, everythin's runnin' to plan, I s'pose." He eyed her seriously. "And there's nothin' 'only' about you, lass. Guard yerself well. Sev'rus'll mope away t' rest of 'is life if y' don't. I've seen 'im crack the sads b'fore... 'e were only four, but 'e curdled milk up and down Spinner's End."

Hermione couldn't help an amused grin. She could easily imagine that a four-year-old Severus would have expressed his displeasure with intensity well beyond his years.

Toby cocked an eyebrow as she turned to go to her position below the imposing grace of the south bell tower. "Fair dinkum, 'e did! At t' time, I reckoned summat 'ad gone wrong in t' ice works. Now, I *know* it were our Sev'rus."

High above the centre of Paris, Severus held his broom in a motionless hover. Waiting. As he had waited before numerous raids in Riddle's service. As he had waited before the Battle of the Seven Potters. As he had waited for Albus to throw him another scrap of information. As he had waited for Riddle to give Nagini the order to kill. He waited as the python waits when it has tracked down its quarry power coiled in ambush, trusting senses and instinct, secure in the knowledge that the prey has no choice but to come within range. But this time, Severus did not wear a mask of *any* kind.

Kingsley had given explicit orders not to kill Arawn on sight. Through a transient disappointment, Severus had understood the reasons. Arawn was the only known person who could provide, willingly or not, an explanation of how mind links with Dementors were established and maintained as well as valuable insights into how the foul entities reasoned, perceived and planned. It would also be crucial to discover what incantation was used to disguise a Dementor as a shadow in order to devise a counter-spell. Severus had filled several sheets of parchment with some rough ideas on how it might have been done and how a Dementor Eumorphus could be structured. His exploratory calculations agreed with the Healers' prognosis in that successfully disguising a Dementor depended on a bond between caster and subject... and that using it would expose the core and roots of the caster's magic and soul to slow, insidious depletion.

The fact that the Dementors had been partially consuming specific types of Muggles gave the problem another dimension of urgency one that Number 10 Downing Street was definitely interested in. Nobody could even guess how long *that* little picnic had been going on, but it would certainly explain some of the horrendous stories taking the headlines in the Muggle newspapers. In recognition of the existing and potential danger, a secure contact between Auror Headquarters and the Muggle Secret Intelligence Service had been authorised by the British Prime Minister and the Minister for Magic. Privately, Severus thought that the *nom de plume* used by the contact was a little bit kitsch. "M" for Muggle. Indeed.

Still scanning his surroundings for any sign of trouble, Severus curled his lip in a sneer. He had, thank every god in every universe, not been present for the interrogation of Dolores Umbridge. Dosed into compliance with Veritaserum, she had revealed that her position as Senior Under-Secretary to the Minister for Magic had been essentially that of a parasite on an unsuspecting host. Loyal to Cornelius Fudge only for the power that he could grant her, Umbridge had identified the former Minister's weaknesses and exploited them mercilessly. Nudging him with rumours of discord, dissent, and disruption, she had succeeded in finding out just how well she could steer him. However, over the years, she had reached a point where Cornelius' basic decency began to prompt him to question her advice and recommendations.

Umbridge had visited Azkaban several times as part of her duties, and what she had seen there had whetted her appetite for enforcing regimented authority. But one occasion stood out for her as a turning point in her career ambitions: as she had walked past one of the dark hollows that passed for cells, a prisoner had thrown himself against the iron bars of the door, alternately snarling like a wild animal and screaming obscenities. Dolores had watched with some admiration as a Dementor glided toward the cell and as the inmate collapsed on the floor in a silent, submissive, shivering heap. This was uncompromising control! Umbridge's mind had quickly outlined possibilities of using the creatures to extend her influence over Cornelius. Soon after, she had scheduled an appointment to meet with the Chief Administrator of Dementors.

The meetings between Umbridge and Arawn had quickly become regular events. Arawn provided the intellectual muscle and several cold, silent subjects for their research, and Umbridge set spurs to the pace with no-questions-asked funding and innocently phrased questions on the possibility of Dementors being used in targeted searches for criminal fugitives.

Upon reading the interrogators' report, Severus had concluded that Arawn had never truly been blind to the real nature of Umbridge's motivation. The Unpseakable had been as enamoured of power and control as the puffy pink toad had been but Arawn's purpose had lain in a different direction. Severus had felt sick to his stomach when he read of how Umbridge had convinced Cornelius that Dementors would be effective bodyguards for the students of Hogwarts... and that they would be effective bodyguards for the Minister himself in the climate of unrest that had been generated by *false* rumours of Voldemort's return.

Umbridge had then engineered circumstantial proof for the sagacity of her advice and, simultaneously, removed any chance of the Minister being troubled by something she really didn't need him to know. She had watched Arawn feed the Minister's brooding bodyguard with memories drawn from several Azkaban inmates to see if highly charged memories really could help a Dementor home in on a specific target. One of those memories had featured Barty Crouch Jr whose testimony would have caused far too many complications.

The Minister's mental state had continued to fracture and crumble, at times swinging wildly between affable bumbler and vicious accuser. He was, as Remus had grumbled to Severus after grimacing his way through a goblet of Wolfsbane Potion, "not in his right mind." With the constant, sinister presence of a soul-sucking bodyguard, and Umbridge's relentless goading of his fears, Cornelius really stood no chance.

Umbridge's rise to power had been ultimately evidenced by her certain guarantee of a plum position in the Ministry for a senior Slytherin in exchange for a memory of Harry Potter throwing one of his famous temper tantrums which she personally fed to a Dementor.

After the attack in Little Whinging, her influence had coloured Cornelius' every move the unscheduled relocation of Potter's hearing, the biased prosecution, and the blatantly nasty attempts to discredit any attempt at defence all held a touch of fluffy pink cardigan.

Severus had skipped the section featuring her Hogwarts appointments.

Brockdale Bridge had been the final straw for Cornelius Fudge. Umbridge had told him that the threat was false: mere illusions and lies spread by anarchists who sought to take power. The fatal reality, when it eventuated, could not be disguised.

The bridge had not been the only thing to collapse.

Kingsley had informed Severus that the former Minister for Magic now resided in St Mungo's Janus Thickey Ward, where he spent his days fussily signing imaginary decrees and chairing meetings with important officials that no-one else could see. In the evenings, he would consult his silver pocket watch and ask what was on the menu for supper... because one should never be late for meals, you know...

Severus had been gratified to read that under interrogation, the simpering, saccharine abomination had suffered some vivid flashbacks of her time with the centaurs, in which Bane had repeatedly sent her into a cave full of Mortis Bats to gather guano by hand with casual warnings to watch out for flesh-eating cockroaches that would lay eggs under her fingernails. By the time Bane had forced her to retrieve all of the guano from the cave under threat of being kept in the Forbidden Forest forever, Umbridge had desired only one thing: to feel the cleansing touch of water. She had barged past the ranks of tail-swishing centaurs, trying not to notice their disgraceful state of nakedness, and dropped to her filthy knees at the edge of a nearby pool.

Severus had been immensely gratified to read the interrogators' description of the squealing shriek Umbridge had suddenly emitted it had been loud enough to frighten the seagulls off Azkaban's ramparts. When forced to tell of her reasons for rendering the interrogators partially deaf, she had revealed that she had seen her own reflection in the still water.

In whimpering tones, she had told of Mortis Bat faeces and other undefined defilements coating her from head to toe, cockroaches clinging to her fluffy cardigan with their spiny legs hopelessly entangled, and that a cave centipede had decided that her hair bow would be a suitable place to coil up and have a rest. She had looked away from the pool and back to the centaurs who had gathered around her in an engrossed semi-circle to better observe their pungent captive. From her kneeling position, she had in one of the interrogator's fairly illustrative phrasing "got an eyeful of undercarriage" and had begun to scream in earnest. At that point, Bane and Magorian had thrown her into the pool, where a helpful swarm of eels immediately began an intimate search for hapless insects.

Severus had passed this useful information on to Hermione: it would prove that Bane and the other males of his herd were not guilty of what many openly prejudiced humans suspected. Having written "Centaur's popular myth debunk" in her scroll of *Things to Do*, Hermione had agreed that a centaur as mindful of honour as Bane would feel dreadfully ill and would need some of the unicorns' Grype Nut Substitutes if he so much as let the mythical propaganda cross his mind.

Still waiting, Severus allowed a sigh to slip between his clenched teeth as he perused the vista below him. At least he didn't have to keep an eye out for bloody Potter.

As soon as the Death Eater had Portkeyed to Calais, Arawn mounted his broom and flew low over the Seine, watching as shrouded forms rose into the air in snaking columns. Hungry, deadly, and ready, they restrained themselves waiting for their entire company to assemble. Arawn fancied that he had taught them well. He reached into his robe and clasped the Llygad y Ddraig. A feverish rush of adrenalin swept through his blood. *Yield to me...*

Monsieur Roquefort was actually relieved to see a trout Patronus leaping through the brisk stream of North Sea air that buffeted the Port of Calais. The waiting had been cold and tense, and he was more than in the mood to banish unwelcome invaders from French soil.

The silver trout sheltered in still air behind an ornamental planting, fanning its gills and adjusting its position with deft movements of its fins. "A Death Eater has just Portkeyed out of Paris. He's going to order the Calais infestation to advance."

Monsieur Roquefort nodded soberly. At least the message had not been delivered in a broad dialect. English was hard enough to understand at the best of times, with its flattened consonants and impossible vowels. He summoned his Patronus and, having given the proud, silver cockerel a message, dispatched it across the sea to Dover. It was time to send the Dementors back where they came from.

He signalled to his response team, pleased to see that the British Aurors also jumped to attention with wands at the ready. One of them was reported to have a lion Patronus which should make for an interesting spectacle when it got among the Dementors.

"They don't know how to use it," Arawn said out loud, single-mindedly enamoured of the object held covetously in his hand. To his left and right, an escort of Dementors glided in voiceless malevolence. "They can never use it. They are afraid of it." *But I am not afraid. I will use the Llygad's power. Snape cannot refuse me now. I'll show him the price of refusal, and I'll show him the meaning of...*

"Going somewhere, Arawn?"

Arawn pulled up with a gasp. The silkily precise tones of Severus Snape had come from right above him.

The Dementors whirled quickly enough for their ragged shrouds to snap in the heavy air. Arawn sensed their confusion they too had been caught by surprise.

Severus sat his broom with an air of stiff-backed dislike. Some distance behind him, the centuries old bulk of *Cathedrale Notre Dame de Paris* crouched like a monstrous creature waiting to pounce. In a sense, it was. "In fitting company, I see." He didn't raise a finger as Arawn flew up to face him. He didn't break eye contact with the renegade Unspeakable as the Dementors circled at a distance. He didn't give any sign that he noticed the steady stream of Dementors gliding up to join their fellows with the aim of ensuring that he could not escape.

"Come for your duelling lesson, Snape?" Arawn spat contemptuously. His expression turned quizzical. "You'll be a worthy opponent you have enough backbone not to begin without declaring your presence. Or you're merely foolish."

Treating Arawn with the same bland ambivalence with which he had so often treated Bellatrix, Severus shrugged one shoulder. "I issued the challenge, Arawn. I do not ignore my own protocol." He gave a half-smirk. "Therefore, you are still unscathed."

Uncertain as to whether he was being taunted or not, Arawn gestured to the steadily building, shrouded masses. "My Dementors do not fear human magic," he hissed. "And they do not fear *you*."

"Perhaps not. But word in the Ministry is that they would very much like to consume both magic and myself. Maybe they are saving you for the last course."

"Word in the Ministry!" Arawn sneered. "After how many years' worth of injunctions and bloated focus groups?"

"Probably far too many," Severus conceded, noting that Arawn had ignored the prospect of his own demise by consumption. *By conscious choice, or is he too far gone to even recognise the danger?*

Arawn looked thoughtful. "Then you know how useless they can be. We could take action to remove so much dead, rotten wood." He fingered the Llygad y Ddraig, making sure that Severus could see it. "I have something that you want, and you can make all of this so much easier by unlocking its power. Think of how many lives you'll spare if you would just be reasonable."

"Reasonable? As in swear fealty to you and, at some point in the future, have one of your acquaintances half-Kiss me when I least expect it? What then? Use me as some sort of thrall to access the Llygad y Ddraig's secrets until you tire of having to share? Power desired, lusted after for its own sake, cannot be shared and its effects are manifestly poisonous. Believe me, I know what longing after such things can do. And I doubt very much that obsessing over the Llygad y Ddraig is the only thing that has

been slowly consuming you."

Arawn drew his wand. "When I want a lecture from you, I'll ask for one! Haven't you noticed that you are surrounded and outnumbered? That the odds against you are... Oh, you'll see. They will tear this city apart." His demeanour turned coolly sly, as though he had come to a definitive conclusion. "Are you *afraid* to release the Llygad's power? Too much of a coward to expose its secrets? I know it has something to do with Merlin..."

"Why would I be afraid of something that, by right of inheritance, is mine? Why would I relinquish any part of it to a perfidious-Unspeakable who takes Dementors, Death Eaters, and madness as his allies? By the way, if by 'odds' you are referring to your reinforcements, I'm afraid they are otherwise engaged."

Arawn visibly started. "What?"

"They're. Not. Coming." Severus added shock value to his statement by levitating the bundle Oriens had passed on to him. "See for yourself."

Arawn's next words froze in his throat as the wrappings slid away, leaving the ghastly trophies to stare at him accusingly.

Severus shifted slightly on his broom. With his thumb nail, he scratched a mark on a Galleon concealed in the palm of his hand. "Shall I restore the head to its proper size?"

"You lie!" Arawn screamed.

"With the evidence right before your eyes?" Severus tutted. "And you call the Ministerial minions useless."

Waiting just inside the secret entrance to the south bell tower, Hermione felt her Galleon warming in her hand, Severus' mark etched plainly on its surface. She alerted Petrus with three pinpoint lights from her wand.

The inside of the bell tower being too structurally complex to allow him to freely use his wings, Petrus swiftly negotiated the massive internal supports hand over hand, dropping between them, catching the next, and swinging to the next hand hold much as Quasimodo had done so long ago.

He threw himself at the mechanisms their electric motors disconnected by Arthur and Tobias that had been installed to replace the once familiar medieval machinery and urged the great bell into motion. "*Alles vite, mon ami, alles vite*," he whispered. Catching Emmanuel's momentum, he delivered his prodigious strength in measured doses. The bourdon seemed to shake itself a titan roused from slumber.

"Death Eater!"

"Ex-Death Eater. Shall I take that as a compliment, seeing that you appear to enjoy their company?"

"Coward!" *Take him!*

In one obscene wave, the Dementors surged towards Severus.

Severus' jaw clenched as he forced himself not to yield to the foul wind that ran before the soul eaters. Without producing the true Llygad y Ddraig which lay hidden against his skin, he removed the charms that concealed its power.

The Dementors blundered to a halt, jostling each other and confused by the sudden revelation of an immense amount of magical muscle. Severus could feel the questing tendrils of their consciousness, but was careful not to let a single one penetrate his mind. He channelled some more of his magic into his Occlumency shields. "Come to me," he murmured to the noxious entities. "I can reward you with far, far more than what *he* can." *Merlin, be with me*. Silently, he recited the chant that Merlin had used to call upon dragon-kind for aid.

The Dementors wavered, vacillating, evaluating...

Thirteen tons of bronze thrummed a deep, humming note. The air danced with overlapping vibrations. Emmanuel's oaken supports trembled and groaned.

"Pay the half-blood no heed," Arawn snarled imperiously. "All who know him say he is filled with deceptions and lies."

The Dementors hesitated. Two vital pulses dragged their hunger this way and that. But one was stronger, deeper, throbbing with ultimately devourable energy. Slowly, deliberately, the Dementors began to shift their positions.

Mine is bigger than yours, Severus thought with a satisfied smirk.

For a moment, Arawn seemed vaguely indecisive... then cast a Stunning Spell with a commendable lack of warning.

Severus was waiting for it. Attacking and defensive magic collided with a searing blast of sparks and a shuddering, molten hiss.

Arawn quickly disengaged and attacked again two vivid cords leapt from his wand simultaneously, coming at Severus from different directions.

With the fluid ease of a master duelist, Severus wandlessly blocked a Disarming Charm and engaged a Body-Bind Curse. Breaking both connections and swerving steeply to the left, he cast an Anti-Disapparition Jinx.

Arawn deflected it and dived suddenly. Severus followed, rolling to avoid another Stunning Spell and well aware of the Dementors' intention to feed on the first wizard to falter...

Ron spun into a low crouch, casting a silver shield in front of himself and Harry as a green-tinted curse ripped towards them.

With an explosive impact, the curse screeched across Ron's shield with the nerve-jangling pitch of fingernails grating across a blackboard.

Harry retaliated immediately, his teamwork training now part of his instinct *Expelliarmus!* He squinted in recognition as his Disarming Charm ricocheted away from the target and fizzled into the pavement. "It's Rabastan Lestranger!" He sensed the next curse coming. "Come away!" he yelled, dragging Ron away from the display window just in time the glass geometrically fractured into a cloud of spinning star knives which seethed towards them like a swarm of angry hornets.

Ron redoubled his efforts with the shield. With a sniper's reflexes, Harry ducked and weaved in and out of its protection, sending counter-curses and binding spells with grim-faced intensity. But the star knives kept coming, slicing away plasma-like gobbets of protective magic faster than Ron could patch them.

Petrus felt the power of the node roar up through the bell tower, swamping himself and Emmanuel in an eager torrent of galloping energy. "Now, Emmanuel! Let the filthy things know fear! *Pour la France! Pour Paris! Liberté!*"

Rabastan grinned to himself. No matter that what he had assumed to be an easy Muggle extermination had turned out to be a pair of wizards. They were experienced and well trained, he decided after several creative curses were successfully blocked, but he relished the opportunity for a challenge. Even more so, he relished the anticipation

of what would happen when his knives got through the shield. They always did, sooner more often than later. Besides, this unexpected resistance wouldn't make any difference to the outcome of tonight's little adventure. There weren't enough wizards and witches in all of Paris to rebuff Arawn's Dementors not to mention the approaching body of the army.

He was abruptly aware of the grin melting from his face. Even in dimly backlit outline, he would know *her* anywhere. The ridiculous antique cape. The composed, rather pear-shaped figure. The grotesque cudgel that made Bella's wand appear elegant. To engage *her* in a duel was asking for pain the scars that she had given him on their last encounter shivered as though they wanted to peel away from his skin and run away without him. Blocking another Disarming Spell, he heard his own voice come forth in a shuddering gasp that was flattened to a frightened squeak as the voice of an immense bell issued from the cathedral in tones of thundering majesty, heralding a roaring tsunami of primal magic. "Senior Auror McPhee!" Showing neither honour nor courage, Rabastan Disappeared.

Hermione gasped when Emmanuel shook the stones beneath her feet in a tone so commanding and defiant it nearly brought her to her knees. It gave her pins and needles all over and made her want to laugh and weep at the same time. *I wonder if this is what they mean by Divine Wrath?* she thought.

"Holy brown undies!" Toby gasped, unwilling to use any sort of profanity out of respect for the purpose of the building on which he stood. He had thought that perhaps the weight of ages gave the cathedral a convincing sense of presence, but now he knew there was something else: something unknowable and *alive* in a way that he could not fathom.

Beside him, Tocky stood at his full height with his eyes glowing emerald green. "This is being Deep Magic, Master Tobias," the house-elf whispered. "Tocky is knowing this. In all the world, none is deeper, none is older. It is speaking through the bell."

If Severus could give sound a colour, then Emmanuel sang in shades of living, liquid gold. He yielded slightly to the barreling shockwave and tasted elemental magic drawn from the planet's seething core light as air, pure as water, sustaining as earth, and irrepressible as fire. It poured over him, through him, searching every part of his being and baring even those dark places he would have preferred to keep hidden. But it was useless to resist, for this magic was far beyond anything he had ever experienced, and Severus discovered that he didn't mind if it saw his thoughts and read his soul it did not judge or condemn, nor did it hurt, taunt, or expose him. Feeling as though he had received some sort of healing touch, Severus was momentarily encapsulated in a peaceful sense of simply existing.

The fleeting sensation passed, and all he could see were the shrouded forms of Dementors, their ranks smashed asunder, swept before Emmanuel's onslaught in a helpless, tattered tangle. He searched for Arawn, spotting the Unspeakable looking at the cathedral with disbelief and rage. Their eyes met...

A fleeing Dementor collided with Severus, skewing the aim of his Stunning Spell and leaving him with the nauseating impression of having unwittingly plunged his hand into the cold innards of a submerged corpse, softened and putrid with rot. The Dementor was more interested in escaping than sampling his soul, but Severus threw a brutal pulse of infrasound point blank into its face just to be sure. *Damn the swine! Where is he?*

Minerva gripped Filius' arm as tremors of singing power roiled and boomed around them. "Merlin! Now *there's* a bell! *Gie it laldy, Petrus!*" She fidgeted excitedly. "Let's see our friends come to life!"

"Ow! Don't pinch," Filius grumbled, extricating his now bruised arm. "And you know they don't come to life..."

"Oh, let a witch dream, will you? Come on! I wouldn't have picked you for such a stick-in-the-mud." As she set off, she sent a pair of hissing, spitting cats after a frantic Dementor that was trying to escape in a westerly direction. "Oh, no you don't, you oversized bog wight!"

With an amused sigh, Filius steered his custom-built broom after the headmistress, keeping his eyes peeled for potential attacks. But even his caution couldn't hold back the excited smile which spread across his face. The intricate charm that he and Minerva had carefully crafted the headmistress being responsible for working Piertotum Locomotor into the lattice sequence and placed in readiness for this very moment was being activated...

The winged, the horned, the tusked, and the tailed most with features scoured and scarred by time and wars the pre-selected gargoyles of Paris began to move as Emmanuel's deep tone rolled over them. Shambling, climbing, limping, and loping, the animated stone forms headed for the bells of their consecrated homes.

In the streets of Paris, the few Muggles who had chosen to brave the menacing, soul-sapping weather emerged from cars and restaurants, theatres and bars. Those having faith crossed themselves and whispered prayers. Others stood and gaped in voiceless appreciation. Even though an inexplicable malaise of thought-muddling bewilderment hung over the entire city, nothing could blur the steady, strong tolling of Emmanuel as he stirred the hearts, minds, and souls of everyone who heard him.

In a broad arc to the west of *Cathedrale Notre Dame de Paris*, other bells began to ring. These were higher notes some soft, some sharp, some mellow, some laughing and they all merged to form a carillon that cavorted through every scale, skipping between chaotic order and orderly chaos. Beneath them all, Emmanuel marked the time and dictated the measure, supporting the smaller bells and lifting their chorus to the sky.

Minerva and Filius listened and watched in wonder. Minerva prodded her colleague's arm. "You have that calculating look about you, Filius," she said, keeping her voice low.

"I'm thinking that... if I were to describe what we're hearing... it sounds like fractal geomorphic Arithmancy expressed in sound listen to those ratios between amplitude and..."

"Honestly, Filius! You and Septima are the only people I know who can go all dewy eyed over multi-thingummy power equations."

Several ragged groups of Dementors fled past them to the equation-free opening to the east, one of them looking decidedly clawed, and all of them harassed beyond endurance. A solitary Dementor quickly joined them, Ginny Weasley's silver horse nearly trampling its shroud.

Filius rolled his eyes and enthusiastically practised the non-Patronus method of Dementor repulsion simply because he wanted to and because it was fun... a bit like playing at nine-pin bowling. Other Patronus forms swooped into the air, luminous and graceful, ensuring that the Dementors did not escape in any other direction than the one they were supposed to. "Miss Granger enjoys solving them," he retorted, well aware of Minerva's fondness for the young witch. "They form the basis of everything: transfiguration, spell crafting, curses, counter-curses even devising new potions. Ask Severus and Pugsley if you don't believe me."

Minerva smiled as one of her cats tore at a Dementor's head and returned to sit imperiously on the end of her broom. "Hmph. Each to their own. You can keep your brain benders, but I want one of those gargoyles to keep in my quarters. I really like that little winged monkey."

"Fly, fly, fly!" Filius muttered.

"What was that?"

"Nothing, Headmistress." *You don't covet a pair of ruby red slippers, by any chance?*

Rabastan didn't have much time to congratulate himself on his timely escape Arawn was heading his way, demented with fury. Even more bells were ringing, forming a wide, resonant arc that soared to the low clouds and beyond. For a moment, Rabastan fancied that it formed some sort of wall, woven with intertwining notes voiced by a huge number of bronze throats.

"Leave the Muggles!" the renegade Unspeakable shrieked. "Attack the cathedral! Find whatever *whomever* is in there and destroy them!" Arawn's soulless gaze swept

over a ragged group of half-souls. "Go in through the rear!" he shouted, pointing them in the right direction.

The half-eaten Muggles eyed him with fearful suspicion. Several of them shifted uneasily as they exchanged lost, bewildered mutterings with their brethren. Arawn realised that without the Dementors' mind links, the half-souls could break and run at any moment. "*Imperio!* Much better. Now run along to church, like good little Muggles. Whatever you find in there is yours."

Two masked Death Eaters approached at a brisk jog. "Nothing from Jugson," one of them gasped. The other, a tall, husky wizard, gave a derisive snort. "Gutless sod might've gone into hiding..."

"Enough!" Arawn barked. "Go with the half-souls. Kill any that turn back. They'll need some help to bring down that pile of stone." He turned to Rabastan, who had the look of one who hoped he wouldn't be noticed. "Get in there, and put a stop to that *infernal* noise."

"Master Tobias!" Tocky pointed down to the grassy enclosure where stonemasons working on the cathedral's ongoing restorations had stored their works in progress.

Toby searched through the drifting layers of damp chill. Like restless ghosts in a graveyard, he could see figures moving stealthily between blocks of half-carved stone, stopping every now and then to look about them. "At least they're 'umans of some sort. Best let them Aurors know, lad," he whispered. He fitted an arrow to his bowstring.

Arawn searched the horizon and examined the Portkey. There should be some sign from his reinforcements. But there was no message. No movement. Nothing. Narrowing his eyes, he decided to inspect the nature of the delay for himself.

The Aurors were quick to act. Toby noted robed figures on brooms, flashes of light, and spoken incantations without even blinking at the magic which he now regarded as simply another expression of "normal". Four of the prowling humans dropped to the ground, struggling in their bonds and swearing fitfully instead of uttering anything that sounded remotely magical. *So they're not all wizards*, he thought. His eyes locked on movement – a wand in the process of being raised while an Auror's attention was engaged in the wizarding equivalent of a gunfight – and the sinister glint of a silver mask. *But that one is!* In a single, detached action, Toby loosed his arrow and dropped the Death Eater mid-curse.

Something flashed in a shade of poisonous green. Tocky snarled and made a throwing motion with one hand. A ball of light ricocheted off the house-elf's shield and bounced off the magically fortified stones of the cathedral in a fountain of sparks, leaving not a single scratch.

Possibly tracking the lurid, hissing trace, another Auror dived at suicidal speed and leapt from his broom with the confident daring of a circus acrobat, dropping and rolling onto his feet in the midst of unfinished ornaments. He was challenged at once with a volley of explosive curses.

Toby whistled through his teeth. Whoever had engaged the acrobatic Auror was a real bruiser who had no trouble fighting two Aurors at once. *Bugger's built like a brick shit'ouse...* Something large, winged, and dark as a clot of shadow flew through his field of view, a red-haired wizard on its back.

The acrobat was in serious trouble – he barely managed to deflect something extremely violent which tore a large limb cleanly from a tree. From behind, another human shape leapt from the mist, a long hunting knife gleamed...

Toby acted automatically, disabling the knife bearer with an arrow through the shoulder as he heard the red-haired wizard shout, *Impedimenta!* The bruiser stumbled as though he had waded into a lake of molasses. A few more magical words had the bulky Death Eater trussed like a chicken, hanging from a convenient stone adornment, and silenced.

"*Expecto Patronum!* George! *What* in Sequana's name do you think you're doing?"

Toby recognized Arthur's airborne voice. Looking to the young wizard on the black, winged whatever it was, he felt a stab of dismay at the rebellious scowl and dismissive shrug that was flung back at Arthur's exasperated concern.

"Dementors!" Tocky raised one thin arm and pointed, his green eyes blazing with revulsion. "They is leaving! They is hating the Deep Magic! The Deep Magic burns them like white-hot needles through the bones."

Toby raised one eyebrow in slightly discomfited surprise. "'Ow d'you know that?"

"House-elves know, Master Tobais." Tocky replied distantly. He pulled his pillowcase a little closer about his body. "Deep Magic is our old friend. We is knowing."

Toby watched more broom-mounted figures crossing the air from street level to the clouds, their movements suggesting pursuit of invisible quarry, their wands marked by flashes of silver light. He saw Arthur sternly wave his son back to the banks of the Seine before darting into the thick of the airborne action. Searching for any sign of his own son, Toby considered that while he understood Arthur's concern, he thought it was a little unfair. Wizard or Muggle, boys should be allowed to grow into men.

The first few Dementors emerged from the Calais sewers with orderly stealth, unaware of the Patronus forms sent down to flush them out into the open – and unaware that they were being observed.

Roquefort consulted his charmed map, which showed the entire network of branching underground tunnels and their access points. Many of these access points bore a silver star, which indicated a Patronus form waiting to participate in what had been dubbed, with predictable British toilet humour: "The Great Dementurd Flush". *Trois... deux... une...*

Dementors erupted out of the sewers like rats stampeding from a gang of stoats. All stealth abandoned, the manhole covers were left to clang and roll noisily down the empty streets. A magnificent silver lion burst out of the underground, mane bristling and claws spread wide on paws the size of dinner plates. The Dementors fled before it, but the lion moved above them, keeping them down with great swipes of its huge paws. The lion did not act alone. A swarm of Patronus forms poured in from all directions corporeal and non-corporeal – surrounding the Dementors and holding them in one, writhing, tightly packed mass.

"Bloody Aurors and everybody bloody else! Where'd they all come from?" Rabastan muttered to himself. He knew that somehow Arawn's plan had been exposed and would not be running to the envisaged schedule. His colleagues, and the half-souls, appeared to have walked straight into an ambush. Still, he would not risk making a run for it just yet. Aurors preferred to capture. Dementors preferred to Kiss. Arawn would definitely kill. "*Alohomora*," he hissed petulantly, scowling at one of the lesser doors as though he would rather have blown it to bits. Once inside, he looked around the echoing, cavernous space. There was something about it that he instantly hated. Unsure of how to ascend to where the offending bell ringer was ensconced, Rabastan thumbed through a tourist brochure. With fervent expletives, he memorised the route he would need to take to get up to a great, noisy bell referred to as "Emmanuel". "Three hundred and something *friggin'* steps," he swore under his breath. Wand raised, he began to climb the stairs.

"'Old ze Dementors down! 'Old zem!" Roquefort screamed in English. A pair of shining border collies streaked through the air to round up a would-be escapee, herding it back into the pack with enthusiastic efficiency.

Roquefort sent his plumed, spurred cockerel back into the fray and shot a glance into the slumbering darkness above the North Sea. He had been told that help would

come from this direction and when it did, he was not to be afraid. More importantly, no one was to raise a wand against whatever help it might be. *Any 'elp would be welcome*, he thought. *As satisfying as zis is, we cannot keep up our energies forever*

A spark of orange light pierced the darkness. Two more sparks answered, like fireflies conversing in a luminous language.

The number of sparks doubled and brightened, approaching swiftly in a broad wedge a seventh took the lead and the sparks rapidly grew to streams of fire.

"*Merde!*" Roquefort felt dread seep from the marrow of his bones to the tips of his hair. Was *this* the advertised help? Ever mindful of his duties, he steered his broom aloft, putting himself between now audible clarion calls and the increasingly distracted Dementor attack forces. "Minds on ze job!" he roared through a Sonorus spell in French and in English. "All of you! Keep your courage and 'old ze filth down!"

Kingsley was suddenly at his side, his features held between savage elation and unashamed fear. "Here comes one hell of a cavalry!" he growled.

Roquefort shook his head in horrified confusion. "But 'ow...?"

"Never mind. No time." Kingsley's amplified voice called for a monumental leap of faith. "Drop the charms when the dragons get here and for the blessed love of all the gods, hold your fire!"

A blast of wind and heat nearly swept the two wizards from the sky. A triple-toned, melodic roar rang in their ears, and they caught a flashing glimpse of deep green scales and inscrutable amber eyes.

Two enemies of Dementors mingled in a dazzling riot of silver form and red-gold fire. For a moment, it seemed that the Patronus animals delighted in the presence of seven Welsh Greens as they danced between the searing jets of flame and leapt over the dragons' backs before fading away, their eyes filled with reluctance.

Hermione stuffed her knuckles in her mouth to stop herself squealing with excitement as the air began to clear, revealing a pristine night sky dotted joyfully with stars. She readied herself to summon her Patronus to send a message to Petrus... and gasped as her eyes filled with tears of compassion.

Above the city, an enormous dragon a Ukrainian Ironbelly, for no other dragon grew to such a size released a curling plume of flame. Around each of the dragon's legs, Hermione saw the cruel glint of scarred metal. "It's *you*," she whispered.

The Bell, The Spear, and The Book – Part Two

Chapter 28 of 32

Hermione earns the goodwill of a certain dragon. Severus engages in an unexpected conversation. Draco receives an offer that he can't refuse. Arawn takes a setback in his stride. Rabastan encounters his own "three strikes" law. Sister Clarise overhears some significant snippets, and Toby makes a new acquaintance.

A/N:

French English (Google Translate)

Adieu Farewell

Approprié Appropriate

Je peux y voler I can fly there

Moi Me

Mon Dieu My God

S'il vous plait If you please

Due to my inability to keep to word limits, this chapter will be presented in three parts.

Petrus' reference to the heart is remembered and adapted from the *Upanishads* of India. If I can ever recall or find which *Upanishad* it came from, I will give a proper citation.

'Senior Auror McPhee' is adapted from the character Nanny McPhee in the film *Nanny McPhee*, Universal Pictures, 2005.

Canon characters are the property of J.K. Rowling. I make no money from them.

Many thanks to TeaOli for beta reading, helpful suggestions, and plenty of laughs. I was naughty and added a post-beta sentence here and there, so mistakes are my fault entirely.

Keeping her eyes on the dragon, Hermione summoned her Patronus and sent it to alert Petrus with a predetermined message: the Dementors were retreating eastwards, and a few more hearty peals should do the job nicely. As her merlin streaked away like a small feathered comet, she mounted her broom a single purpose burning in her mind as she left the cathedral behind.

Come on, faster! Gods, I wish I had Harry's Firebolt! She flew higher, following the dragon as it banked and spat a jet of flame after the routed Dementors. Her heart soared when she saw how healthy the old dragon looked. She drew her wand. *Just a little closer... Good! I'm in range. "Relashio!"*

Her charm wrapped around the iron fetters in a mist of bright sparks. Two sharp *cracks* rang out. The bonds of imprisonment fell away, tumbling down to make twin

splashes in the River Seine, where Sequana would obligingly ensure that they rusted away to nothing.

The dragon turned its head. It scanned the air behind itself and then down a little. A pair of liquid ruby eyes locked onto Hermione.

"Oh gods, it can see! Er... Gotta go!" Hermione swung her broom around in as tight a turn as she dared, trying not to think of Harry's desperate flight from a Hungarian Horntail. A sickly yellow curse screeched up from the streets, heading straight towards her and too quick for her to cast a shield. Without really thinking about it, she let go of her broom and dropped below it, prepared to let herself fall and rely on a well-timed Arresto Momentum. Above her, her broom exploded in a flaming ball.

"*Hermione!*" Neville seized his broom, ready to fly to the rescue. From behind a wall to his right, he heard Draco yell, "*Stupefyl!*"

Neville froze mid-mount, staring upwards with his mouth open. "Draco? Oi! Draco! Are you seeing this too, or have I been hit with something weird?"

Draco checked that the Death Eater who had tried to blast Hermione to pieces was well and truly stupefied, scrambled back over the wall, then followed Neville's gaze. "Merlin's Beard...", he breathed.

Hermione gritted her teeth against the sickening pull of gravity, willing her eyes to stay open, her mind to stay calm, and to not start screaming Severus' name. *I can do this...* The neat Parisian streetscape rushed towards her...

What...? She was looking at the dragon from above. She was falling towards it slowly. *No, I'm not falling slowly... it's descending slower than I am...* Her confusion turned to mute astonishment as she landed on the dragon's back with a gentle, somewhat graceless *thump*. Gasping, she wriggled to a sitting position with a death grip on two of the dragon's dorsal spines, slipping one leg between them so that she was astride the high ridge of its backbone. Hermione tried to find her voice, but only managed something between a sob and a hiccup. Looking straight ahead, her view of the gracefully tilting world was flanked by a pair of dragon ears. She was suddenly certain that the dragon was female. "*She*", not "*it*"... *Now how did I come to that conclusion... WhoaaaMerlinhelp!*

Hermione willed her stomach to stay in its proper place as the dragon banked again, climbing twice her body length with a single mighty sweep of her wings. With a rumble that began somewhere deep in her ribcage, the dragon let out a low, undulating, sonorous call that sounded very like a summons.

Swift, broom-mounted movement flickered to the left. Hermione turned to look, her heart nearly bursting with relief. "Severus! Thank the gods, you're safe! Oh, love! Severus, I'm fine! I don't think she's going to hurt me! She saved me, did you see?"

Severus nodded, steering his broom on autopilot as he slipstreamed in the dragon's wake, his body reflexively shifting to compensate for turbulence.

"Look how red she is! Like the dragon in Merlin's cipher! I remember Hagrid saying that Ukrainian Ironbellies go a bit red in their old age... Did you know it, too?"

Severus opened his mouth as if to speak, then simply nodded again.

Hermione started to laugh. Severus' black eyes were wide in his pale features, and he had not yet said a word. Her beloved was absolutely, adorably, thunderstruck.

Rabastan braced himself against the curving stone wall, ordering himself not to lose his stomach contents. The closer he got to the cathedral's bourdon, the worse he felt. His head throbbed in time to the monstrous peals of the bell he could feel the vibrations drilling into his clenched molars and some dreadful force lanced his muscles and bones with hidden fire. Another bout of painful retching had him looking around desperately. He pointed his wand at the wall. "*Defodio!*"

With a groan, he slid down to sit on one of the steps as his spell work produced nothing but agonizing pain. Through the rippling patterns in his vision, he made out the shape of a door not far above him. Crawling up the stairs, he reached the door and pushed it open. He fell into a cold night breeze, catching himself on his hands before he landed, face down, on dressed stone.

Gulping air, he got up and looked around. He was standing on a narrow walkway between the two bell towers. Feeling dazed and sick, he wandered distractedly until his eyes rested on a tall spire, flanked by statues, rising above the spine of the cathedral. It presented the opportunity for a compromise: if he could not physically climb the stairs and murder the bell ringer, he could probably attack the entire south bell tower from the spire it appeared to have a crow's nest arrangement for just such a purpose. Fumbling slightly, he dragged his broom from a large pocket in his robes and winced through "*Engorgio*." Rabastan waited until another wave of nausea passed, then made a short, shaky flight over to the spire.

As soon as his feet touched a solid surface, something arrested his questing vision. Down on one of the ramparts above the flying buttresses, he could see a man moving about. A man and a house-elf. As he watched, the house-elf reached up and took the man's hand. They both vanished with a distant *pop*, then reappeared on a wide, flagged tier over which the highest, most delicate arms of the flying buttresses soared to touch stone walls.

Rabastan fished an eyeglass out of his pocket. "*Telescopium*," he muttered, touching it with his wand. He peered through the glass and hummed softly to himself. "And what have we here? Bow and arrows not a wizard's choice of weapon... I wonder, could this be the same fellow who gave Arawn a persistent limp? If it is, there's a prize for his corpse a fairly generous one."

Petrus raised his head when *Mademoiselle* Hermione's merlin swooped boldly around him, nearly brushing his nose with its ethereal wings. "Ah! Cheeky falcon! You show the mischief that your mistress keeps on the tight rein, *non?*" The merlin perched high above Emmanuel and bobbed its head three times this being the signal for Petrus to stop ringing the bell. Needing to keep his ears well flattened to protect them from the noise, he would not have heard a spoken message. Petrus grinned and braced himself, gleefully roaring, "*Ave Maria!*" as he gave Emmanuel the means to shake the bell tower to its foundations a few more times.

As the bourdon began to slow and settle under his careful ministrations, Petrus chanted a blessing, coaxing the wildly surging magic into calm restfulness. He kept chanting until Emmanuel stood still, quivering slightly with a barely audible hum. Knowing that this would continue for some time, he bade his bronze friend *adieu* and swiftly made his way down the spiralling stairs on foot.

At the door leading out to a narrow walkway between the two bell towers, he came to a sudden halt. Ears pricked, he snuffed the air, grimacing at the taste... the faintest trace... of evil.

Severus had never been so close to a live dragon before. The last thing he had ever expected to feel was gratitude. Temporarily shelving the inconvenient annoyance of Arawn's disappearance while he sped to snatch Hermione out of the sky, he had seen the enormous dragon intercept his witch's fall as attentively as a Welsh Green dam would catch an overtired dragonet on its first flight a deeply moving spectacle that he had observed, only once, from a very safe distance.

The Ukrainian Ironbelly's wings flexed slightly as the dragon adjusted the air pressure beneath them, allowing her to gain altitude with very little effort.

Still slipstreaming, Severus caught the scent of the creature heat-softened metal, scorching sparks, air rippling dry and hot from a blast furnace. It evoked a bittersweet memory... Lily and himself, in the blacksmith's shop on the Salford Docks, hands clamped over their ears just as Mr Evans had told them to do, watching in awe as a lump of glowing steel was deftly shaped into a perfect hexagonal shaft.

The Llygad warmed his chest. A sibilant voice with a tone not unlike the described sound of Parseltongue but richer, older, accented with strong syllables, resonant growls,

and treble hisses spoke directly into his mind:

Arkhré-ach nu, Sévérūs. Khea-ourskh, Sévérūs gnaveâ Myrddin.

Severus shook his head and called to his witch. "Hermione? Did you just say something?"

"Not me!" she shouted back, still keeping her hands firmly clamped around a dorsal spine. "But *she* rumbled a bit just then and sort of hissed."

Severus flew level with the dragon's head, forcing himself to keep his nerve as "she" observed him with an air of detached amusement. Her worn yellow teeth were easily two feet long and backlit by an orange glow that flared and dimmed with her vast breaths. Severus hoped that she wouldn't notice that he wore boots made of dragon hide even if the donor had died of natural causes. "Her eyes are clear, Hermione!" he called again, recalling Hermione's description of the once imprisoned dragon's near blinded state. *Was it simply better nutrition, or did she receive some healing? But who could have healed her?* His eyes narrowed. *I have my suspicions...* A thought challenged him. *I suppose if I can talk to a half-Kneazle, I can try talking to... to a dragon. Bloody hell.* "Did Fawkes a phoenix heal your eyes, by any chance?" he asked the dragon, trying not to swerve away as she swivelled an ear in his direction.

Awrrgron yé né phnechs. Khea-ourskh, Sévérūs! Réágh! Gnr eskh nu-a schérákh.

At an increasing distance to the east, the dark shadow of massed Dementors fled in ragged retreat, tumbling over itself like some grotesque parody of a sea fog. It seemed as though the air it had passed through was left dry and desolate, tainted with hatred's poisonous chill.

"Severus, look!" Hermione pointed to the shadow.

Long streams of bright yellow fire appeared at the shadow's flanks, harassing the cold menace like herding dogs at the heels of obstinate cattle. Over the hollow thunder of the red dragon's flight, Severus could make out a distinctive, yowling screech. *Gods! Hungarian Horntails!*

Réágh! The Ukrainian Ironbelly emphasised the instruction with a smouldering growl, flames flickering between her teeth.

The Llygad felt suddenly hot, as though it were glowing with a power that threatened to burst through its confinement. Merlin's magic unceremoniously punched through Severus' uncertainty. Gathering his resolve, he allowed his ancestor's magic to complement his own...

Quickly! He jumped at the abrupt translation which came as forcefully as the dragon's urgently repeated instruction. *I will carry you, Severus, blood-kin of Merlin. Quickly! Come with me and fly with your wingless mate.*

Severus unconsciously copied his wingless mate's habit of biting the lower lip. He miniaturised his broom, stuffed it into his coat pocket and flew under his own power. "Yes, I can fly without wings," he said in response to the dragon's rather abstract stare, being careful to keep sarcasm out of his tone.

"If she's asking you to do something, please do it," Hermione warned. "I think she's getting impatient and going all fidgety."

"Far be it from me to test the patience of a dragon," Severus proclaimed with true sincerity. He flew over the dragon's back and landed neatly between the next pair of dorsal spines behind Hermione. A Cushioning Charm was necessary before he felt comfortable enough to survey his position. They were sitting right between the immense wings that stretched out on either side, the tips just visible in the starlight. This was a good position, Severus decided, feeling the smooth spines that pressed snugly into his lower back and abdomen. Ukrainian Ironbellies possessed fused thoracic vertebrae an adaptation for structural strength to contend with unimaginable flight forces which meant that the dragon could not forget they were there, arch backwards, and mangle them both. "This wasn't part of the plan at all," he said resignedly, "but saying, 'No, thank you, now may I please have my witch back?' would not have been advisable."

"You might have hurt her feelings," Hermione replied, ignoring Severus' spontaneous eye roll as she consolingly patted a dorsal spine.

"Spare me the... Never mind. *Expecto Patronum!*"

A little surprised at how untroubled she felt at being a dragon's passenger, Hermione bit her lip to stop herself smiling. Severus' falcon looked just as wind ruffled as he did even more so when Severus began a precisely dictatorial message to deliver to Kingsley regarding a "slight change of plan". Hermione quietly laughed in her sleeve as the falcon departed to deliver its news. She could have sworn that the ethereal peregrine had given its owner a professionally sullen scowl.

The Ukrainian Ironbelly gave a long, penetrating call that seemed to resonate to the other flanks, then laid back her ears, stretched out her neck and roared. A jet of flame warmed the air ahead of her, and spiralling columns of sparks rolled back along her flanks. Hermione could see the deep, heaving movement of wing joints under scaled hide as the dragon shifted from easy cruising to distance consuming speed. "Severus?"

Severus reached forward and wrapped his arms around Hermione as though it were the usual thing to do while riding a dragon. "Yes, my love?"

"She the dragon talked to you, didn't she? In a proper language. And you could understand her through Merlin's magic?"

"She did, indeed. And I could."

Hermione wriggled around to look at him. "Does that make dragons *beings*, do you think?"

"At the moment, I would like to think so." He scowled and shook his head. "The arguments surrounding proposed amendments to the definition of 'being' would take, I imagine, centuries." Even without Legilimency, he knew the focus of Hermione's concern. "But I believe that we, with our combined efforts, will ensure that dragons are never, ever, imprisoned again."

Hermione nodded grimly. "If we get through this. I'm putting a lot of faith in that vision you had of two black-haired children."

Severus couldn't help a small smile of masculine pride. He placed two fingers under Hermione's chin, all the better to properly position her for a kiss... which continued on... for longer... than he intended. It was an intoxicating mixture, feeling Hermione melt into him challenging him to match her passion while a magical being of terrifying power carried them into certain danger. Just at the point where he would have blissfully lost himself in the stolen moment, a comment from the dragon made him pull away with a soft laugh.

"What did she say?" Hermione asked, intuitively placing her suspicion in the correct place.

"She said that before we go too far in our mating rituals, we should ensure that we have a well-built nest in place ~~prior~~ to our dragonets' arrival."

Hermione felt herself blush. "Well, I suppose she would know," she said, turning to face the front again.

A buck rabbit Patronus appeared alongside them, running at a pace to outstrip a bullet from a farmer's gun. "Password!" it demanded in Auror Proudfoot's voice.

"Hares and hounds," Severus answered.

"Dover is clear! Once we'd got the Dementors out into the open, two flights of seven Welsh Greens came roaring in from sod all nowhere fourteen dragons in all! Fourteen! Nobody had ever seen the like of it but the timing was perfect! Seven of 'em kept going over the sea on a bearing that'd take them straight to Calais. Merlin, we were bloody terrified, but those fine specimens of *Ormr cymru* ignored us and gave the Dementors one hell of a flaming hurry-up and pursued them due east from the Dover

shore. Keep your eyes peeled if you come across them. Auror MacFusty said he thought he saw a pair of Hebridean Blacks in the mix as well the first warning you get with those purple eyed stealth flyers is a charred arse.

"I'm in Calais now. I'll give Kingsley and the French Obliviators a hand with the clean up before we Portkey to Paris. Kingsley said that the entire Calais infestation was also packed up and sent due east with dragons hot on their shrouds. He says he'll try and catch up with you, but if he can't, he wishes you the best of luck with whatever the next phase turns out to be. His orders for you and Miss Granger are *not* to get eaten by anything and to come back alive. If you come back as ghosts, he'll be very cross." The Patronus ran a few more strides before fading into the night.

"What did they do with the Dementors in London?" Hermione asked, absently reaching down to stroke the dragon's scales.

"I believe that they were handed over to the Department of Mysteries for *unspeakable* experiments."

Hermione shuddered. "Ugh!" She gripped Severus' hand. "You told Kingsley that she's taking us to the city you saw the place where your Sight showed you a hooded person holding the spearhead from Macsen's treasure."

"Yes, she is taking us to Pripyat," Severus murmured, wondering against ungrounded speculation as to who the hooded person might be. He scowled into the darkness, in two minds as to whether he would have preferred the company of wizards and witches as he had originally planned or an alarming number of dragons.

Ahead of them, the dark wall of Dementors flinched with the pyrotechnic wrath of dragon fire. Behind them, the lights of Paris twinkled distantly. Beneath them, the red dragon carried them onward...

Murmuring sacred Sūtras and invoking Buddha's Mercy as Emmanuel's voice softened into silence, Oriens took only a little time to absorb the doings of the Ukrainian Ironbelly as it flew over, and out of, Paris. His duties did not extend beyond the city, and he would not disregard an instruction to stay back and assist wherever he could. Trusting in the great, traceless power that he referred to as "The Way", he knew he was there for a reason.

A mongoose Patronus danced sinuously around his broom. "One Death Eater, stunned and bound. Please follow to collect," it said. Oriens signalled the Auror who flew alongside him and followed the mongoose as it bounded through the air with its head and ears up, its tail held aloft in a declaration of war.

The mongoose lead them down to a narrow lane between a clothing boutique and a stone wall surrounding a small two-storey house that time had most likely forgotten.

A young wizard hailed him and pointed to the tiny yard behind the house. A short distance away, another wizard sat with his back against a wall, resting his blond head on his knees. "He's in there. The bastard tried to curse our Hermione. Draco took him down."

"I'll look after our new friend," the Auror told Oriens. He indicated the two young men. "They're two of Hogwarts' students. The dark-haired one is Neville Longbottom the one who beheaded Nagini. The other one... well, the less said, the better."

As the Auror dropped into the yard to formally apprehend the Death Eater, Oriens dismounted in the lane to make sure that the students were unhurt. "Any injuries, gentlemen?" he asked without preamble.

"No, sir," Neville answered. "At least, not physical ones." He turned his body slightly towards his blond companion, who had raised his head but made no move to stand up. "Draco was fine until a few minutes after he stunned the Death Eater. I'm not sure if that dragon spooked him, or if it's just... just *everything*."

Oriens watched Draco with careful concern. Moving slowly, he crouched down in front of the young man until hesitant eye contact was made. *Terrible pain... A heavy burden... Lost... Dreadfully lost...* Oriens could see it all there in a single glance. "Where does it hurt, Draco?"

Draco reddened and raised his hands despairingly. "Nobody has ever asked me that question before," he whispered, his eyes filling with tears. "It hurts everywhere," he said suddenly, desperately. "It hurts so much and it won't stop... I don't know how to make it stop..."

Oriens sat back on his heels and studied Draco for a moment, using his skills as an Unspeakable and his nonhuman senses to divine the young wizard's truth. Slowly, the impression of Draco's Fate-spun path began to emerge from the Unknown. "You were never meant to cause harm to anyone," Oriens stated, having seen enough to make a diagnosis. "But you have done so, and that is the root of your pain." He took hold of Draco's left wrist and pushed back the sleeve while the blond wizard watched, unresisting and miserable. "One who has been taught how to hurt, must learn how to heal," he said, resting his index and middle finger over the small, round scar left by Voldemort's branding. "Thus is the balance of your soul restored."

"It's too late," Draco murmured, shaking his head.

"Codswallop!" Neville snorted. "You've heaps of time we're not even out of school, yet. And if I were you, I wouldn't go telling Snape that you think it's too late, or else it really will be. Didn't *he* turn out to be the wizard you just don't mess with! Did you see him fly right up to that dragon? Gods!"

Draco wiped his eyes. "I wouldn't dare. I know he put his soul on the line for me. I wouldn't have been born in the first place if he hadn't carved a bind rune out of turquoise and stained it with Merlin knows what potion to stop Mother miscarrying. He saved her life. If she lost a third child me Grandfather was going to poison her. Father couldn't let that happen..." He managed a weak smile. "Hermione was riding the dragon. It saved her. I saw *that*." He hung his head, ashamed. "And the best I could do for all those years was call her a Mudblood," he whispered. "And I let Death Eaters into Hogwarts. I tried to murder..." His upper lip curled slightly. "Still think it's not too late?"

Oriens stood up and held out a hand to help Draco to his feet. "Ultimately, Draco, you shall be the one to answer that question. But the answer may take some years to find." He considered the natural aptitudes he had seen in Draco's path the path he had been forced away from by having to be someone else. *No wonder he feels lost*. Young Malfoy would never be personable enough for frontline Healing, but he did possess the intelligence, patience, and tenacity that could lead to great discoveries in the often solitary field of applied research.

Oriens had an idea. "Draco, when you have completed your N.E.W.Ts, how would you feel about undertaking further study abroad?"

Draco shrugged. "I've been toying with the idea maybe somewhere in Eastern Europe... if they'll take me on. Some place where my name means nothing..." Curiosity furrowed his brow, and he stood a little straighter as he took refuge in social etiquette. "Sir, do you have something in mind?"

Oriens summoned his broom. "I do. If you are agreeable, I'll speak with the Sage of Borobudur to secure a three-year apprenticeship with the school's Master Healer. There are three positions available. So far, there is only one applicant."

Draco blinked. "Healing? Borobudur? In Java? I mean no disrespect, but did I hear you correctly?"

Oriens gave an enigmatic smile. "You did. Be advised that Borobudur follows a Buddhist tradition," he said gently. "They only use herbs, various plant parts, and minerals gleaned from the Earth. No creature's life is taken for medicines or for sustenance," he added with meaningful emphasis.

Draco paced, his mind quickened with the prospect of a real future that didn't involve watching light fade from dying eyes. "Sir, if you would speak to the Sage on my behalf, I would be most grateful," he replied with his most formal bow. He stood still and stared at his boots. "The truth is... I've seen..." He shivered. "I can't stand the sight of joints of meat anymore. Especially if they're medium rare... and on a dining table. In fact, dining tables give me nightmares, and I never want to sit at one ever again."

Oriens considered the dining arrangements of Borobudur: simple woven sitting mats spread on the floor, giving easy access to a carpet of banana leaves piled high with fruit, steamed rice, and clay pots containing a bewildering cornucopia of spice-fragrant dishes. "If you wish to avoid dining tables, nobody in Borobudur will consider that

unusual. I'll be in touch," he said, shaking Draco's offered hand before taking flight.

Neville watched Draco's surprise benefactor go. "Merlin, I think the Fates smiled on you tonight, Malfoy." He vaguely wondered if either of them had caught the benefactor's name... but couldn't remember... He grinned affectionately as his Patronus returned from another scouting mission. "Hey, you," he said to the silver mongoose.

Draco watched the lithe, glowing creature as it gambolled around Neville's feet, pausing on every second circuit to raise its sleek head and gaze at him with intelligent eyes. "I'm still working on mine," he said. "I'm not sure if I have the right sort of happy memories. Or maybe I'm just worried that it'll be a ferret," he added, shoving one hand into his pocket with embarrassment.

"Give it time; the memories will come. Chin up! My Patronus only took a corporeal form after the war. Before that, it was just a blobby thing... Not sure why it came out as a mongoose."

Draco's brow creased, and then he gave a short laugh. "Compulsory Muggle Studies!"

Neville arched an eyebrow. "And the explanation, sir?"

Draco actually grinned. "For my library assignment, I had to select and read two pieces of classic Muggle literature from the inter-library loan catalogue. When I got stuck for a second choice, Petrus suggested *The Jungle Book*, by Rudyard Kipling."

It was Neville's turn to smile. "Sorry, I haven't read it, but the title sounds fun so unlike you."

"Thank you. I liked the story so much that I focussed on it for my essay topic. In that same book is another small side story about a *mongoose* who protected a boy from two cobras Nag and Nagaina. The mongoose killed them both."

Neville's eyes widened in surprise at the cobras' names. "So Voldemort was inspired by Muggle literature? Who'd've thought..."

Draco shrugged. "He probably read it during his days in that Muggle orphanage." His eyes held a flicker of repugnance. "But I'm inclined to think that he would have wanted the cobras to win and kill the entire family. Slowly."

"I'd rather not think about it. Hey, you'll be heading into a *real* jungle!"

"If I run into any talking pythons, I promise I'll be careful."

"Do Dementors 'ave ears?" Toby asked uncertainly, needing to say something reasonably meaningless after watching a real, live fire-breathing dragon swoop over the city and carry both Hermione and Severus away on its back.

Tocky hopped from one foot to the other. He had been just as captivated as his master had been at the sight of the huge creature and had needed to bite his hands quite hard to stop himself from applauding and attracting unwanted attention. "They doesn't, Master Tobias, but they is being able to hear. Tocky isn't knowing how." The house-elf lowered his voice to a whisper. "The Deep Magic has hurts them terribly Tocky is thinking this is good. Tocky wonders what that says about Tocky."

"That you reckon it feels good to kick their arses? So do I."

The house-elf glanced up at him and shrugged. "Tocky is not knowing if they have..." Tocky squeaked, then froze. Literally.

Toby hissed an oath. The house-elf's entire body was entombed in ice. He turned around...

It came out of the blue a hammer blow to his chest, a sharp, stinging scourge that pulled at his skin, then faded to a crawling itch. Toby knew by instinct that had he not been wearing the armour Severus had given him, he would have been seriously injured. Cold with fury, he faced the wizard responsible, sensing spent traces of magic sliding down his body in foul, clammy threads.

Rabastan Lestrangle gaped in momentary shock. This was the third time in a row that he had been thwarted. The curse should have turned the Muggle's and this time, he was *sure* it was a Muggle skin into a weeping mass of raw ulcers, yet the inferior creature was unscathed. Furthermore, it was snarling insults and had the temerity to sight him down an arrow. He cast a shield just in time the Muggle's arrow bounced harmlessly away and clattered into a flying buttress. The remains of Rabastan's curse pooled on the stones and evaporated.

"Hah! A Muggle in charmed armour," he shouted, remembering details of the Goblin Wars. "And where did a knuckle dragging primitive like you get hold of a *wizard's* armour?" He stopped suddenly. His eyes narrowed venomously. "You! You look like... Could it be? Moloch's Mother-in-law! Oh, this explains much you're a *Snape!*"

"Rather me than you, sport," Toby growled, wondering if it was actually possible to "get out of this one".

Rabastan shook with rage and hatred. "Muggle maggot! Air-thieving parasite!" He raised his wand. "Let's relieve you of that which you should not have and then give you some lengthy lessons in respect!"

Toby fitted another arrow to his bow, staring his challenger directly in the eyes and instantly loathing the air of arrogant superiority that he saw there. The little red dragon on his arm guard extended its claws and seemed to roar at the wizard who was grinding his teeth fit to fracture them. A movement above the south transept caught Toby's attention. A familiar silhouette. He only gave it a glance, but it was enough to alert his attacker.

Rabastan turned side-on to the Muggle, but before he could risk a proper look, something glided over his head, spun in mid-air and dropped lightly between him and his intended pupil. He looked the intruder up and down, then laughed. "Gods! Is that all? An animated gargoye?"

The animated gargoye growled and took a step towards him.

"Oh, please." Rabastan casually flicked his wand: "*Finite Incantatem.*"

The gargoye froze. With a creeping ripple, it turned to inanimate stone blind, deaf, dumb, and harmless.

"Should've run while you had the chance, Muggle!" Rabastan called around the gargoye's still form. "I'll just get this rubbish out of the way, and then we can have a nice little chat. *Expulso!*"

He could smell it before he reached it: blood, churned mud, excrement, sweat and *fear*. Arawn strode to the crest of a hill and beheld what he simply could not believe. The site where his army trolls, Dementors and all had been encamped was an empty swathe of complete annihilation.

By wandlight, he examined the heavily pocked ground. Blast craters, shattered rocks marked with crystalline burn scars, the itching tang of conquered Dark magic. Here and there in the semi-frozen agitation, he could see distinctive shapes clearly marked: hoof prints. Baffled and still disbelieving, he sent out a summons for any Dementors in the vicinity and searched for any further clues.

Broken wands, torn pieces of Muggle clothing, a fragment of a silver mask. No bodies. No Dementors.

He noticed part of a troll's club protruding from the ground. Summoning it, he examined the broken piece, puzzling over the deep indentations in the wood. *A mace, of some sort? Who could have...?*

As he mused, a great, rushing wind swept through the forbidding darkness of the forest. The treetops tossed violently, seeming to gesture in his direction, pointing and accusing, reaching and grasping. Arawn's skin prickled. For a moment, he thought he heard the sound of reed pipes. He backed away from an unseen force that flowed out from between the trees. Whatever it was, it was coming towards him like the vengeful hand of an elemental god. Somewhere, a falcon screamed. An unexpected surge of sheer panic shook him to his bones. He turned and fled, back up over the ridge of low hills, adrenalin giving him a fine turn of speed.

When Arawn finally stopped running, he was well away from the forest. He gathered his wits and focussed his attention. He had to retrace his steps under a Disillusionment Charm and find the first of a series of Portkeys. Faced with the kind of power he had just experienced, he knew where his absent Dementors would have gone: *Pripyat*.

Toby barely had time for his mind to scream, "No!" It happened too quickly. He had seen the curse leave the wizard's wand in a flicker of light, but instead of striking Petrus, the stone being's seemingly inanimate hand had whipped out and deflected it. *Hah! Petrus was playin' possum!*

Rabastan fell back in a defensive crouch, too astounded to think clearly. He had never seen anything like this before. The gargoyle had brushed away a curse with its bare hand... which should not have happened because gargoyles couldn't do that and he had cast..."*Finite Incantatem!*" The second iteration of the spell washed over the gargoyle like water. This time, there was no return to simple carved stone.

Completely unfazed, the gargoyle flattened its ears, bared its teeth and prowled towards him with narrowed eyes blazing magma orange. There was no doubt about its intention: it coming for him.

"*Reducto!*"

The gargoyle swatted the spell away with a gut-rumbling snarl.

Rabastan felt the cold press of doom. "What the hell is this? *Homorphus!*"

The gargoyle's shape didn't change at all.

"*Crucio!*"

The curse was caught and tossed aside as neatly as a child's toy ball.

Rabastan pushed his growing fear aside and mustered all of his willpower to cast the Killing Curse.

Petrus sensed the magic building. Crouching low, he launched himself at the Death Eater with a leonine roar, catching his wand hand and curtailing the cast as they fell together in a wrestling hold.

With his superior physical strength, Petrus quickly had the advantage. "Villain!" he thundered as he sprang to his feet, dragging the source of evil into a kneeling position by the scruff of his robes. "Servant of Darkness! You *dare* to defile the stones of this sacred place!" His grip tightened on the Death Eater's arm as the wizard struggled and swore, spitting curses and hexes in a fluent stream of venom. Wandless magic raged around Petrus' body in vicious, lurid snarls, seeking any point of weakness.

Rabastan felt the bones in his right forearm crack and splinter. His wand slid from his fingers. With a garbled howl of agony, he clawed at the gargoyle's eyes and the world spun as he felt himself upended and slammed roughly against the balustrade above a second tier of buttress spans which arched like de-fleshed ribs from windowed walls to their massive stone anchors. He squirmed and writhed in the gargoyle's grip, shrieking as the stone guardian placed its foot over his wand and ground it into broom straws. He gathered all of his malice, all of his desire to maim, torture, and kill. He looked the gargoyle in its molten eyes. *Catch this, if you can "Avada Kedavra!"*

Trying to get a clear shot at the Death Eater through the riot of motion and dizzying flashes of bitter light, Toby soon realised that the combatants were too close for him to do anything at all to help. Unsure of what to do, he glanced at Tocky, whose eyes gazed at him pleadingly from inside his icy prison. His mouth went dry when he heard two words that chilled him to the soul with their ruthless hatred. Toby dropped to his knees and covered Tocky, shielding the snap-frozen house-elf as well as he could. Power sheeted through the air, howling like a Banshee, electric and tasting of ozone...

Silence...

"M-mast-ter?" A slightly blue Tocky placed chilled hands on his master's arm and dazedly got to his numb feet.

Toby steeled himself, then turned around. *Oh, bugger.* He brushed bits of ice off Tocky's pillowcase, then took his cloak off and tossed it a short distance away. "Listen, Tocky, go wrap that cloak around you and warm up b'fore y' shake yerself to bits. Don't worry, lad, I'm not givin' it to you. You're not gettin' presents of dismissal."

"Mast-ter Tobias is g-giving Tocky an-n ord-ders?" Tocky asked through chattering teeth, stretching to see what had happened to Petrus.

"I is. Am. Go on." Toby nudged Tocky in the direction of the cloak. Standing, he forced himself to walk through what felt like a slithering swamp of static electricity. He peered over the wall. "You earned every bit of that," he said to the Death Eater's corpse, which drooped like an unstrung, broken puppet across one of the lesser buttresses.

Toby kept hoping that Petrus would move, or say something... But the stone being lay silent and still, stretched on his belly with limbs and wings akimbo. "Petrus?" Toby knelt beside his ally. "C'mon, mate... I don't know any last rites or nothin' and if I send for a priest, well, d'you think 'e's gonna believe me?" He reached out and shook Petrus' shoulder.

"*Oui...* Do not worry, *Monsieur*, I remember the prayers *approprié...*," Petrus mumbled hazily, his talons scraping stone as his fingers curled. His tail twitched feebly.

"Prize swot in Sunday School, eh?" Toby couldn't keep relief out of his voice.

Petrus' tail gave an encouraging lash. "I am *not* the prize swot... *Ave Maria*, that was the Dark magic most terrible." He slowly pushed himself onto his knees.

"Those words 'e said... were that a Killin' Curse?" Toby winced when he noted the weals and gashes covering Petrus' chest and arms.

"*Oui.*" Petrus gathered his wings into a loose approximation of order and shakily rubbed his eyes.

"It didn't kill you... obviously, as Sev'rus would say... But you've got a bit of damage there."

Still on his knees, Petrus examined his injuries. "These are nothing, *Monsieur* Tobias. A waxing moon, a handful of fine clay, and the touch of rain will heal them. As for the curse Unforgiveable, faith was my shield that is why it rebounded on the one who cast it."

Toby sombrely considered the grievous tale Severus had told him regarding the deployment of that particular Unforgiveable. He still felt guilty about having asked his son about the "Unforgiveables" mentioned in the *Daily Prophet* and how a baby could survive one. Severus, after a moment of clinical silence, had given more than an academic answer to Toby's questions he had offered the gift of trust by revealing the source of a torment that had been a raw burden of secret vulnerability. "Sev'rus said it

were love's power... actin' through sacrifice... that gave protection from the curse."

Petrus nodded, his eyes shimmering moonlight silver as he got to his feet. "*Monsieur* Severus is correct. But consider this, *Monsieur* Tobias: true faith and sacrifice they are always grounded in love."

Toby considered this for a moment. "Faith in who, or what?"

Petrus tested his balance with a few tentative steps. He lightly tapped Toby's chest, right above the heart. "To know this, here is where you must search. The word 'heart', in your English, it seems to be made of two words 'here' and 'art' those words, they are saying, 'here it is'."

A Scots-accented shriek descended from above: "Oh, great Merlin!"

Petrus and Toby instinctively ducked as the headmistress of Hogwarts swept out of the sky like an outraged Hippogriff, an alarmed Charms master in tow.

"*Madame la Headmiss...*"

"*Petrus!* What on Earth... Look at the state of you! Irma will have a blue fit!"

Toby valiantly tried to rescue the situation and Petrus, who was retreating before Minerva's insistent examinations. "One of them bloody Death Eaters got into t' cathedral, and Petrus..."

"The despicable scoundrel was going to kill you, *Monsieur* Tobias..."

"And 'e 'ad a pretty convincin' go at knockin' you off as well..."

"*S'il vous plait, Madame la Headmistress*" Petrus pleaded, guiding Minerva's searching wand light away from his wounds. "I know how to mend..."

"Give me some light, will you, Filius?" Minerva firmly steered her damaged staff member into the instantly provided illumination. "*Tch!* Stop fussing, Petrus..."

"*Fussing? Mo?*" Petrus angled his ears back in the pained disbelief of the falsely accused as his hands were lightly slapped away from a defensive position.

"We'll have to get you down to the muster point..."

"*Je peux y voler...*"

"Don't you dare!" Minerva took her assistant librarian firmly by an unscathed wrist. "You're coming with me, laddie."

Petrus gave Toby and Tocky a desperate glance. His silent appeal to Filius was answered with a wince and a shrug. "*Mon Dieu...*"

As Minerva bustled away with her prayerfully protesting patient, Filius quietly shook his head. "Never come between Minerva and an injured staff member," he advised. "Especially if the staff member resembles a gargoyle." He signalled a pair of passing wizards with a burst of orange sparks from his wand.

Toby looked up and waved in recognition. "Oi! Oriens! I reckon Petrus needs some moral support."

Oriens landed as soundlessly as a cat, while his flying companion spiralled down to examine the Death Eater's body. "What happened? Where is he now?"

"E took on a Death Eater and got a bit scraped up. I thought for a minute 'e'd been all done in but it were the Death Eater that done a perish, not Petrus." He pointed in the direction the headmistress had taken. "Minerva took 'im that way, fussin' and cluckin' like old mother 'en so be careful!"

A voice called up from the buttress, "Oh, I know this one all right Rabastan Lestrange. I'll get him bagged and tagged. A killer for the chiller. Couldn't have happened to a nicer chap."

"Rabies Lestrange? Name says it all," Toby muttered as Oriens looked over the edge of the cathedral. "Petrus survived a Killin' Curse. It bounced back and killed 'im instead," Toby explained, pointing to the corpse.

"Really? How?" Filius asked, intrigued.

For a moment, Toby was at a loss as to how to repeat Petrus' explanation. He caught Oriens' steady, searching gaze and decided that the phenomenon was not his to relate. "I didn't see 'ow," he said. "Besides, d'y' think *I'm* the one to try explainin' magic to wizards?"

Crack!

Sister Clarise pressed her back against a crumbling wall and listened. She could hear footsteps crunching over frost and rubble.

Beyond the bridge into the city, and high above the ruins, Dementors massed before the cold void, pouring down into the decaying streets as their numbers increased at a terrifying rate. She had seen a great swarm of them come back to the city not long after dawn. They had returned in a hurry, darkening the doleful morning even further and somehow, she could sense that they were very, very angry. She knew that Dementors could not speak as humans did, but she fancied she could hear their thin screams of agony and wrath. She had clamped her hands over her ears to stop herself fainting from the horror of it.

Sister Clarise supposed that it was the magic within the spearhead that shielded her from the Dementors' notice and kept her warm in the bleak wretchedness that would otherwise suck the life heat from her body. She certainly did not have the means to do so herself. Curling her fingers around the spearhead's jewelled bindings, she peered cautiously around the corner. Through a concealing snarl of stark brambles, she caught sight of the recent arrival. She sadly considered that he would have been handsome if not for his soulless eyes. Even from the distance of her vantage point, she could feel their piercing chill. Her grip on the spearhead tightened until the jewels pressed sharply into her palm. The phoenix feather brushed against her knuckles, a whispering touch of courage.

She knew of the charms that Nimuë had set in place when she concealed the remaining objects of Macsen's Treasure. Nimuë had mentioned them in her book without hinting at the crafting of the charms she had only said that no one could find or lay hands on any part of the Treasure unless they were fit to do so. Now, the memory of those written words murmured through Sister Clarise's mind in a solemn chant, evoking a ghostly collage of sights, sounds, and scents from an age long departed.

Sister Clarise had not fully *Seen* the one to whom she should surrender the spearhead she only knew that he had black hair and wore black robes, and that a most princely Patronus had flowed from his wand. She looked again at the soulless wizard. He was not the one. *You are definitely not fit to touch it*

She continued to watch as the Dementors gathered around the flaxen-haired human. He was furious, though not directly with the Dementors. She struggled to hear his words, the flow of which were interrupted by occasional stretches of... *telepathy?*

He demanded to know what had happened at the forest and paused as though listening.

Sister Clarise noted how his expression melted into disbelief, then shock, then white-faced rage.

"Centaur!" he roared. "An *army* of centaurs bearing magic from the First Fire?"

The Dementors inclined their heads.

Sister Clarise felt a flicker of light in the midst of darkness. These would be the same centaurs from whom the phoenix had taken the food and mulled mead. *Bless you all, brave warriors!*

"I *know* you find them inedible," the wizard snarled in response to a Dementor's postural protestation, "but consider how you may watch them starve to death when we have taken everything else. Snape had his chance. We shall make sure that *he* is the very last to die."

Snape? Sister Clarise dared not yield to the impulse to run, hide, weep, or scream her deepest sorrow to the sky. The spearhead's warmth flowed into her blood, calming her and restoring courage.

The soulless wizard emerged from another wordless exchange and announced that to guard against the failings of weak-minded cowardice, no other human would ever again be part of their company.

Sister Clarise pressed her lips together in weary disapproval. *Company? They are Dementors. They only take, fool. They never give. Their allegiance is only for themselves. But you belong to them, now, don't you?*

Training her ears on his next words, she heard one phrase very clearly. It made her heart leap and race: the wizard had mentioned the Llygad y Ddraig. And he had it in his possession.

"Are you coming down to the muster point now?" Filius asked, turning to follow Oriens who had calmly stated his intention to give Petrus moral support though he had expressed his doubts that Headmistress McGonagall could be dissuaded from her ministrations.

Toby saluted the Auror who flew from the cathedral at a leisurely pace, Rabastan Lestranger's wrapped corpse floating eerily behind him. He consulted his watch and shook his head. "Not yet. There's another 'alf 'our before we're all s'posed to be there. If y' don't mind, I reckon I'll stay up 'ere for a bit." He stared in the direction the dragon had taken. "Sev'rus..."

"Certainly. I understand," Filius said perceptively. Leaving Tobias and Tocky to pensive vigil, he hurried away to see if the Unspeakable really could save his stone friend from being thoroughly Minerva'd .

For some while, Toby stared into the darkness, breaking his reverie only to accept his cloak from Tocky. Together, they watched and waited...

A light clatter of hooves made them jump to face the new danger.

Tocky swiftly put his hands behind his back to hide a glowing shield while Toby eased an arrow off his bowstring and slipped it back into his quiver. Both recognized the red-haired wizard astride the winged, horse-like creature the surviving Weasley twin. "George Weasley?" Toby offered as an introduction, noting that the wizard was lacking one ear.

George nodded and slid down from the creature's back. He looked Toby over with the air of one whose mind was on the verge of being somewhere else. "You'd be Tobias the Archer. They talked about you at the Order meeting. Nice shot, by the way. The half-soul with the knife would have slit Auror Gallius' throat."

Toby shrugged. His attention was drawn to the strangely morbid creature which was now nibbling George's cloak. "Can I ask... ?" Toby wasn't certain how he should phrase his question. He had heard that some magical creatures understood human speech perfectly well. He didn't want to cause insult by asking "what" the creature might be, when "who" would be more appropriate and safer.

"You can see her? Of course you can. You've seen death. And I didn't bother with a Disillusionment Charm." George gave a small smile. "Her name is Styx. She's a Thestral. She came to me just after Fred's funeral," he added distantly. "Did you know about... about my brother?"

Toby nodded. There were no words he could offer that could bring any sort of comfort. Styx approached him cautiously, nostrils questing and ears pricked. Toby slowly extended one hand and let the Thestral make the next move. For a moment, Styx's warm breath puffed into his open palm, then she relaxed and nudged him confidently.

"At the funeral, she'd been pulling the..." George's face twisted with unvoiced pain. "When Hagrid took her out of harness, she came straight to me. I know she looks... well... forbidding... But she became my best friend. She's quiet and dignified when everybody else wants to cry and fuss and hug. Respectful, you know?"

Toby nodded, running his hand along the Thestral's bony, glossy shoulder while she nuzzled at his sleeve. "Sometimes, y' need to find yer own way of managin' 'ard times. What works for some won't work for others."

George leaned on the balustrade and looked out across the city. "I wanted to go away... anywhere... to be alone. I couldn't cry. Couldn't speak. Couldn't think. Styx seemed to know... She didn't expect me to *do* anything. And she stayed with me..." He looked to one side as though expecting to see someone then his blue eyes glazed with heart wrenching despair.

"You okay, mate?" Toby asked as the Thestral stretched her neck and pressed her head against George's shoulder.

George turned to rub Styx's cheek while she anointed his hair with slobber. "I owed Hagrid to let him know what she was doing. He owed back, saying that to bond with a Thestral was a rare privilege and to remember to cast a Disillusionment Charm on her should she be about during the day. He said he wasn't about to tell Styx where to place her loyalty... or her love." He combed the Thestral's long, black mane with his fingers. "Whenever... it gets really bad... and I think I can't breathe anymore... when things couldn't get any blacker... She keeps my heart beating, this one."

"Good to know. So you're not about to do yerself in, then?"

George shook his head. "No, not me. Fred would give me what-for on the other side of the Veil." His next words sparked with resurrected mischief: "And *that's* a question, that is, coming from a bloke who was hanging over a lethal drop with no flight capacity at all dodging hexes and picking off assassins! Blimey!"

Toby sighed. "Tocky 'ad the magic sorted. In a way, I wish I could've done more."

A slow grin crept over George's face. His eyes were suddenly bright and lively. "If you want to do more, come with me!"

"What?"

Tocky wrung his hands. "Tocky isn't certain..."

"Styx can carry both of us. She's strong and she's fast. They weren't going to let *me* wrangle Dementors either. Worried that I'd give it all up, I guess. But I won't." He gripped Tobias' arm. "Come with me! You too, Tocky!"

Tocky folded his arms disapprovingly. "Tocky *always* goes with Master Tobias," he fired back with an unusual amount of truculence. "In case something is needing to be done."

"You should've seen it, Ginny," Ron proclaimed to anyone within earshot. He gave Harry a Quidditch-strength slap on the back. "*His* supervisor just had to stand there, and Lestrange was off like a robber's dog but the best bit was when Senior Auror McPhee changed those star knives into *butterflies*!"

Ginny exchanged a conspiratorial smile with Harry. "If I was her, I'd have turned them into spiders lots and lots of big, hairy spiders with one goal in life... To find Ron Weasley and run across his chest just before he goes to sleep."

"You're charming, you are," Ron grumbled with an involuntary shudder.

The enthusiastic, milling chatter of assembled wizards and witches faltered under the imposition of a rising shriek:

"Arthur *Weasley*! What do you mean you *haven't seen him*?"

Ginny hissed through her teeth and shook her head. "I've had a gut feeling for ages that something like this would happen."

Ron winced as his mother wailed in acute distress. "Something like what?"

"Like George deciding to cut loose." Squaring her shoulders, she marched towards the sounds of maternal displeasure.

Ron glanced at Harry and shrugged. He blinked after his sister. "Where are you going?"

Ginny returned a resolute eye roll. "To save Dad. Coming, gentlemen?"

Of all the reckless things he had ever done in his life, this had to be the chart topper. So said the more responsible side of Toby's nature. The less responsible side seemed to be revelling in some sort of second adolescence.

The charm George had placed over Styx's back was actually quite comfortable both cushioning and supportive and Toby had been grateful for it during the eyeball-bursting acceleration the Thestral had performed as she took flight. Determined not to grab hold of George out of sheer fright, it had taken him a few minutes to adjust to the breathtaking speed of the creature, during which he had maintained a firm grip on the surprisingly solid steed with his legs. After what felt like an hour into the flight, he was thankful that, as an experienced horseman, he could stay in the saddle for the best part of a day and not suffer for it afterwards. He looked around, wondering why Tocky had chosen to travel while invisible, but he knew that the house-elf would appear the instant he was needed.

Styx snorted and tossed her head, yawning slightly as though startled by something. Toby instinctively made his body move with the Thestral's, much as he would while letting a cutting horse work a lively calf.

"All right, Tobias?" George called out, patting Styx's neck and asking her what the matter was.

"Yeah. Is she okay?"

"Something gave her a little scare, but she's calm now."

Thinking that he would rather know *what* could give a Thestral a scare, Toby hesitantly looked behind them. The first thing he saw was a pair of incandescent purple eyes staring back at him. The second thing was the outline of the eyes' owner mapped in splintered starlight on dark, shiny scales. It was long, lean as a race horse, and winged.

"Um... George? There's a dragon be'ind us."

"Well, two's company, I suppose."

"Two?"

"I wasn't going to say anything, but there's one in front of us, as well. A Romanian Longhorn I can see the glitter of its horns. My brother Charlie got burned by one of those."

Toby suddenly longed for a drink of water. "Nice." He whispered a question through his teeth, "Tocky? What d'you reckon about all this?" He felt the house-elf's hand at his shoulder, as though Tocky were standing on Styx's bony rump.

"Tocky is reckoning that the dragons is not attacking us, Master Tobias. Tocky is asking dragons... Dragons is saying they is not here to eat."

"They can *talk*?" Toby exclaimed, forgetting to keep his voice down.

"Who can talk?" George asked, turning around. His eyes widened as he looked past Toby. "You didn't say it was a Hebridean Black!"

"Sorry, mate. When I were lad, I collected *Know-Yer-Dragon* cards out of Rington's Tea packets, and I must've missed that one. Knew I should've joined a bloody swap meet and got the whole set."

"Yes, you should have. Rington's Tea, eh? Dad has one of their tins in the shed."

The Dementors sensed it first. Pressing close together, they pointed westward. The soulless wizard turned and looked, then drew his wand.

Sister Clarise felt the shift in the air. The heavy cold stirred and trembled, growing colder by the second and beyond it, a mighty thunder roared in tones of fire and light.

The Bell, The Spear, and The Book – Part Three

Chapter 29 of 32

The Dementors stage a rebellion. Kingsley is amazed at how many have answered a call for help. Sister Clarise takes a dangerous risk, and Hermione's inner warrior roars with dragons. Arawn finds out that some things are just too hot to handle. Severus gets quite a shock, but destiny's duty calls... Toby learns of some sobering history.

A/N:

Ahov An informal greeting (Ukrainian)

Kozak I have used this Old East Slavic variant of "Cossack" to differentiate between Wizarding and Muggle populations.

Russian (GoogleTranslate)

Babushka Grandmother

Da Yes

Ushanka A thick fur cap with ear flaps

Ved'ma Witch

Volshebnik Wizard

Canon characters are the property of J.K. Rowling. I make no money from them.

A big box of thanks to TeaOli for beta reading and keeping my use of colons within reasonable bounds.

I had this chapter drafted before the geopolitical tension between Ukraine and Russia hit flashpoint. I held off posting for a while, hoping that things might improve. Tragically, they didn't. Thoughts and prayers for those caught in the conflict.

Hermione felt Severus' arms tighten around her waist.

"*That* will be the Dover infestation," he murmured distantly, distaste clipping his tone.

Following his narrow-eyed stare, Hermione could see a murky pall of Dementors being driven eastwards, travelling parallel to the red dragon's bearing and moving at about twice the speed. As Hermione watched, lances of fire pierced and slashed the cold shadow while the melodic roars of Welsh Greens meshed together in a timeless, polytonal chorus. "It sounds like they're singing," she mused aloud. "I know Welsh people have the gift for singing Professor Flitwick says they're always the mainstay of the choir but I wouldn't have thought the Welsh dragons had it too."

"Perhaps the gift is inherent to the magic hidden in the bones of the landscape," Severus proposed. "If you live on the land and from it part of it becomes part of you, regardless of what species you happen to be." He shook himself out of the diversion into the esoteric and back into more familiar territory. "You'd have to give the magic back, though, through the process of death and decay."

Hermione was about to comment on the use of song in applied magic when a second flight of Welsh Greens appeared, driving another writhing dark knot before them. "The Dementors ousted from Calais," she said.

The red dragon hissed and snorted a shower of sparks.

A single Welsh Green flew towards them, but its attention was on the old Ukrainian Ironbelly as it gave a gentle, fluting call and rolled to one side in its flight, exposing its chest and belly before returning to its conspecifics.

Hermione relaxed, having pressed back against Severus in alarm at the speed of the Welsh Green's approach. "I wonder what all that was about."

"Respect," Severus answered. "The exchange was very quick and succinct, but I gather that the gist of it is respect for one's elders. Our dragon is quite venerable it would seem even for dragons of other lands."

*We do not need it!*A Dementor turned to face its companions, rebellion cast in every movement.

The wizard is still useful, another argued. *It has power. It knows the ways of our prey.*

*Does it know the magic of the First Fire?*the first asked, gesturing to the approaching menace.

It did not know when we were burned by the inedible ones a third put in, twisting awkwardly in agony. *We had to withdraw... hungry.*

A fourth Dementor drifted between them. *It was not with us then it is with us now. We will not retreat again.* It turned to face the commotion to the west.

This is not surety! The first Dementor seemed to swell in anger. *Here are more of our brethren... Hear them call their pain!*It surged towards the fourth Dementor and seized it by the front of its shroud. *We will not retreat again?* It gestured to the approaching swarm as rotting cloth frayed in its clawed grasp. *What, then, is this?*

Returning Dementors began to swoop past them, mind-linked warnings coming as a keening shriek. *Deep Magic! It rose up from the living core. It spoke through metal and air. It told us we shall not feed. It banished us. It tore and pierced us. Light guardians chased us. It follows! It follows in the First Fire!*

The Dementors stirred erratically as the word passed among them, spreading from mind to mind like a ripple through still water. Simultaneously, their attention was seized by a rolling roar. The next communication flitted through them as one realisation: *Those... they breathe the spawn of First Fire!*

Still intent on rebellion, the first Dementor seized its moment and took command. *We shall not retreat! Take the blue crystal. Feed and grow strong on its power. Smother the souls of the Fire breathers with our numbers. Spread through this living world and use the humans as our sense slaves, just as the wizard taught us. Starve what remains. When life yields to us, the Deep Magic born of the First Fire shall fail.*

What of the wizard?

Eat what remains of its soul

"Minister, I thought you should know..." Charlie Weasley's dragonfly Patronus performed a sideways leap mid-hover. "The entire Sanctuary is empty it wasn't our fault and I'm not kidding when I say that a wild Ukrainian Ironbelly did it! But gods, it was a really big one! You know how big the Gringotts dragon was supposed to be? *That* big! It flew in just below the clouds it roared, we felt some scarily powerful magic, the containment wards dropped, and our dragons began to move as though they'd been given

orders. Even Norberta went with them every single breed followed the wild Ironbelly."

The foot-long dragonfly landed upside down on a stair rail and wiped its eyes with silvery forelegs. Charlie's tone carried wistful contrition. "I know it sounds weird, but I think Norberta wanted me to fly with her... I really wish I'd had the bottle to try it... That flight was the most beautiful thing I've ever seen."

"I wonder if Charlie was down there," Hermione speculated through a mischievous grin, now reasonably sure that the somewhat noisy, multi-species array of dragons was not about to attack them.

Severus settled himself smugly. "I hope so. Few things are as gratifying as a discomfited Weasley." He was mindful to call himself back from what could be a perilous path. When the red dragon had told him to use "both powers" meaning his own and Merlin's to release the Sanctuary's dragons as she called them to war with an ear-throbbing roar, he had enjoyed the thrill of what felt like unlimited power a little too much. His spartan standards of self-discipline, toughened with the lessons of brutal experience, sounded a warning: *I didn't survive the scourge of Dark Magic for nothing* he reminded himself. *True vigilance also recognises the potential danger within* A sharp prod in the chest brought him back to the relative buoyancy of the present moment.

"I wish you'd stop it," Hermione scolded. "Really, what has any Weasley ever done to you that couldn't be dismissed as a transient petty annoyance?"

Severus shrugged, smirked and directed her to the sight of a Chinese Fireball spitting volleys of mushroom-shaped flames as it soared and danced in lissom, coiling flight.

Kingsley Shacklebolt steadied himself as he emerged from the Portkey's turbulent embrace, then stepped away as more wizards and witches arrived at the broad, frosty plain that stretched before high, ancient walls of battle-scarred stone. Order members, Aurors, Unspeakables, War veterans anyone who could cast a Patronus had answered his request for help without hesitation. Travelling through a number of strategically positioned Portkeys, they steadily filled the space with lively chatter which carried the accents of Norway, Northern Spain, and every land in between. Waving to Victor Krum, Kingsley would have felt proud if he had not also tasted humility as the crowd looked to him with ready bravery and unswerving loyalty. He would have happily credited every stalwart member of his staff if time were not so demanding.

From groaning gates bristling with ragged defences, the few inhabitants of what had once been the finest school of witchcraft in Baltic Europe ran forward to greet everyone with boisterous enthusiasm. It had been nearly a lifetime since Castel Dacia had echoed with the noise of so many people, and the worn, oft-repaired stones of its structures seemed to shake off dogged, hard-bitten suspicion to allow the visitors to touch the magic of their making.

Spotting a wolf Patronus, Kingsley excused himself from the press of hands and voices to receive its message in private. The silver wolf loped towards him, nimbly dodging an ethereal Shetland pony and unconcernedly leaping over one of Minerva's indignant cats.

"Please to give password," the wolf growled in the Unspeakable Valentin's voice.

"*Babushka*," Kingsley responded, allowing his formal, Ministerial accents to explore a robust, earthy pronunciation.

The wolf sat down and briefly raised a front paw. "Aurors and Unspeakables from Rossiya, Ukraina, Belarus, and Polska are assembled outside of Kiev. From Gulf of Riga to Adriatic Sea to shores of Black Sea, *volshbnik* and *ved'ma*, they have come. Following your plan, we will make attack from east of Pripjat while you and your company make attack from west." The wolf fleetingly flattened its ears and licked its nose, conveying uncertainty. "I hope you know already, Minister... Many dragons also fly to Pripjat. Is good? Is bad? I do not know. Our Chinese ambassador says it is very good fortune... but we have never seen this before. At least they do not attack us word spreads that *Dementors* are these dragons' quarry."

"Me and Fred never had *that* much trouble from him, really," George reflected with bittersweet nostalgia. "We did the old twin switcheroo to try and rattle his cage, but he evaded the snare... You see, he'd just say, 'Mr Weasley,' in that *I'm-Potions-master-here-forget-it-at-your-peril* tone and either look right between us or not look at us at all." George shrugged. "Many times, we tried to fool him by swapping our names on our essays, but he *always* returned the right essay to its true author. Even scarier, he could tell which one of us had brewed what potion!"

"Strewth," Toby muttered, impressed.

"We gave up trying to get under his skin after we had an... an unanticipated and rather wrinkly incident with an Ageing Potion."

"Used that to make a point or two, did 'e?"

"You know him better than you think you do, Tobias. Gods, he was like a walking Cruciatus Curse but he never said a word about what happened. You know that way he has of looking at you that makes you feel like you're wearing a dunce's cap, and then you've spontaneously grown a pair of donkey's ears to hold it in place?"

"I know it well," Toby affirmed, raising an eyebrow when George sat up straighter as though looking at something intently.

"We got it. And some. But I could only grow one donkey's ear now. Merlin, that'd look even sillier!" George pointed briefly. "Up ahead," he hissed over his shoulder.

Toby peered into the darkness, catching a dull, flaring glow and a winged silhouette that, even at a distance, was enormous. "D'y reckon that's the one we saw in Paris?"

George turned side on. "I'd say so... I wanted Styx to follow it, so she did."

"She followed it without directions... 'cause y *wanted* 'er to?" Toby asked sceptically.

George nodded, his slight smile only just visible. "I can't explain how; it's a Thestral thing. Anyway, Ukrainian Ironbellys aren't the fastest dragons around, and as I said, Styx is swift on the wing. The Ironbelly will have been using the stiff tailwind we picked up somewhere over Germany which added to its head start but that Romanian Longhorn has been giving us a ride in its slipstream, so we managed to catch up." He leaned down and patted the Thestral's neck. "Hold this position, Styx."

"I 'ope Sev'rus and 'Ermione are still in one piece," Toby said under his breath.

The Hebridean Black that had been silently following them suddenly appeared alongside, then glided away, its wings only beginning to move once it was well clear of Styx's air space.

"Master Tobias is not to worry," Tocky whispered, still invisible. "The black dragon is been going to help."

Valentin had expected a swift reply from Minister Shacklebolt, so the silver lynx did not surprise him when it arrived within minutes of him sending his wolf. Nor was he surprised by the lynx's grave expression or the verbal affirmation that it gave. Immediately he sent word to his commander, then mounted his broom and flew over what looked like a small nation of magical folk to an upland plateau where a heartening number of Kozaks stood alongside their snorting, stamping Granians.

"*Ahov*, Valya!" one of them shouted, shouldering his way between wizards and winged horses to make himself easily seen.

Valentin grinned. He couldn't have missed the Kozak leader whose gaudy, shimmering attire would have put the proudest peacock to silent shame. "*Ahov*, Bohdan!" he called back over rollicking banter and restless neighing. Landing, he braced himself for a rough embrace and mentally prepared his stomach for the dose of even rougher vodka that would follow.

Wizards and an occasional wild-haired witch crowded around him expectantly: a solid, good-humoured wall of *ushankas*, fur-lined cloaks, lavishly embroidered tunics, and snow-stained boots. A dragon soared overhead, its fire complementing the misty glow of torches.

"Another Ironbelly a young one," Bohdan commented, pressing a generously filled shot glass into Valentin's hands. "Khoryv has been watching many dragons fly over... They have not given us one single glance, but they make our Granians nervous. They go to Pripyat."

Valentin nodded. "Da, I have heard. They are after Dementors."

Bohdan scowled, his moustaches flexing impressively. "You are sure of this, Valya?"

"As sure as I can be. I trust my sources." Valentin tracked the young Ironbelly for a moment, then gestured towards the Granians. "Too nervous to go into battle?" he asked. "Information suggests that Pripyat's ghost skies will soon vanish behind dragons' wings." He looked Bohdan in the eyes. "We advance *now*."

Bohdan bristled proudly, the blood of generations of knightly warriors bringing hearty colour to his face. He raised his own shot glass as he addressed his fellow Kozaks in barrel-chested tones, "Dragons or no, our Granians have courage beyond their nerves if they didn't, we could fill them with a share of our own and have *plenty* left over! You! Kozaks! We fight!" With a bawdy salute, he drained his glass.

Valentin saluted the Kozaks and swallowed the burning liquor, for a moment unsure if it was the fuming alcohol that brought water to his eyes and punched the breath out of his lungs, or if it was the tumultuous whooping of the Kozaks as they vaulted astride their Granians' backs and urged the rearing, prancing steeds into the air.

From the lower ground, several thousand wand lights glittered in the darkness, preceding a massed shout of invocations, war cries, and cheers.

Valentin raised his wand, adding his own voice to the dinning chorus. His heart clenched with fear and awe when a passing Romanian Longhorn joined in with a muscular roar and a vivid jet of fire.

Severus scanned the horizon, searching for any sign of their destination. Through the increasingly oppressive, obfuscating darkness, dragon fire flickered sporadically red and gold lightning amid ragged, lurking clouds. But the cold was beyond intense. Even their dragon seemed to be labouring in the burdensome air. "We must be close now..." He turned his head at a half-perceived movement. "Hebridean Black," he whispered, momentarily staring the dragon in its glowing amethyst eyes. He felt Hermione shift and gasp softly. "Such a fierce form, but such grace," she murmured. "Just like you, Severus."

"Silly witch," he growled while squeezing her lightly. The lean, athletic dragon swooped in front of them, cutting through the frigid resistance with strong, rhythmic wing strokes. The sudden increase in the Ironbelly's speed gave a sense of the inexorable. "I love you. Don't forget that."

Hermione's hands grasped his tightly. "I won't forget." She felt the blood drain from her cheeks as she raised her eyes. Reaching upwards in wordless supplication, the mournful shapes of abandoned buildings slid reluctantly into sight the empty, silent husks that had once formed a city Pripyat.

"Remember," Kingsley directed through a Sonorous Charm, "use your Patronus for distance attacks, keep the infrasound method for close combat should you need to and you probably will." He paused to scan the closely packed crowd before him, seeing nods of affirmation and the steely glint of resolve. Evidently, Severus' precise instructions on how to deploy a non-Patronus defensive move against Dementors had been enthusiastically practised. "By now, you all know about the dragons, yes?"

A buzzing murmur answered him. In it, he detected fear, but no weakening of purpose. By now, most knew of what had occurred in Dover and Calais or were in the process of being told.

He spread his arms in an urgent gesture of appeal. "Tonight, we are not their prey. And we are not their antagonists. No-one *no-one* is to attack any dragon in any way. Are we agreed?"

The cheers of assent momentarily took his breath away.

"They would follow you into a dragon's jaws, Minister."

Kingsley clasped Gawain's shoulder, thankful for the unyielding solidity that he felt there. "I thought that only Albus could have rallied such a response..."

"You've done better than Albus," Gawain said with solemn gravity. "You have a true gift for diplomacy with a human touch."

Kingsley shook his head. "Honesty and simple courtesy goes a long way. But even if I'd had old Albus' style, I'd have achieved very little without Severus' expertise in applied planning."

"Dumbledore's right-hand man," Gawain said resignedly. "Is he yours now?" He sighed at Kingsley's sharp glance. "I thought he was supposed to be here with us. I must confess I'm in two minds about him, still. Alastor never trusted him."

"There was an unavoidable change of plan involving a very large dragon. Severus will be in Pripyat before us." Kingsley frowned at a memory. "Alastor didn't trust *anyone* Merlin, he barely trusted himself! Gawain, you were there at the Wizengamot... You heard what Albus' portrait said about Severus' loyalties and you heard Harry Potter's testimony."

"Suspicion, once fostered, is hard to erase," Gawain said. "Replacing it with trust is even harder."

Kingsley gave the signal for the move to the western side of Pripyat: three streams of white light issued from his wand. "When I offered Severus his position in the Ministry, I also offered him my trust and respect and said that I knew he was the best person to lead our new Department. Before he signed the contract, he told me that he regards it as a duty of personal honour to make amends for what was done and witnessed during his time in Voldemort's service. I believe him absolutely." He silently dared Gawain to challenge his statement while knowing that he could never disclose Severus' kinship with Merlin or that the former Death Eater carried Merlin's power with him. "I don't regard Severus as my right-hand man any more than he does. I'd say he's thoroughly sick of being treated like an appendage."

Gawain held up his hands in surrender, a wry smile crossing his features. "I'll work on it, Minister; by my wand, I will. But if Severus isn't at your right hand, who is? Perhaps that raven of yours?"

Kingsley's eyes held a gleam of subdued mirth. "Well, why not? Jamin gave Madam Skeeter quite a scare just as she was becoming unbearable. Best laugh I'd had in ages."

How do I find you? Severus thought, having attempted to coax information out of the Llygad y Ddraig with no result at all. For the moment, it seemed that he was on his own. He swore under his breath when the building murk shifted, revealing the heart stopping sight of the shimmering rift that hung in the sky with the pallid luminescence of rotting flesh, liquid and poisonous. He could see the Dementors massed before it and streaming through from the void beyond. He ran his tongue over the familiar, irregular angles of his front teeth as he considered the converging options available to him and made a decision.

"Stay with her, Hermione," he said, leaping clear of the dragon's back. "We'll find each other again!" He hovered as the Ironbelly's length passed beneath him, Hermione's cry of dismay sharp and faint in his ears. *Look after her, please*, he silently beseeched the dragon.

The red dragon's voice glided through his mind: *Yreng-uârth ngaurr, Sévérûs.*

As *one of my own*, Severus repeated to himself. Checking the charms he had set in place to mask the Llygad y Ddraig's power, he drew courage from the Ironbelly's words and flew down to the city without the faintest idea of what to do next.

Hermione choked back her fear and a paralysing sense of loss. *He's doing what he has to do* she reminded herself. *But I didn't think he'd have to do it like this. Oh, gods... What's that?*

A formless shadow reared up from the centre of Pripyat, spanning the city's footprint, building upon itself and climbing to the clouds. Like an ocean wave storming to a steep shore break, it crested and wavered, ready to crash down and deliver ruin to anything it touched. Hermione's throat constricted around a scream. It was not a shadow. It was an uncountable number of Dementors.

Arawn felt the Dementors massing behind him, their minds pressing into his with thought-freezing force. He turned to face them as their numbers curled and swarmed, surrounding him completely.

We hunger for the Llygad y Ddraig. It is no longer yours.

A Dementor extended its skeletal hand, fingers flexing with anticipation.

"Never," Arawn snarled, furious and avaricious. "It belongs to me!" But his hand moved against his will, reaching into his robes and drawing out the coveted object. For a moment, he could see the crystal disc as the Dementors did – a source of power, pulsing with vital energy. Hunger gnawed in the pit of his stomach as he looked upon it – a living thing to be devoured...

"No!"

The shout of a woman's voice rang in Arawn's ears, a sound distorted into shrill echoes by the Dementors' invasion of his senses. The Dementors surged forward, then recoiled, their wrath hissing in his blood. He was half aware of her – a woman swathed in robes of black wool. Partially hidden by a hood, her features were thin and pale. Arawn stumbled backwards, momentarily blinded. The woman held something in her right hand that burned with a vengeful light. Jewels blazed with magic both ancient and fearsome, flashing with a fury that was not of the world upon which he stood.

The Dementors slid away from her, skulking into shadow. Their hold on his mind fell away, taking with it the dazzling display. *A spearhead?*

"It is not *yours!*" Sister Clarise charged the obviously disoriented wizard, dropping her shoulder into his chest with a much force as she could gather. In one swift, desperate move, she snatched the Llygad y Ddraig and flicked the chain over his head as he fell to the ground.

She glanced skyward... and stood stunned with horror. *Oh, Powers that be, help us!* Wherever she looked, the sky was seething with Dementors – they hung over Pripyat like the weight of an impending avalanche. A Ukrainian Ironbelly flew right towards them – looking as small as a garden lizard against the heaving bulk of doom – banked at the last bare second, then spat a twisting column of fire straight into the Dementors' midst and gave a roar that sent echoes bounding between the empty buildings.

Too late, she heard the wizard scream, "*Crucio!*" The world shattered in flashes of searing pain. The spearhead fell from her grasp, landing point down between two loose paving stones.

Dementors circled her as the torrent of agony ceased, leaving her body cringing helplessly with ripping spasms and dry retching. The wizard strode towards her, his empty eyes fixed on the Llygad y Ddraig which lay just beyond her reach, his features twisted like a tortured demon's.

In the sky space between two buildings, she saw a wizard coming – flying without a broom. Black robes. Black hair. A silver peregrine falcon erupted from his wand as he ploughed through the Dementors, hurling them left and right by some means she could not see.

A peregrine... The falcon of a prince... He's the one...

The falcon tore into the Dementors that surrounded her, a hurricane of vicious talons, hooked beak, and blinding speed.

Arawn recognised the peregrine. *Snake!*

The dragon's fire tore into the Dementors, charring their shrouds and forcing them back in defiant retreat. The Hebridean Black that had flown with the old dragon soared higher with a skirling shriek. The Dementors rallied to close their ranks.

Hermione gritted her teeth, bracing her aching legs against crushing g-forces as the Ironbelly swerved away from the Dementors with a roar that made her yelp and cover her ears. Far higher than the clouds, the sky rumbled ominously. Thinking quickly, she pulled a handkerchief out of her pocket and transfigured it into a pair of ear muffs.

She stared, open mouthed, as the voices of answering dragons grew to a constant, growling thunder which vibrated in her bones and made her insides squirm. In one colossal blast, pulsing jets and dazzling columns of fire rained down on the Dementors from above. Shielding her eyes, Hermione saw dragon after dragon diving, attacking, and veering away to make room for the next.

The Sanctuary's Chinese Fireball hurtled past, protuberant eyes reflecting inferno and Dementors, golden facial spikes bristling with wrath. A mushroom-shaped flame spouted from each nostril, leaving behind a trail of shimmering sparks that exploded in every colour of the spectrum. *I didn't know they could do fireworks!* Hermione thought. She spotted a band of perhaps a hundred Dementors leave their comrades and stream after the Fireball like a noxious tentacle. *They're going to try to bring the dragon down!*

"*Expecto Patronum!*" Her merlin streaked towards the Dementors. Hermione punched the air when its bold attack threw a good number of them into the path of the Ironbelly's fire. "Hah! Get roasted, you disgusting things!"

The old dragon turned her scarred head to examine her passenger and hissed enquiringly. Hermione candidly looked the dragon in the eye. "Well, I couldn't just sit here, could I?"

Severus didn't bother with a smooth landing – he cannoned straight into Arawn, snarling as he heard the breath explode out of the renegade Unspeakable's body. With a twisting move he had learned as a streetwise boy, Severus seized Arawn in a headlock and positioned him to take the impact of both their weights as they slammed into the ground.

Above the darkness of the Dementors, the sky thundered, then flared with an unearthly, faceted, flaming light. To the east and west, a sudden riot of human voices and the arcing silver glow of Patronus forms announced the arrival of allies.

Severus tightened his choke hold as Arawn struggled and thrashed with feral, inhuman strength. Before he could magically immobilise him, Arawn's hand lashed out...

With a strangled scream, the person Severus' Patronus had defended was thrown high into the air – and left to fall.

A *witch!* There was no choice. Severus could not let the witch he had seen by strangely well-timed coincidence holding the spearhead fall to her death. "*Arresto Momentum!*" His magic caught her a few inches above the ground.

A Repulsion Hex threw Severus clear of Arawn. Then he couldn't breathe.

Three half-souls in the company of a masked Death Eater and a swarm of Dementors quickly surrounded him. On the Death Eater's command, delivered in Russian, one half-soul turned away and levelled a Kalashnikov rifle at the witch's head, threatening to kick her as she tried to sit up.

Arawn snatched up the Llygad y Ddraig. He levitated the spearhead, assessing its worth. *The Dementors are afraid of its magic. It will be useful.* He ignored the protests of the cringing witch.

A rough shout. "Tocky! Get 'elp!" At the same time, someone else yelled, '*Stupefy!*' The force of the spell hurled the Russian Death Eater headfirst against a wall. He folded limply to the shattered pavement, leaving a bloody trail. The half-soul with the rifle swung around, searching for a hidden target. He staggered, a short burst of gunfire going wild. Dropping the rifle, he grasped an arrow lodged in his upper chest. Turning, he tried to run, then fell with a second arrow through the base of his skull.

Through his tunnelling vision, Severus saw someone charge past while pointing a wand at him.

"*Anapneo!*"

He gulped cold air as though it were a gift from the gods. *George Weasley?*

As the second half-soul fled, the third hefted the Kalashnikov and took aim at George. Appearing from nowhere, Styx seized the man by the neck and killed him with a single violent shake of her head.

Sister Clarise tried to throw herself between the cold-eyed wizard and the spearhead, but barely managed to get to her knees. "It is not for you to touch!" she cried desperately, unsure if Nimue's protective charms were still strong after so many centuries.

Severus heard her and Arawn's answering expletives but he couldn't see where they were through the passing dives of the Dementors and their trailing shrouds. *They're about to feed!* Coughing, he wordlessly cast his Patronus to hold them off a little longer. He knew that since Fred's death, George, while able to use the infrasound method of defence, had been unable to summon his soul's guardian.

"On yer feet, lad! D'y' think it's a bloody tea break?"

Severus blinked in astonishment as his father grasped his arm and yanked him upright. "There's too many," he gasped, feeling the cold, dulling pressure of the Dementors' intentions.

Tobias' eyes held the gritty glint of one who held an all-pervading despair at bay through sheer stubbornness. "Yeah. I can *feel* 'em. But I 'ope we're both wrong."

Arawn reached out and grasped the spearhead in his right hand, holding it and the Llygad y Ddraig aloft with a yell of triumph.

A silver boar slashed through the Dementors, a battering ram of temper and tusks. Working with Severus' peregrine, it tossed them in every direction as it charged, spun with lowered head and charged again.

Through the scattering Dementors, Severus saw Arawn staring at him with a menacing grin... which faded to a grimace of pure agony.

"God's Teeth...", Toby whispered hoarsely, sighting Arawn down an arrow, even though his hands trembled at what he saw.

Moving to stand beside Tobias, George looked on with mute horror, grasping Styx's mane like a lifeline as he raised his wand.

"Drop it, Arawn!" Severus bellowed. "By the gods, drop it!" He raised his wand, but knew that there was nothing he could do. Vivid images of the incurable curse that had weakened Albus' last days flashed through his mind in sneering taunts.

The renegade Unspeakable's right hand smoked and blistered, flesh peeling from tendon and bone in crackling ribbons. "It's mine, Snape! It's mine!" he shrieked, insanity lighting his eyes as he watched the burning travel up his arm. "You'll never take it..." He took a few steps towards Severus, the spearhead clutched in his blackened finger bones like a dagger as though he meant to stab his adversary to the heart. "You're like all of them... a coward... afraid of *real* power..."

Severus sleeved his wand and locked eyes with Arawn. "George, Tobias, there's no need for defence. He's not going to make it."

Arawn stumbled as his legs began to fail. "You've lost, Snape...", he hissed. His soulless eyes clouded and bubbled, and then he fell face down on the broken stones of the dead city. The spearhead jolted free and landed, clean and bright, at Severus' feet.

A dark-haired Auror mounted on an Aethonan pounded towards them, casting another boar Patronus as he came. The winged horse reared, rising several feet into the air as its rider dismounted in a flying leap with wand drawn. Severus recognised him at once, having consulted with him many times in the Ministry a young wizard with a nobleman's bearing and one shoulder noticeably higher than the other. The Auror halted in disappointed disgust when he caught sight of Arawn's body, which was rapidly crumbling into ashes. "Oh, bollocks," he grumbled in a pleasant West Midlands accent. "We were supposed to take him alive."

"I know, Ricardus," Severus stated baldly. "It seems that the end of the matter was not ours to decide."

"He was already done for," a thin voice put in. "The Dementors had eaten most of him."

With a look of quizzical surprise, Ricardus quickly moved to assist the witch who had spoken. Her posture suggested that she was close to fainting.

Severus stealthily summoned the false Llygad y Ddraig. He cast a Cleansing Charm over it to remove a film of soot and ash, warded it, then handed it to Tobias. "Look after this," he murmured.

"Noooo... *Sev'rus!* Not *again*. Strike me *bloody purple!*"

"That can be arranged. Fear not, it won't be so long or so perilous, this time," Severus hissed. He eyed the spearhead warily. "Now, let's find out who our friend over there..." His jaw dropped as he looked at the woman who had thrown back her hood and was approaching him, leaning heavily on Ricardus.

"Bloody hell," George muttered, looking from Severus to the woman and back again. "Tobias?" He transfigured a house brick into a chair. "Mate, you look a bit green I think you should sit for a bit." He waved to Tocky, who had appeared at a street entrance.

"More peoples is coming," Tocky announced. "Tocky is found them...Master Tobias?"

Severus stared into the witch's black eyes, too stunned to think.

"He was not the one to wield the Spear of the Stronghold," she said weakly. "He signed his death warrant as soon as he touched it."

"Nimuë's magic?" Severus asked, even though he already knew. His words fell heavy and dull.

Surprise flickered across the witch's pale features before she nodded. "She was told to ensure that no person could find... the Spear... except that they were fit to do so. Nimuë added an extra layer of protection in case it should ever be claimed by one with evil intentions. *He* was such a one. But you are not. Severus, take it. It was meant to come to your hand."

Still staring, Severus nodded dumbly.

"I assume that this will all become classified information?" Ricardus asked, cocking an eyebrow at the spearhead. He transfigured a paving tile into a stretcher, levitated it and helped the witch lie down.

The Auror's perceptive sensibility hauled Severus out of borderline shock. "Indeed. Will you ensure that the need for secrecy is understood in my absence?"

Ricardus nodded. "Aye, Severus, I will."

With great trepidation, Severus summoned the spearhead. He held his breath for a moment as its weight settled in his hand. Magic tingled through his fingers. It felt warm, but not hot. As he looked around, unscathed, even Styx seemed to sigh with relief.

With her eyes on a knot of Dementors that had dodged a Hungarian Horntail's fire, Hermione cast her Patronus again and simultaneously used her left hand to blast another Dementor with infrasound when it tried to dive at her from above. It vaguely occurred to her that she was fearlessly riding the dragon without holding on. *I can be proud of that later.* She felt the dragon's right wing dip. Gripping with her legs, she pressed her heels into iron-hard scales and tried not to squeal through a steep, corkscrewing descent. *Evasive move...*

The Ironbelly flared her wings and lashed her tail. Her body swung almost vertical as she spat fire at any Dementor that had dared to follow.

Hermione could see wizards mounted on Granians, holding their wide-eyed steeds on steady courses while dragons flew over their heads. Those who saw her cheered with enthusiastic abandon, waving and standing on their Granians' backs to bow to her, then dropping astride again to launch their next Patronus attack. A few cheeky wizards even blew her a kiss.

As the Ironbelly flew higher again, Hermione realised what the dragons were doing. She had seen a similar strategy on a nature documentary in which a pod of humpback whales dived deep under a shoal of herring and began to circle their way back up. As they circled, they blew streams of bubbles to corral their next meal. *Bubble netting! Except the dragons do it with fire... They start from high above and circle... towards the rift. Blessed Merlin! It's working!*

On the ground, from the west and the east, rivers of corporeal and non-corporeal Patronus forms met and merged to form a rising sea of molten silver, forcing every Dementor in Pripjat up and into the fiery net. The dragons worked furiously, driving the soul eaters back to the rift. *Gold above, silver below. Severus, where are you? As the two colours met and mingled, the Dementors were forced to begin a straggling retreat into the void.*

Severus had only just flown clear of the drab, concrete buildings when he heard a distinctive, melodious whistle. *Surely not*, he thought. *Then again, sure enough!* "Where have you been, you necessary nuisance?"

Fawkes circled, singing urgently, and flicked his long tail feathers into Severus' free hand.

Hermione wiped sweat out of her eyes and discarded her ear muffs. The Dementors were now pressing close to the rift, which meant that the dragons themselves were also closer together. The undulating heat of their fire soaked into Hermione's body, and her muscles throbbed from the effort of riding the mighty being in combat flight. A dolphin Patronus soared over her and plunged into the dazzling melee which held a clot of dense black, shroud-streaming cold at its centre.

Her heart leapt when she heard Fawkes' song and her spirit sang when Severus let go of the phoenix's tail and resumed his seat behind her.

"I must say, you look particularly bewitching when you fight from dragonback," he purred, holding his arms out to the sides to submit to a brief, slightly damp hug. "I'd reciprocate, but my hands are full," he said.

"You found the person!" Hermione exclaimed, eyeing the spearhead with instinctive wariness. She glanced at Severus' left hand. "Fawkes gave you a feather..." She touched his face. "You've been in a fight..."

"And I'm still here," Severus replied, his tone heavy with meaning. There was simply no time to explain. His Sight or perhaps Merlin's had outlined the final steps he needed to take with ruthless clarity. With a deep sense of reverence, he placed Fawkes' feather quill first into the spearhead's bindings, and transfigured it into a long shaft of orange-red wood.

Fawkes flew around and between the dragons, singing of mighty deeds from ages long past. The great beings listened and comprehended.

The red dragon roared with all her voice. She slewed around and aligned herself with the deadly rift.

In one precisely coordinated movement, the dragons redoubled and focussed their efforts, producing an immense ball of white-hot fire. The Dementors fled before it, clawing at each other as they passed back into the realm from which they had come.

The red dragon's wings moved in deep, powerful strokes. She pinned back her ears and flew straight towards the churning conflagration.

"The Sword has gone home through the waters, the Grail has gone home through the empyrean..." Severus stood up, one hand on Hermione's shoulder to steady himself. He raised the Spear of the Stronghold, and its magic blazed in glorious splendour.

The dragons pulled away, their fire subsided, and Severus stared through the rift and into the bowels of the lifeless void beyond. The red dragon released a great jet of flame. "And the Spear shall go home through the fire!" Severus drew the Spear back and hurled it through the streaming flames and into the maw of cold destruction, crying aloud the sacred words that Theravāda, scholar of Angkor Wat, had lifted from obscurity and passed on to him.

The dragon swerved as a vast bubble of venomous hatred burst through the rift. Clawing with dead, boneless hands, it groped around the dragon, dragging, freezing, trying to draw them into an eternal tomb. Severus wrapped his arms around Hermione, seeking to warm her with his mortal heat. "Occlude, Hermione! With everything you have!"

The dragon's flight faltered, her wings labouring as she was brought to a near standstill.

Three Hungarian Horntails streaked overhead, strafing the rift with purifying fire.

Two Romanian Longhorns swooped under the old dragon, lifting her on the bow wave of their wings.

Hermione felt the cold pressure trying to break through her chest, pressing on her mind, seeking her soul. Then, with a dreadful screech, it withdrew.

The red dragon screamed as she left the rift behind, its ragged edges spitting and writhing. A bright light flared within the gap. A deafening howl of thwarted hunger raged and gibbered, overwhelming...

A thunderous *boom* threatened to split Heaven and Earth, followed by a shockwave of stunning power.

The air juddered as the rift's edges crashed together. Fire leapt along its length, glowing white, yellow, orange, and red... then fading into an unscarred night.

"No!" Hermione felt her wizard slipping from the dragon's back, his arms limp at her waist. Frantically, she tried to grab his robes, but her hands were numb and feeble. Darkness muddled through her vision. The words of a Sticking Charm tumbled through her lips as she wrapped Severus' arms around her and fixed his cold hands around the dorsal spine in front of her. Consciousness left her as she fell back against him...

Sister Clarise tried to resist waking up. She was warm and comfortable, the effects of the Cruciatus Curse an unpleasant memory. She could hear someone whispering. *A house-elf?* Memory invaded resistance. *Severus!* The name washed through her in waves of disbelief. She had thought that he was long since lost to the Dark and most likely dead. And there was someone else she had thought she had recognised. She opened her eyes.

She focussed on white painted walls, then on a house-elf wearing an old pillowcase and a tattered scarf. Her eyes travelled to examine the person the house-elf was addressing. Scuffed work boots... heavy cotton trousers *is that armour from the goblin wars?* and a Prussian blue cloak. She gasped at how familiar his features still were. *So I wasn't hallucinating...* His hair, once dark brown, was now iron-grey and longer than she'd ever seen him wear it. At a prompt from the house-elf, he looked at her. His grey eyes still held a northerner's steel, but the sharp edges of mill town life were gone, replaced with a rough, ready, confident pragmatism. Her senses drifted, floundering he seemed quite at ease with the house-elf. *Toby?*

She watched as he stirred himself and paced the floor, shaking his head as he muttered, "Bloody woman!"

The house-elf trotted beside him, hesitantly waving to her at each turn, then pulling his ears as though he wasn't certain if he had done something wrong.

After several minutes, Toby spoke: "God's Teeth, Eileen *I know* you're Eileen 'cause I 'ad someone check that you're not a... golem... or somethin' else."

"I'm..." *I'm Sister Clarise. No, no longer.* "I left everything behind," Eileen said, pushing herself up to rest against a pile of pillows, trying to determine what had happened and where she was.

Toby folded his arms and glared at her with a mixture of annoyance, curiosity, and concern. From the leather arm-guard covering his left forearm, an engraved red dragon peered at her with its head tilted to one side. "Y' don't say."

"The Llygad y Ddraig... what happened to it?"

"T' real one? Yeah, we know of t' copy. Sev'rus 'as it, now t' orig'nal. I gave it back to 'im. 'E's not with the Dark anymore."

Eileen absorbed this information with heart-rending relief. "I'm sorry..."

Toby sighed and sat on a wooden chair. "Sev'rus is the one y' should apologise to, not me." He rested his elbows on his knees and examined his work-hardened hands. "Y' know, that golem turned out to be good med'cine. I 'aven't touched a drop since that night. Got the chance to start over. And maybe set a few things right with Sev'rus."

He scowled and searched for something in his pockets. "We're in St Mungo's, by t' way. You blacked out after Sev'rus took t' Spear. An Auror Ricardus got you out of Ukraine. Oriens, an Unspeakable, brought us 'ere. They said yer magic is very weak, and there's no lastin' damage from t' curse... but you're well underweight."

He knows Aurors and Unspeakables by name? "Where is Severus?" Eileen asked cautiously.

"Dunno. They Sev'rus and 'Ermione 'aven't been seen since them dragons made what looked like a second sun over Pripjat. That were late last night. It's six in t' mornin' now." Toby cast a critical eye over Eileen's apparel. "If y' really are some sort of nun, maybe y' could say a prayer or two for 'em. If that's yer thing, nowadays."

"Toby..."

Toby cut her off with a gesture. "I said I'd let 'em know when y' woke up so they can take another look at you," he said, opening the door. He hesitated on the way out. "Should I come back?"

Noting the house-elf's sorrowful expression, Eileen nodded.

"Master Tobias?"

Exchanging a nod with the duty Healer who had just finished assessing Eileen, Toby stopped in the antiseptic corridor with his hand on the doorknob. "Tocky?"

The house-elf squirmed shyly. "Tocky is been wondering if Master Tobias and... and..." Tocky glanced pleadingly at his master, his fidgeting fingers tearing a small hole in his pillowcase.

"Stone t' bloody...There's no gettin' 'round this, is there?" Toby gave an exasperated sigh as he entered Eileen's private room, then quickly retrieved his quiver from the house-elf's grasp. "No, y' don't, lad. I'm not 'avin' y' wander 'round lookin' like an echidna. You've not done anythin' wrong." He gestured to Eileen, who looked much better after a bowl of porridge and was sitting properly upright looking ready to talk. "Tocky, Eileen. Eileen, Tocky."

Tocky bowed. "Mistress Eileen, Tocky is being delighted to serve with Master Tobias' permissions."

Eileen couldn't help raising her eyebrows. *Master Tobias?* "Hello, Tocky," she said as gently as she could. "It's a pleasure to meet a house-elf again... It's been so many years."

Toby rolled his eyes. "Right. Now what was Tocky wonderin'?" he asked gruffly.

"Tocky is been thinking perhaps Master Tobias and Mistress Eileen is wanting pots of tea?" The house-elf prompted hopefully.

When the ward clock chimed the first hour of the afternoon, the Healers arrived to make sure Eileen ate and rested. Leaving Tocky to keep an eye on things, Toby retreated to a small roof garden to consider what Eileen had told him. He morosely shook his head.

Her own family had tried to push her into an arranged marriage with an unspecified member of the Carrow family. He grimaced, remembering the leering look on Amycus Carrow's face as he threatened Hermione in the villa. For a fleeting moment, Toby was glad he'd knocked the bastard off. It was harder to comprehend that the then Prince patriarch had threatened to kill Eileen if she brought dishonour to the family name by refusing the marriage.

Eileen had unequivocally turned the arrangement down.

Her brother, Drusus Prince, sounded like a decent bloke no, a good man. Toby was pleased that Drusus had enjoyed meeting baby Severus, even though Severus would have been too young to remember the occasion. In a wandering moment, he wished he could have been there too, to share the pride he had felt in his sooty-haired, obsidian-eyed son...

Toby scanned the skyline. *Where are you, Sev'rus? Stop dickin' around an' send someone a message..*

The threat of death had been real. To save his sister's life, Drusus had created a golem to stand in for her in an "accidental" drowning. Then he had helped her escape Wales, knowing that any future contact between them would be brief and sporadic.

Eileen had chosen Manchester as a refuge because of its size she could hide among the Muggle population without attracting attention and its industry, where she hoped she could find enough work to survive on her own. Keeping her use of magic to a bare minimum, it had been much, much harder than she had anticipated. Many nights, she had gone to bed hungry, her hands raw with blisters and her heart crying for a family she could never return to. When Toby had enticed her out with the promise of a full stomach, she had never considered the possibility of falling in love with him... that event had caught her completely by surprise.

Toby grinned just a little. An embryonic Severus had also caught her by surprise.

Her brother's death had effectively torn the world out from under her feet. The unwelcome responsibility of safeguarding the Llygad y Ddraig had hung over her like a sentence of lifelong damnation. As she told of her last encounter with Drusus, Toby had sensed that she was hiding some extra information, and he was pretty sure he could pinpoint what it was. As far as he dared to *think* he knew, reputedly powerful witches didn't just lose their magic.

Eileen hadn't mentioned the closure of the mill or Toby's drinking. She had simply said that after a visit from two of Voldemort's most trusted Death Eaters, her wand had been stolen, and life had become a steadily worsening progression of problems and burdens during which every visage of hope had turned its back on her and walked away. "I gave up," she had said, her thin hands clasped around a cup of tea. "Everything inside me just stopped and would go no further. I had nothing left... not even for Severus. Don't think, don't feel, don't exist... that was my daily creed."

"And I weren't man enow to 'elp," Toby had muttered, resisting an urge to brush a lock of silver-streaked hair out of Eileen's eyes. "I made everthin' worse for both of you."

"You helped in Pripyat," she had replied quietly. "You helped Severus, too. And not for the first time... I see a ruined villa, a young woman bound... a young woman whom Severus loves. Hermione, is that her name? Then I see her tormentors felled with arrows. My magic is weak, but the Sight has stayed with me."

Toby shuddered. With her Sight, Eileen had known that Voldemort's Death Eaters were coming to execute them both as a test for Severus' loyalty. She had taken the true Llygad y Ddraig from him while he was "indisposed", tapped into its power, and summoned her golem from the tomb that bore her name. Being made with nine drops of her blood, it had followed the scent of its blood bond and journeyed, by night, to Spinner's End. She had patched up its damages with a Glamour and hidden the thing in *his* tool shed under a Disillusionment Charm.

And it had been wandering around in the master bedroom, making that floorboard creak while he had been barely sane with the terror of seeing such a thing in the making. After he had fled for his life, Eileen had hidden in the attic, concealing herself in a tiny alcove behind a false wall and hoping that the Death Eaters would be thrown off the trail by a pair of golems. They were. They hadn't even bothered to check the "corpses" for signs of humanity, so great was their disdain.

Toby kicked at a discarded chestnut shell. "So... there's two golems... one of 'er and one of me... and that's what's in our... in those graves." He shivered and glanced up at the sky. It had the look of evening snow.

"There's somethin' I don't get..." Toby said guilelessly as Tocky contentedly arranged the makings of afternoon tea. "Sev'rus reckons you 'ad some serious power. 'E said yer school records show you were somethin' special. So why did y' need to tap into Merlin's power to... to call yer golem and... I s'pose... and make one of me?"

Eileen started, then stared at him. "How do you know? How did you find out it was Merlin's?" she demanded, colour flushing her cheeks. "*What* do you know?"

"Calm down! It's not as though I could use t' bloody thing. When I found the Llygad y' Ddraig, I found somethin' else."

Eileen eyed him warily. "Oh... Did you?"

Delving into his memory, Toby recited, word for word, what had been written on the scrap of Graphorn hide he had retrieved from the fire grate. Then, taking his time, he described the wending pathways, fortuitous crossroads, and tangled mysteries that had lead to the confirmation that Myrddin Emrys was also Merlinus Ambrosius, that Severus was Merlin's heir, and that the Llygad y Ddraig the *real* one was the repository for Merlin's power and memories. He finished with a return to the Graphorn hide which had once been part of *The Book of Nimuë*.

Eileen closed her eyes. A tear traced its way down her cheek. "You know most of it... And you kept what you held safe." Her eyes were bright when she looked at him again. "After Merlin gave his son Prince Lepidus Merlinus his blessing, Nimuë herself entrusted the Llygad y Ddraig to him. After Merlin's true death, she wrote her book and gave that to Lepidus as well. Those two treasures became part of our family's heritage. They were meant to complement each other. The Book was intended to further magical knowledge in the wider world, but the Llygad had to be kept, and consulted, in secrecy.

"It was said of the Llygad y Ddraig that only one of Merlin's blood could learn its secrets and be able to wield its power. This was why we grew afraid of it when a faction of our family turned to the Dark Arts and began to quest for it. It is knowledge and it is power: forces of terrible destruction if used for the wrong reasons. For generations, we kept the Llygad hidden and concealed anything else that may have lead the Dark to us, and to it.

"When Drusus' guardianship was discovered, he asked me to make a copy of the Llygad y Ddraig so he could..." Eileen shook her head and wiped her eyes. "I knew it had to be convincing... it had to contain the promise of great power. The copy contains most of *my* power, Toby, with some illusions of amplification to make it seem far greater than it is."

Toby nodded his understanding, a little surprised that his suspicions had been correct and sorely tempted to reveal that her power was at that very moment nestled against his chest. *Sev'rus warded it... She can't sense it*

"On the night I created your golem, I found that I was able to access Merlin's power, even though I wasn't touching the Llygad. Physical proximity seemed to be the opening: you were within arm's reach of me the whole time, but the *flow* of power was enabled by the bond I shared with you. Otherwise, I would have used an Imperius Curse for more than just forcing you to watch."

Toby bit his lip, not knowing whether he fully understood what she had said or what to say in reply.

Eileen nibbled on a gingernut biscuit. "*The Book of Nimuë*... In the beginning, Lepidus established a protocol for consulting it which effectively screened out anyone with an affiliation to the Dark Arts. In the treacherous times after King Arthur's death, he treated the pages detailing Merlin's appearance and family connections with a combination charm to hide them and to make anyone who consulted the Book believe that there was nothing more to it than what they could see. For many generations, his charms were renewed each year and held their purpose.

"Sadly, there came a time when it was simply too dangerous to keep the Book intact. We could not risk having our kinship with Merlin widely exposed. By then, the family legends surrounding the Llygad had grown into dangerous fantasy, the truth forgotten in nightmares of bloodshed. Centuries ago, the hidden pages were excised from the Book and held with the Llygad y Ddraig in secret by those of our family who kept to the Light. The rest of the Book was placed in the Very Old Bodleian Library under a Secure Loans system. Until a scholar Johann Whicher discovered that parts of it were missing and correctly deduced that the omissions detailed Merlin's familial connections. Quite innocently, he made that discovery public knowledge.

"We persuaded the Ministry to place an embargo on the Book, arguing that Merlin's treatises on Druidic magic and Deep Earth Geomancy could too easily be harnessed for Dark purposes. By the early fourteen hundreds, and after several attempted thefts, even that became perilous. By then, Nimuë's name had become synonymous with treachery.

"We hid *The Book of Nimuë* in a Muggle priory in Abergavenny, where a watcher had been stationed to give warning should the Dark begin to assert its influence."

"So *you* 'ad the missin' pages from Nimuë's book." Toby stated.

Eileen nodded. "Drusus gave them to me when I went into hiding. With the Dark extending its reach and slowly closing in, it was too risky for him to keep them. When I thought all was lost... that last day I saw my brother alive... I hid the Llygad and burned the pages. I still had enough of my own power left to generate a small amount of Fiendfyre. I let it grow no bigger than a caterpillar, but it consumed the pages voraciously. Controlling it drained me so much... In my fatigue, I hadn't noticed that a single scrap remained."

For some minutes, silence paced the distance between them.

She studied Toby's hands. "What's that you're holding?"

Toby held his brass wedding ring in his thumb and forefinger. "I were never right for you, I know that...", he said, melancholy softening his tone. "You're wizardin' royalty... You knew full bloody well y' were descended from Merlin." His breathing quickened. "I thought you were dead. I thought the vows I '*adn't* managed to scupper 'ad died with you."

Eileen quickly deduced which particular vows he referred to. "If you've made a life with someone else, it's not your fault..."

"There's nothin' with anyone," Toby growled. "Once in a while, yeah, but never anythin' serious. I were too busy lookin' out for wizards who might want to pinch the Llygad y Ddraig." He stood up. "I better go. You're lookin' tired again."

Eileen fingered the brass cross which hung on a chain around her neck. "Will you come again after supper?"

"If y' like."

Receiving a small smile and a nod as an answer, Toby went out into the corridor, a studiously silent Tocky close behind him. He spotted Oriens talking to the duty Healers. "Any news?" he asked when he had come close enough not to have to raise his voice.

"Nothing," Oriens answered. "I've tried sending a Patronus every few hours, but there's been no reply. Mind you, Severus and presumably Hermione, as they say she was with him would've had to draw on a lot of their power to hold off the energy release when the rift closed. It could be that they're simply too drained to respond at the moment."

A Place in the World – Part One

Chapter 30 of 32

A Hebridean Black makes a useful and timely appearance. Toby enlists the help of a half-Kneazle. Bane gives a few words of advice, and a game of marbles heralds some new possibilities. Severus' encounter with Hagrid's new "dog" provides a moment of inspiration. Toby is anxious to do a bit of explaining, and Severus considers the value of forgiveness.

A/N:

Crux ala cross-shaped, composite bones articulating with the acromial extremities of the furcula [fused collar bones] in quadrupedal dragons. The structural divisions of the *crux ala* form the sockets for the ball joints of the wings (dorsolateral *crux ala*) and forelegs (ventrolateral *crux ala*). Source: Dandy, Beau G.B., and Fopsfeldt, Brum L; 1801. *Comparative Anatomy of Dragons*. In *The Sixth Centennial Symposium of Magizoology*. Spiffingwot Press, Fallen-in-Thames, London, Pp. 230–596.

(Severus has this volume in his library. He graciously allowed me to consult it but it was Hermione who warned me that the species lithographs will bite unwary fingers!)

Pugsley Addams is the property of the cartoonist Charles Addams. I make no profit from his character.

Canon characters are the property of J.K. Rowling. I make no money from them.

French English (GoogleTranslate)

Bravement! Bravely done!

Mon Dieu My God.

Thank you, TeaOli, for the beta work on the first part of the last full chapter. I hope the e-tissues came in handy! Of course, I had a teensy fiddle with the text which means that mistakes are all mine.

Severus heard himself groan. His body moved awkwardly, full of cramps and aching muscles. *Hermione...*

Alarmed, he sat up quickly, wincing as a searing headache conjured brightly coloured dots and sent them skipping merrily around his field of view. "Hermione!"

His witch lay within arm's reach. To his relief, he could see her chest rise and fall with her breathing. Her dusty hair stirred limply in the breeze.

Breeze Severus blinked. The wind was fairly howling he could hear it beyond the...

Beyond the...

His eyes explored a pair of huge, clawed feet. The feet were attached to muscular legs held in a low crouch, and the legs supported a well-stocked belly covered in grey armoured scales. On each side, enormous rust-red wings draped to form a protective shelter around himself and Hermione. *Gods. We're honorary dragonets.* The observation made him giddy with laughter that he was too exhausted and numb to express.

Arkhre-ach nu, Sévérūs. The old Ironbelly stepped aside, still holding her wings out as a barrier against the wind.

"Salutations and respects to you, too," Severus rasped, thinking that he sounded worse than Albus with a sore throat and a hangover. He took a moment to scan himself for damage, finding that, apart from total fatigue and a raging thirst, he seemed to be unharmed. He pulled himself closer to Hermione and examined her intently. A mischievous smirk surfaced unbidden when, having detected no injuries, he noticed the singed, frizzing ends of her hair. A soul-deep sense of love rose from his heart and consumed him completely with a greatness that was blissfully frightening.

Leaning over her, he kissed her searchingly. "Wake for me, little lioness," he whispered.

Hermione moaned and rolled to one side. "Owww! Bugger and sod it all, I ache all over. I need a hot bath."

With extreme difficulty, Severus held his amusement in check. *No fairy tales with you, my dear. Thank Merlin, indeed. Many times.* "Here and now?"

Hermione rubbed her eyes. Sitting up, she took in her surroundings and the old dragon as though she thought she were dreaming. Her mind caught up with her senses, and she launched herself at Severus with a cry of relief knocking him flat. "The rift closed," she whispered, trembling and teary. "The Dementors went through... You threw the Spear... The rift closed and we're still alive!" She held her wizard tightly as he insistently manoeuvred her back into a sitting position. "Where are we? Gods, I thought you were going to fall off... I used a Sticking Charm on your hands. That's the last thing I remember. The last thing I *want* to remember," she added.

"As to where we are, I'm not certain," Severus answered. "And, obviously, I didn't fall off. I'll thank you thoroughly for your resourcefulness at a more appropriate time." He stood up and scanned what he could see of their surroundings in the remnants of a pale ochre sunset. They were in a shallow, bowl-shaped depression ringed with a carefully constructed rampart of boulders. Beyond the rampart, a broad shelf of basalt stretched to merge with a gently sloping mountain peak crusted with hard-packed snow. "I think this is what she meant by 'a well-built nest'."

The Ironbelly turned away from them and spat a jet of fire at the snow, producing a generous rivulet of water which flooded a natural channel worn smooth by eons of annual snow melt.

Severus and Hermione glanced at each other and gingerly climbed over the rampart, gasping as the freezing wind pressed against them, but thinking only of water's power to restore body and mind. Dropping to their knees, they scooped up liquid sustenance in cupped hands and drank eagerly. By the time they were satisfied, ice had begun to form on the channel's edges.

Hermione tucked her hands under her armpits to warm them. "We must have been pretty dehydrated. I wonder how long we've been up here."

Severus nodded, pleased to find that his headache was easing. He examined the white-capped mountains that stood as a stolid barrier all around the nest site. In the misty skies beyond, the sun sank in a blushing puddle of clouds. "I'd say our dragon brought us here last night, and we've slept through an entire day."

Hermione stood up, alarmed. "No one will know where we are!"

"Or if we're alive."

The Ironbelly gave a rumbling hiss, punctuated with brassy, fluting notes.

"Soul guardians have been visiting us, apparently," Severus said, listening intently. "A goat-like creature has come many times... Felines great and small... a horse... a bear... and a stag."

Hermione drew her wand, concentrated, then sat down again. "Pants! I think I need to rest a bit longer. I'm out of it for a while yet. How aggravating! I could manage an illumination, but that's about all. What about you?" she asked, even as Severus focussed his magic, then shook his head, his eyes drifting half-closed as though he were fighting the pull of sleep.

"I could summon my Patronus, but I couldn't send it... anywhere..." His words faded as he stared towards a towering pinnacle. "Look," he whispered, pointing.

From shadowed crags, a dark form sprang into the dusky sky. Amethyst eyes gleamed as a Hebridean Black approached at a leisurely glide. The black dragon landed at a wing's distance from them, then faced the old Ironbelly with a quiet hiss. Standing on hind legs, the Hebridean exposed stomach, chest, and throat, then dropped on all fours with folded wings and bowed head.

Hermione heard the Ironbelly's soft, indecipherable communication. "What did she say?" she asked.

"She said that he has been resting while waiting for us. He's here to take us home," Severus answered as the red dragon rumbled her approval.

The Hebridean sauntered to the edge of the basalt shelf, snuffed the air while turning his head left and right, stretched his wings, and yawned revealing impressive rows of saw-edged teeth.

"Now?" Hermione asked, looking steadily at the former Gringotts dragon. She wiped her eyes with her sleeve. "Does she have a name?"

"She does," Severus said, "but it's nothing that I could ever translate into English." He knitted his brows as he thought. "The song of high clouds in a mountain pass before the first frost of winter. That's the closest description I can think of."

"I think it's a beautiful name." Hermione approached the huge being, feeling smaller than she ever had in her life. The dragon's scars from long years of captivity gave a world's weight of poignancy to her mighty deeds of selfless courage. "Thank you... Thank you for everything you've done. I wish I had more words or better ones..." She looked the red dragon in her ruby eyes once more and could have sworn there was a touch of affection there.

Severus bowed to the Ironbelly, wordlessly placing his own gratitude at her feet. He clasped Hermione's hand. "Come away now. We shouldn't keep a dragon waiting."

Eileen emerged from a light doze, an image burning in her mind: A Hebridean Black gliding low over a landscape of snowbound forests with two human passengers. *Severus... and there's Hermione. They're alive!* She sat up, looking around for someone to tell.

Finding that she was alone, she carefully got to her feet and wrapped a knitted blanket around her shoulders. As her hand touched the doorknob, a faint prickling sensation ran up her fingers a Tell to alert the duty Healer. Undeterred, she opened the door and stepped out into a brightly lit corridor.

"Madam, you shouldn't be out of bed yet!"

Eileen turned around. The duty Healer was briskly striding towards her.

Toby appeared at the end of the corridor, minus his armour and holding something black and furry in one arm. "Goin' somewhere? Again."

Eileen hesitated, still completely thrown by the improbable likelihood that *he* would be the one to believe her when she gave her news. "The Sight showed me..." she began as he drew closer, certain that she would not sound credible. "Severus and Hermione are alive, and they're... they're riding a Hebridean Black." She leaned against the wall, feeling weak and queasy.

The Healer was at her side in an instant. "Oh dear, you can barely stand! Let me summon a stretcher."

"Thank God," Toby sighed, his shoulders slumping a little with relief. He recovered himself quickly. "I'll see to 'er, Audrey," he said, placing a small black half-Kneazle on the floor. "Would y' mind lettin' t' Minister know Sev'rus and 'Ermione are tearin' 'round somewhere on a dragon? That's *on* a dragon, not *in* one."

"You believe her?" the Healer asked with the sort of sympathetic scepticism that came from many years of experience in dealing with patients experiencing a wide range of disorientating maladies.

"She said t' Sight showed 'er... Yeah, I believe 'er." Toby easily lifted Eileen in his arms. "Crikey, woman, a budgie's 'eavier than you!"

Audrey surveyed them with her hands on her hips, a smile fighting with the corners of her mouth. "Very well, Tobias, but I'll be telling Minister Shackbolt that you're the one he should talk to if the information is incorrect!"

Toby nonchalantly shrugged off the threat of Ministerial ire.

Eileen hesitantly placed her arms around Toby's neck. "Shackbolt? That's the name I saw in a vision; it seems so long ago. I sent a raven to London with a warning," she said when the Healer had walked far enough away not to hear.

Toby nodded. "'E got it. And 'e's *still* got t' raven. And 'e'll want a chat with you, I reckon, once you've rested." He wondered if Severus would as well, but knew better than to voice any assumptions on what course of action his son might take. "Tocky, get t' door for us, lad me 'ands're full."

"I... I don't understand," Eileen stammered as Toby put her back to bed. The black half-Kneazle leapt up beside her and examined her with solemn citrine eyes. "This is so strange. *You* are so strange."

Toby couldn't help laughing. "Thanks a lot! Don't worry. I get yer drift. There's times I think the exact same thing." He paused to think for a moment. "Explainin' the whats an whys would take a fair while... I'll tell y' tomorrow, if curiosity's got you."

Eileen smiled faintly. "I'd like that... You'd be well within your rights never to speak to me again."

"You'd 'ave far more right not to speak to *me*," Toby pointed out, his words draped in shame.

Eileen swallowed and looked away. She wondered if she should tell him that she had forgiven him long ago and that it was for herself that the same beneficence would never come unless... *He was just a little boy. Severus should have been able to count on me.* She reached out to stroke the half-Kneazle's velvety head, her fingers lingering on the animal's green collar as she read a pewter disc bearing a name and a number. "Your name is Southpaw?" she asked as the half-Kneazle placed his left front paw on her wrist as though taking her pulse.

Toby leaned against the door jamb. "That one came from a litter of four, I were told. T' other three Northpaw, Eastpaw, and Westpaw they're P.T. staff as well. They wear them green collars and even 'ave their own staff room."

"Poddy is telling Tocky they is rescued from a Death Eaters' den, Mistress Eileen. They was in a cage near a cauldron of boiling Selkie fat," Tocky said, wringing his hands at the distressing thought of the four half-Kneazles' close call. "They was next."

Eileen settled comfortably as Southpaw began to purr. "But what are they doing in St Mungo's? And what's 'P.T.'?"

Toby grinned, gesturing Tocky out of the room. "They're registered 'Ealers. Twelve altogether, some 'alf-Kneazles, some quarter. It were Sev'rus' idea, originally. Poppy Madam Pomfrey backed 'im up for t' research proposal. It's all still in clin'cal trials, but it's got promise Purrin' Therapy. Trust me, it works. I know from experience."

"Experience?"

"Got sliced up with a nasty bit of curse-work it weren't Sev'rus' doin' and a spot of P.T. made all t' diff'rence." He raised a hand to forestall any more questions from the witch who stared at him from the midst of a sea of amazement. "Sleep well," he said, leaving her in Southpaw's care.

Seated in front of the Hebridean's *crux ala* which, combined with the saddle-shaped fifteenth neck vertebra, plenty of firm muscle, and an absence of spines, made a reasonably comfortable seat Severus looked back towards the high peaks of the Ukraine Carpathians, seeing the native dragons' fiery farewells flicker distantly against winter-marbled peaks and cliffs. In front of him, Hermione shifted her position slightly.

"I'm afraid your flying potion has worn off, Severus. I didn't think to bring a spare dose," she said, her voice sounding pale with a tincture of green.

"Look to the horizon what you can see of it," he murmured, holding her closer and tucking his cloak around her. "It might help."

She sighed and leaned into his warmth. "Who was the person... the one who had the Spear?" she asked after a moment.

"In need of a distraction, are you? It's a strange thing to speak of, Hermione, as I find it hard to believe and even harder to comprehend. But tell you, I shall..."

Stretching ahead into the night, u-shaped valleys wound placidly between the upthrust, brooding evidence of Earth's tectonic violence. The Hebridean chose his course through them without indecision, swivelling his ears back as he listened to the blood kin of Merlin's curious tale, but never making a sound to interrupt the narrative.

At length, he glided out of a long hanging valley and into what had once been the path of an immense glacier. The black dragon flew low, almost brushing snow from the tips of tall evergreens with his claws, then spat a trail of sparks as the ground plunged away in a frozen waterfall. He flew down into a gorge, where sheer walls barely contained the span of his wings. Far below, the glassy crackle of ice answered his wing strokes as though the spirit of a wild river stirred in her seasonal sleep.

The gorge opened abruptly. They left the mountains behind. A winter moon peered from behind scudding clouds. The wide plains of Poland stretched as far as the eye could see, majestically robed in mounded snow.

Kingsley's quill scratched methodically as he drafted an official Ministerial record that would be stored, in case of any need for future reference, in the *Response to Crisis* archives.

Gawain read aloud from his own notes. "In addition to the two fatalities, a total of fifteen Muggle half-souls we suspect they were very recent victims of the Dementors were captured, given rudimentary health checks, and signed over to the appropriate Muggle authorities."

"Muggle... authorities...", Kingsley repeated, adding several callouts leading to the names of Muggle liaison officers in the Ukrainian and Russian Ministries.

Gawain waited until Kingsley recharged his quill with ink. "There were far fewer Death Eaters than we anticipated. Three were captured, another four killed in a siege, and one unintentionally slain by George Weasley fatal head injuries post Stunning Spell." He rolled his pocket scroll to the next entry. "The prisoners were subjected to preliminary interviews without Veritaserum. They confirmed that their numbers, boosted with Muggle half-souls and a number of mountain trolls, had been great enough to launch a direct threat to established Wizarding and Muggle societies. When asked where these numerous renegades were, the prisoners said that they went to some place in Croatia, but never returned."

"I know about it," Kingsley said, his expression carefully neutral. "They'll not threaten anyone again."

Gawain nodded. If there was something he needed to know, the Minister would tell him in due course.

A kestrel Patronus soared into the office, landing gracefully beside the sleeping Jamîn. The raven gave a half-hearted, muffled, dozy *caw* from under one wing but made no attempt to rouse himself.

"Please excuse the interruption, Minister," the kestrel said. "It's Healer Audrey Windhover here from St Mungo's. The patient of interest, Sister Clarise also known as Eileen Snape *nee* Prince claims to have witnessed Severus Snape and Hermione Granger *alive* with her Second Sight. She says they are riding a dragon. A Hebridean Black. Present location and possible destination unknown. Tobias Snape asked me to let you know."

Kingsley placed his quill back in a silver stand and leaned back in his chair, scrubbing his eyes vigorously. "I sincerely hope she's right," he said as the kestrel faded, its duty done.

Gawain frowned. "I can't say I'm used to regarding someone's Sight as reliable information I keep hearing Sybill Trelawney blathering on about her blasted tea cups. But," he added, clasping his hands around one knee as he sat on the armrest of a wing-backed chair, "if they really are on a Hebridean, I'd put Galleons on them heading for Scotland so long as the beast doesn't get hungry. If Severus really does have a way, as you put it, with dragons, Hogwarts would be the logical destination."

Kingsley got up and paced the length of his office twice. "Then I suppose I'd better warn Minerva." *I should let Bane know as well,* he thought to himself. *It's been over a century since a wild Hebridean flew a sortie over the Forbidden Forest.*

Hermione felt Severus' insistent prodding and opened her eyes. "Gods, did I doze off ? Even after the news about your mother!"

Severus gave her a gentle squeeze. "You did. I would have left you to sleep, but it'd be a shame if you missed this."

"What?" Hermione looked around at sky and clouds. The air was cold and moist with the tang of salt and seaweed. "Where are we?"

"Above the northern shores of the Netherlands. We're about to leave land behind."

Hermione dared her queasy stomach to do its worst and leaned out to one side, secure with Severus' arms around her. Not as far below as she had assumed, estuaries branched and spread and branched again in dark veins, channelling through sandy beaches and mudflats, merging into the North Sea's inky expanse. To her left, the lights of a town shimmered warmly at the end of a curving bay, marking the start of an arc of offshore islands. "That's Den Helder!" Hermione exclaimed, remembering her Muggle school geography with delighted excitement.

"Where the resident Muggles have a naval base," Severus quickly put in.

"Hmph! And you call *me* a know-it-all. You're right, though. I wonder if dragons show up on radar? Perhaps we shouldn't be flying so low... And there's an airport servicing the naval facilities!"

Severus groaned. "I can see it now. Twenty feet of parchment detailing air traffic control procedures for dragons. Dare I ask for an appendix outlining the risks associated with naval helicopters?"

The Hebridean Black gave a droning growl and shook his head.

Gazing through the window she had designed when she had thought that Severus Snape was dead, Minerva huffed at the scurrying swirls of snowflakes which defiantly blocked her view and took an enlivening swig of Firewhisky. She turned at the sound of hooves on thick carpet. "Kingsley's lynx said he'd tell Bane as well. I take it he's done so?" she asked, absently offering the centaur her hip flask.

"He has, Headmistress," Firenze answered. He kneaded the muscles of his injured shoulder, stirring the scent of the pine, comfrey, and rosemary oils that had been applied as a healing ointment. "I think Bane is looking forward to it the entire herd would be avidly watching the skies if the skies were actually visible." He accepted the flask and sampled its contents, backing up with a swish of his tail and stamping a forefoot as his eyes watered profusely.

"*Och*, there now, that'll put you in good heart," Minerva said with a rosy chuckle. "I'm afraid I can't tell the weather what to do, but I can tell that it'll be filthy by dawn."

Firenze handed the flask back and folded his arms, glancing through the window as a buffeting gust made the castle shiver. "It can't bode well for the dragon stopping by, then," he observed.

"Oh, I don't know.... Finn MacFusty says that the crappier the weather, the better a Hebridean Black likes it."

Firenze politely ignored the headmistress' lapse into crude vernacular. "Really? Any reason why?"

Minerva shrugged, and then her eyes flashed with national pride. "Because they're Scottish!"

Hermione gritted her teeth as the dragon veered steeply above an oil rig, hissing scorn at the man-made flare. In the distance, the lights of a fully laden container ship lurched and rolled in clockwork shocks of white water. *Ugh! I'm glad my stomach is empty, and I'm not on board that..* She felt Severus' breath catch. "What is it?"

"Azkaban. I can feel it nearby." Shuddering, he pushed away stark impressions of bleak cells whose stones relentlessly dispensed cold punishment night and day, the calculating watchfulness of hardened felons, and the gnawing despair of those penitents who realised how much they had wronged themselves by wronging others. He sighed, wondering if Lucius would ever number among the latter. He doubted it.

"*Expecto Patronum!* Yes! My power nap over western Europe worked wonders!" Hermione wriggled happily as she sent her merlin to tell Kingsley that she and Severus were in a responsive state and quite close to home.

"Power nap? An interesting turn of phrase."

"Muggle expression, dearest wizard...Oooh! Scotland dead ahead! Complete with weather front!"

"Typical," Severus growled. A scattering of coastal sleet nipped his nose and cheeks, taunting his disapproval.

"At least it's a real, honest, natural front this time! Gods, I almost love it!"

The Hebridean pricked his ears at Hermione's heartfelt exclamation, then gave an exultant, skirling shriek as he picked up his pace. He dived low over the deep fjords and scowling cliffs of Scotland's coastline, shrieking again as the heaving breaths of the North Sea surged and boomed against the savage shore. He playfully skimmed the sweeping beam of a lonely lighthouse and turned inland.

"I think he likes it, too," Hermione said, blinking with the wet cold.

"Our hides are not as resilient as his, so shall we set aside empathy and put our energies into not freezing to death?" Severus proposed. "I'll shield us from natural honesty; you keep up a Warming Charm."

Petrus leapt from his plinth, ears pricked in excitement. The shriek which cried down the weather was surely stirring enough to rouse the heart of every warrior in Scotland. *A Care of Magical Creatures* text grumbled restlessly in response. Quieting the book with a touch, and being careful not to disturb the fine clay packing his wounds, Petrus took to his balcony. Searching the dark, snow-slashed sky, he clasped his hands together in jubilant delight. "*Mon Dieu! Bravement, bravement!*"

Circling the school's wards, a purple-eyed dragon spouted a plume of fire. In the bright, hot glow, Petrus saw two human figures seated in front of the dragon's wings and forelegs. He whispered a prayer of thanks when he heard *Monsieur* Severus' voice...

Minerva marched through Hogwarts' corridors like a clan chieftain at war, frightening the excited younger students back into the safety of their dormitories and barking orders at the older curfew escapees who dared to try their luck at escaping her notice. Even if Severus had trained the beast to eat from his hand, a dragon was a dragon, and she would not have any young lives put at risk.

Following in the headmistress' wake, Argus and Mrs Norris stalked and glared with great satisfaction, basking in the students' sulky mutterings of disappointment.

Arriving in the entrance hall, Minerva surveyed her chosen company: Filius, Pugsley, and Fergus, who waited with a mutton carcass brought up from the larder. "Petrus sent his owl to me with a message. Kingsley was correct we have a dragon about to pop in for a visit," she said crisply, wondering how three grown wizards in positions of great responsibility could manage to look like boys plotting mischief. "Petrus said that Severus, through a Sonorus Charm, informed him that the dragon would drop himself and Hermione off at the gates and to put the bloody kettle on."

A passing house-elf jumped to attention, bowed and departed with a snap of his fingers.

Minerva glared as the wizards exchanged a flurry of nudges, high-fives, grins, and winks. Ignoring the whispers of "Told you he'd make it, didn't I? That'll be five Galleons" and "It's not over until they're safe inside!" and "You didn't see him escape the dreaded Normandy Snarl-kelp gods damn, I'll raise you ten!", she signalled to Argus to open the doors and drew her miniaturised broom from under her plaid. "Shall we, professors? I've attended to the wards. And don't forget the mutton!"

The Hebridean landed before Hogwarts' gates with a great swirling of glittering snow, chuffing contented, steamy clouds as his hind feet sank into the clean, cold carpet. He eyed the reception committee of four wary humans and a respectful herd of unarmed centaurs and let his fire glow behind bared teeth. He knew there was no danger: *Sévéris gnaveâ Myrddin* had said so, but a show of defensive capability seemed appropriate given the proximity of a castle. Crouching on all fours to allow his weary passengers to disembark, his nostrils flared. There was something that smelled tantalisingly like a good, fat, Highland meadow-fed sheep perfectly aged at that.

Severus winced at the stiffness in his arms and shoulders as he helped Hermione to dismount. Shivering in the sudden absence of her Warming Charm, he let his hand linger on the dragon's rough-edged scales as he communicated his thanks and dropped into knee-deep snow.

"Severus Snape! By the gods, it's about *blessed* time you got here you'll give my Animagus form grey hair, you infinitely troublesome wizard!" Minerva scolded over the wind, closing in on him with watchful, snow-booted steps.

"Given its natural predominant colour, no one will ever notice," Severus commented silkily, eyeing the mutton with a raised eyebrow.

Giving him an irritated stare, Minerva gathered Hermione into a warm embrace before resolutely shoos her through the gates. She nodded to Fergus, who levitated the mutton carcass and dropped it within reach of the increasingly interested dragon. "We didn't have enough owl treats in the castle to thank your scaly friend there," she told Severus. "Besides, the owls would have been terribly put out and the breakfast drop would have taken on a whole new meaning." Her eyes suddenly brimmed. "Damn wind," she muttered. Dashing away the drops, she engulfed the unsuspecting wizard in a fierce hug.

Severus stiffened for a moment, then consciously relaxed as he soothingly patted Minerva's back. He shot a near glare at the dragon. *Stop laughing. You might be next.*

The dragon gave something between a snort and a hiss, then applied himself to the proffered mutton, effortlessly slicing through flesh and bone with precise, surprisingly fastidious applications of his fearsome teeth.

Severus momentarily forgot the cold when he extracted himself from Minerva's arms and turned to face the centaur herd. *All of them*, he thought, wiping snowflakes from his eyelashes. Clustered behind Esnyë, the females of Bane's herd watched the entire scene with quiet attentiveness. Severus pondered the sense of peace that surrounded the herd. *It's the peace that comes from balance the females have ceased their hiding, and Bane's herd is made truly whole. Considering Bane, here he is...*

Without any sign of concern about the dragon, the herd leader picked his way through the snow, hitching a little in his left hind leg. The injury responsible was all too evident a brutal gash received on the battlefield. Even though the wound was neatly stitched and daubed with heather honey and healing herbs, it would leave a lifelong scar. "Severus, the planets said you would be safe enough, but it gladdens our hearts to see you and Hermione your life-mate return," Bane said, bowing as his herd murmured agreement. He faced the dragon, who had paused in his meal to watch the exchange, and bowed again. "O companion of the deities of wind and fire, our herd welcomes you."

Severus raised his eyebrows at the dragon's formal reply and Bane's nod of acceptance. "You can hear and understand his speech?"

Bane took Severus aside. "I can. All centaurs can. So can mer-people, leprechauns, and house-elves. Many races of beings, as you call them, knew the speech before their peoples were scattered and their lands and histories overrun." He noted Severus' sober expression and continued in tones less stern. "Humans, goblins, some races of giants, and Veelas also understood it, once, before they chose to sunder themselves from Elemental Nature, seeking to control it rather than accept its omnipotence. In these lands, the human knowledge of dragons' speech held on until the demise of the Druids."

"Merlin learned it from *them*," Severus whispered as the Llygad supplied fleeting scenes of magic worked in secret places warded with hidden danger, lessons passed on by word of mouth in a single telling, histories woven into the smoke of sacred herbs while leaping firelight gave life to painted images of beasts and beings on rough cave walls.

Bane gave a knowing smile. "Severus, you have many lessons ahead of you accept their teachings and apply them wisely for the good of all; they are great and precious gifts. With those gifts, there is no reason that you cannot achieve just as much as your noble ancestor... and so much more. If you haven't done so already." He winced as he shook a deepening layer of snow off his back.

Severus found that he had no reply to the centaur's words. He let them sink in for a moment, then eyed Bane's wound. "A close call, evidently. It looks painful."

High-stepping through the snow, Ronan came to Bane's side. "He'll recover and live long! Did he tell you that Esnyë stitched the wound with a hair from her own tail?"

"From her own tail? Now that's love, that is," Minerva affirmed, coming up behind Severus. She winked at Ronan, enjoying Bane's embarrassment. "Come inside before you freeze," she said, taking Severus' arm. "We'll get you tea'd, fed, and rested, and then Kingsley says that your next mission should you choose to accept it waits in St Mungo's."

Minerva looked up at the dragon it had consumed the carcass and was stretching its wings in preparation for flight. She was struck by a sudden realisation: the word "beast" didn't do the proud creature any justice at all. She stood straight and looked the Hebridean squarely in the eyes. "Thank you for bringing them both home." She took a step back when the black dragon hissed softly, with overtones of pipes heard fitfully from a distant, misty isle. *Well... I'd almost think it answered me* she mused, touching the cameo at her throat.

Severus smiled to himself, giving Hermione a stealthy wink as he passed through the gates into a warm welcome of wizardly banter and goodwill, and mounted a spare broom handed to him by a grinning, Galleon-laden Pugsley. The Hebridean had told Minerva that she was as welcome as wild weather quite a compliment, really and that the mutton had been the tastiest he had ever eaten.

For what must have been the fiftieth time since the pre-dawn when, upon rising to see if Southpaw wished to go out, she had discovered Toby pacing the corridor Eileen frowned. She shook her head to clear it of swarms of ghosts, centaurs, beer-drinking colicky unicorns, phoenix feathers, ruined villas, cathedrals, red dragons in assorted sizes, Death Eaters, potentially fatal curses, Thestrals, Dementors, half-eaten Muggles, and Toby's astonishing description of Hogwarts' assistant librarian. His story had escorted her through the corridors and classrooms of Hogwarts, reinstating her fond memories of magical creatures and beings along the way. Like long lost friends, they warmed and cheered her, restoring pieces of herself that she had almost forgotten existed. That Toby and Severus had, in the midst of it all, managed to establish an understanding gladdened her heart beyond measure she was truly happy for both of them.

"So...", she began, folding her napkin. "The Defence Against the Dark Arts professor put the word out that you and the Charms professor are going to have a Gobstones contest? And the rest of the staff are placing bets on the outcome? And you're going along with it?" She pushed her empty breakfast bowl aside. "Are you *serious*?"

"Yeah. I reckon Fergus started it. 'E's given me a few lessons prob'ly to work the odds."

"Does it matter who started it? Toby..." Eileen raised her hands in exasperation. "Gobstones... A few lessons. You'll get absolutely creamed!"

"Gobbed, more like it... I'm thinkin' of callin' Snakepit..."

"Powers and prayers!"

Toby grinned. "That's good to see a bit of colour in yer cheeks."

Eileen stood up, pleased to find that her muscles didn't tremble at the effort. "Marbles," she said decisively, placing her hands on her hips.

"Y' what now?"

"Muggle marbles. They won't make such a mess while I get my eye and hand in again."

"What..."

"We ask Tocky to procure marbles, we set up a few practise games, I see what's left of my skills, and at the same time, I find out what you've got... Excuse me, I saw that look! Mind on the job, if you please."

Minerva had been right about the weather. Dawn, what was noticeable of its arrival, had been filthy. Mercifully, the last of a series of angry fronts had passed over quickly, leaving the clear, crystalline silence of stunned relief.

Severus steered his broom over snowdrifts as he sorted his thoughts. He would have preferred to walk, but having to constantly clear a path would have been too much of a distraction. He permitted himself a proper smile as he circled the new Quidditch pitch. Waking early with sleep-entwined limbs, he and Hermione had willingly succumbed to the ardent passions of lovers who knew the presence of Death and chose to celebrate life, pledging themselves to each other with body, mind, magic, and soul while the snowstorm had raged outside. Severus' body still felt warm and deeply relaxed from his own version of stunned relief. Being alive was proving most enjoyable.

After a hasty breakfast, Hermione had left to pay her parents a visit. Seeing her off with greetings and well-wishes to pass on, Severus had been surprised to find that he really wanted to see his father. His *mother*... He wasn't at all sure of how to commence any sort of interaction with her, but he was certain that Tobias would be of assistance.

Flying over Hagrid's hut, which had the usual early morning smoke issuing from the chimney, Severus pulled his broom into a hover. He could see where the snowdrifts by the door had been partially cleared but the work looked as though it had been interrupted. In the snow, there were signs of a scuffle. Drawing his wand, Severus descended to the height of the roof, evaluated the situation, then landed with practised stealth. Pressing his back against the wall, he listened intently.

"Owww! I've told y...No! Gerroff! *Sit*, will yeh!"

Severus relaxed again. The half-giant's tone was chiding, but affection for whatever creature had misbehaved coated the words like warm honey. Sleeving his wand, he proceeded towards the open door...

A monstrous, shaggy black dog with luminous red eyes appeared in the doorway. Exercising prudence, Severus stood still. *Half-giant's best friend, I presume?* On massive paws, the unkempt animal padded down the stairs and trotted towards him. The beast's footfalls made no sound at all. *Gods! A Barghest!*

Hagrid appeared with a rush. "Mornin' Perfess...Severus." His worried black eyes darted over the dog, then rested on Severus with something like an appeal for lenience. "I see yeh've met Petal."

Petal? "Hagrid... What have you done?" Severus stood his ground as Petal circled him once, then shoved a moist, bristly muzzle into the palm of his hand. When the dog raised her head, her jaws were about level with his liver should the oversized canine have a sudden impulse to rip it out.

"There now!" Shifting evasively, Hagrid gave a smile that was half delight and half relief. "Tha' went well. She likes yeh well enough..."

"What have you done?"

Hagrid rubbed his ear vigorously. "It weren' *my* doin'... Around the time the unicorns were gettin' attacked, word came tha' a Barghest had been lost from the res'vation down in Norfolk. I heard it from... well, ne'er mind tha'. So I were out walkin' along the Great Ouse one nigh'... after the Battle... after samplin' some good brown ales at the *Baronet's Bog*... an' she found me an' follered me home. So ter speak."

Severus yielded to another muzzly nudge and scratched the spot between Petal's shoulder blades. "A Barghest found *you* specifically? And *followed* you all the way to Scotland?"

Petal began to wag her tail. A chord of drool decorated her jaws like a viscous icicle. "If she were male, I'd've called her Drooles Verne," Hagrid grumbled, visibly squirming at the truth of Severus' implied deduction. "She does tha' when she's really happy." He studied Petal for a moment, then eyed Severus with great curiosity. "I didn' know yeh've got a way with creatures. Albus' portrait told me plenty, but he said nothin' 'bout..." Hagrid shuffled awkwardly. "Shouldn' have said tha'."

Severus dismissed Hagrid's unease with a casual shrug. *Albus doesn't know everything*, he thought, trailing his fingers down the Barghest's spine. "Should I speak to him again, I'll be sure to thank him for clarifying a situation that would have had me forever on your list of enemies."

Hagrid nodded soberly. He folded his arms and sighed. "It weren' fair, what he asked yeh to do. But war ain' fair on anyone, is it? I'd have done meself in first if he'd asked it of me. I'm righ' glad he didn'!" His curiosity returned, tempered with echoes of raw grief. "He sez he was fortunate, havin' had yeh close by they were his words an' he misses talkin' with yeh," he mumbled hastily.

Severus acknowledged Hagrid's concern for Albus with a half-smile. "All in good time." A pleasantly wicked plan took shape in his mind. "You chose the name 'Petal'?"

Hagrid looked at his feet and shrugged. "When I found her... or she found me... not righ'tly sure which... she'd been rollin' in summat that were none too nice, and she smelled like one o' them corpse flowers."

"*Titan arum.*"

Hagrid nodded. "Well, corpse flowers have petals. And I couldn't call her 'Corpse' that's a terrible name for such a fine animal."

"Fine animal, indeed," Severus agreed, scratching Petal's ribs until she groaned in ecstasy and helplessly tried to reach the same spot with a hind foot.

Hagrid's features brightened with pride. "She is! But it's a righ' shame yer dragon didn't decide to stay. Very misunderstood, they are."

Eileen efficiently knocked the last of Toby's marbles out of the inner circle, smiling a little at his soft whistle of admiration. Each had played seven marbles in a game of Ring Taw, the rules of which were nearly identical between their Muggle and Wizarding childhood memories. "Overall, not bad," Eileen appraised, sitting back on her heels for a moment before standing up. "We'll set up for Classic." From the bag of marbles Tocky had procured whose contents were now widely displayed across the bed she selected fifteen cat's eyes for herself and fifteen agates for Toby.

Tocky busied himself with smoothing the heavy sand he had smuggled into the hospital, erasing the circles drawn for Ring Taw and replacing them with a single wider ring.

Toby watched Eileen arrange her marbles in the centre. "Tournament array?"

"Of course."

"Competition 'abits die 'ard, then. So do Slyth'rin loyalties all them cat's eyes're green."

Surprised, Eileen looked at him and then examined the slightly larger taw she intended to shoot with. "So they are... I hadn't noticed! When I was at school I had a set of green ghosts Gobstones made of clear, green glass." She bit her lip for a moment, her eyes focussing on some unseen point of nostalgia. "I wonder if they're still around somewhere." She nodded to the array which still lacked her opponent's agates. "Best get your ducks in a row, Toby."

Severus stalked down the corridor, tempted to retreat into his Death Eater persona. The cheerful "Good morning, sir!" offered by the St Mungo's Admissions and Enquiries staff as he signed the visitors' register and the delighted smile of the morning duty healer who gave Eileen Snape's room number, had further unsettled him just when he was feeling deeply vulnerable. He knew that it was expected of St Mungo's staff to be pleasant and helpful, especially to decorated war heroes, and they couldn't possibly fathom how *he* was feeling not that he wanted them to but irritation insisted on gnawing at his vitals despite his best efforts at dismissing it. Holding back a quiet snarl, he locked eyes with those of a black half-Kneazle wearing a green collar. Somewhere in the dignified slow-blink he exchanged with the animal, he found that his irascibility evaporated like dew exposed to sunlight. He stood still. "How did you do that?"

The half-Kneazle washed his left front paw and curled the tip of his tail.

As Severus pondered the subtle power of Kneazle magic, a door opened half way down the corridor and Tocky peered out.

Storing his curiosity for another time, Severus allowed himself amusement at the house-elf's exaggerated care in exiting the room and closing the door without a sound then running towards him as fast as his ragged attire would allow.

"Master Severus!" Tocky whispered at full volume as he skidded to a stop on the polished floor. "Tocky is heard dragon-hide boots! Tocky is knowing Master Severus is arrived!" The house-elf hesitated for a moment, then threw his spindly arms around Severus' lower right leg. "Tocky is happy Master Severus is being safe!" He raised worried eyes. "Is Mistress Hermione also safe?"

"She is indeed, Tocky," Severus answered, thinking that never in his life had he been embraced so many times in twenty-four hours. "Hermione has gone to visit her parents to assure them of our well-being." He noted the house-elf's nervous glance at the recently traversed door. "Are they both in there?" he asked, knowing that Tocky would treat his apprehension with careful discretion.

"They is, Master Severus. Master Tobias and Mistress Eileen is playing marbles."

They're what?

"Mistress Eileen is winning and is teaching Master Tobias many lessons."

Good. I think. Severus recalled Bane's words from the night before. "I hope he applies those lessons wisely, but for now, would you see if Tobias is willing to forfeit and step out for a word?"

Tocky bowed. "At once, Master Severus!"

Severus was not kept waiting long at all. His father emerged from the room in a rush, pulled the door shut and briefly seized him in a rough, wiry hug which he spontaneously returned.

Toby stepped back and produced the false Llygad y Ddraig. "Y' need to know, Sev'rus."

Severus tilted his head, confused at the mercurial change of mood. "Agreeable to see you, too."

"This... The power you said y' could feel... It's yer mother's power. She put it in there to make t' ruse believable."

Severus felt his stomach clench as he went cold all over, forgetting the questions he had intended to ask his father. *That's why she didn't...*

"She gave up most of 'er magic an' she told me 'ow it was for 'er, with leavin' 'er family, losin' 'er brother... She said nowt 'bout me goin' off t' rails but I know what damage that did. She were at rock bottom, Sev'rus. So far down she 'ad nothin' left to give... To *anyone*. God's Teeth, lad, I'm sorry..."

Severus swallowed against a dull lump in his throat. "I know a thing or two about deep, dark, hopeless places. I also know that one cannot give that which one doesn't have." He took the false Llygad from his father's hand and cancelled the wards he had placed over it.

"You're not angry?"

Severus shook his head. "I was, not so long ago, and had been for far too long. I've experienced things of late that have permanently altered my perspective on what is worth holding on to." He sighed heavily. "Did she say... If her power is in *this* Llygad, and it was in the vaults when she created your golem... It's a very intensive process..."

"So where'd she get the juice from? Yeah, she mentioned it. She said that she tapped into t' real Llygad's power Merlin's magic an' she could do it because she were standin' near me and, she said, 'cause of the *bond* she shared with me." Toby shrugged. "I'm none sure of what bond she were on about. I'd like t' think I know, but I daren't."

Severus stared at his father with sudden insight, Albus' words echoing in his mind *Still? After all this time?*

"Another thing... There were *two* golems. One of Eileen, and t' one she made of me. 'Ers was what made that floorboard creak." Toby took a few steadying breaths while Severus came to grips with the news. "Yer uncle made it so as to fake a drownin' so Eileen could disappear and not 'ave to marry a Carrow. 'E made sure there were some witnesses who saw Eileen t' golem go under... but then it were lost."

"But Drusus knew where it was..."

"Yeah. The family made a tomb as a memorial and a place to put remains if they were ever found..."

"*Officially*, they never were. So Drusus concealed the golem in the tomb, knowing that nobody would ever open it." Severus gave a mirthless laugh. "He hid it in an obvious place. It amazes me how well and consistently that tactic works." *But he must have told Eileen that it was there. He had the Llygad y Ddraig at the time... did Merlin's Sight show him that the golem would be needed again?*

Toby nodded. "Don't like sayin' so, but it's a good thing it did. Eileen summoned it, and it came to Spinner's End to stand in for 'er a second time."

"And, against all the odds, the substitutions worked. Unbelievable and yet I can see how Eileen's plan succeeded." *Abraxas had become a little too used to easy success in his assassinations. He had lost the habit of examining his victims once he'd dealt a death blow.* "So it's a pair of *golems* in those graves," he muttered. "Gods, even I find that disturbing."

The two men stood in silent thought for several minutes.

"Sev'rus?" Toby raised a cautious eyebrow. "Will you speak to 'er?"

Severus cleared his mind. "That's my intention. Is now a good time, do you think?"

"Well, we were in t' middle of me demonstration on 'ow to lose marbles in record time, but I reckon yer mother'd be more pleased to see *you* than continue thrashin' *me*." Toby eyed his son seriously. "'Er power. Can she ever get it back?"

Severus considered part of a conversation he had witnessed between Merlin and Nimuë. *Nimuë had asked Merlin if he would take back the Llygad y Ddraig. Did she believe that he could simply access his own power if he had the object which contained it... or could a true restoration be performed?* Merlin had refused to take the Llygad y Ddraig, so there were no clues as to what could have been. "I don't know. But we can make a start by returning Eileen's handiwork to her." Severus considered the blue crystal disc and gave a rueful half-smile. "Little wonder I had a sense of something familiar when I first tried to access its power down in the vaults. The nuances of the magical shields I found there were, in some ways, similar to my own."

"Magic 'as traits passed on like phys'cal ones?"

"As far as research bodies know, yes, though the science behind magical heritability is still lacking a consistent method of prediction."

"Yeah... If y' say so. I reckon you should do the 'onours," Toby said, pointing to the false Llygad and grasping the door handle. "Ready?"

Severus nodded and followed his father into the room. The first thing he noticed was the sand on the floor, then Tocky standing anxiously nearby with a bulging bag of marbles half the size of himself, then his mother who sat stiffly on the edge of her bed. She jumped as though touched unexpectedly. The tension in her posture revealed that she didn't dare to look at him. He glanced at his father, who mouthed an advisory to take his time.

Everything is so different to what it was. How do I even begin to make sense of this? Severus asked himself. Since he had last seen his mother, all that the Fates seemed to have withheld from him had been granted: requited love, a position of respect and responsibility, a growing bond with his father, and his place his purpose in the world mapped in his heart with a certainty whose roots delved the depths of centuries.

Severus considered the great power which now nestled in his hands: the power to decide the next step in his own destiny from a position of surety. Beneath it, an even greater authority was his to call on. *A power of which the Dark knows not.* He could guide his decision with its quiet wisdom instead of the acrid gall of resentment and the bitter spawn of anger. Those motivations had only ever resulted in sad, crumbling edifices of poisonous dust.

He bent and took his mother's hand, feeling her fingers tremble as he silently coaxed her to stand. He pressed the copy of the Llygad y Ddraig into her palm and closed her fingers over it. "The true Llygad is safe and secure. *This* Llygad, and that which is within it, rightfully belongs to you. Look at me," he instructed. When she raised her eyes, he searched them intently. Hidden beneath the sorrow and joy in his mother's tearful gaze, he saw the thing that caused her heart and soul to ache. *This much I may be able to mend.* He gathered both her hands in his. "I forgive you," he said softly, the deep resonance of his voice reaching every corner of the room.

A Place in the World – Part Two

Chapter 31 of 32

Severus tells Hermione about an unfortunate turning point in his childhood. Gobstones may open the way to many possibilities. Severus' request for an audience with Hermione's father yields favourable results. A ghostly trio present their rather surprising findings, and Tocky gives a soulful piece of advice.

A/N:

There will be a short epilogue after this chapter.

King Arthur's knowledge of the secret between Sir Bedwyr and Queen Guinevere is discussed on pages 332 and 333 of *The Last Enchantment* by Mary Stewart (1979).

The *Domesday Book* was compiled by order of King William the Conqueror and completed in A.D. 1086. It is kept in The National Archives, Kew, southwest London.

The Battle of Bosworth Field (Battle of Bosworth) took place in A.D. 1485 and was the last major battle in the Wars of the Roses.

Pugsley Addams is the property of the cartoonist Charles Addams. I make no profit from his character.

Canon characters are the property of J.K. Rowling. I make no money from them.

French English (GoogleTranslate)

Exactement Exactly

Extraordinaire Extraordinary

Les heritage Heritage

Mon Dieu! My God!

Latin English

Dominus vobiscum The Lord be with you

Thank you, TeaOli, for the beta work on the second part of the last full chapter. Yes, we're getting there. As usual, I had a post-beta fiddle, so any grammatical messes were caused by me.

"She is absolutely *useless*!" Kingsley's pronouncement reverberated from behind the closed office door. Severus waited for a moment. Hearing nothing more aside from the sound of files being flung down in annoyance and a conversational string of caws, clicks and croaks from the Minister's raven he concluded that Kingsley was the only human in the room and announced his presence as temptation suggested he should.

"Nice," Kingsley grumbled, opening the door. "Somehow I knew it would be you."

Severus pressed one hand to his chest in a gesture of derisive sincerity. "Really?"

Kingsley straightened his outer robe and waved Severus inside. "I'd intended to tell you how relieved I was to hear that I didn't need to go looking for a new head of department, but *that* has taken the wind out of my sails." Partially smothering a laugh, he eyed his Christmas tree. "I must say, it gives me a great deal of satisfaction, but I'd thank you to restore the baubles on your way out. That noise would scar my sanity. How did you know I was referring to *her*?"

Severus allowed himself an unabashed smirk. "'She' and 'useless' uttered in the tones of one who is trying not to teach a raven bad words, followed by the sound of innocent files being roughly handled, could only indicate the involvement of..." Severus sneered at the products of his transfiguration. Several tiny, hysterically screaming representations of Dolores Umbridge fled helter-skelter between boughs, tinsel, and glass icicles hotly pursued by pine cone-coloured centaurs. He handed Kingsley a secure scroll. "The details, as best I can explain them, of what happened after the Ukrainian Ironbelly took charge of my movements."

Kingsley took the scroll and carefully placed it on his desk. "Severus... What you did in Pripyat... Thank you." He smiled ruefully. "My congratulatory vocabulary seems to have deserted me."

Severus looked at the floor and half-shrugged one shoulder.

"I'm not amiss in saying that you've saved a great many souls from consumption." Kingsley stood in quiet thought for a moment. "Consider how many souls there are in the world. So very, very many."

And my soul? How would you answer my question now, Albus? "I didn't act alone," Severus replied quietly, considering how his teenaged self would have done anything for such recognition and would never have believed that receiving accolades could make one feel very modest indeed. "I can truly say that I had the help of Merlin himself."

"So you did," Kingsley allowed. "But where would Merlin's power have been without you to give it hands and voice?" Seeing that Severus was reluctant to dwell on the subject any further, Kingsley changed the subject. "How did you get on at St Mungo's?" he asked, somehow conveying both concern and an intention not to pry.

"Better than expected," Severus answered shortly and without recrimination.

Kingsley nodded, satisfied, and reached for a folder balanced on the edge of his in-box. "We made a thorough search of Umbridge's office and home and interrogated her again with a stronger focus on Arawn's Dementor research."

"Anything?"

"A few possible leads, but they were fragmented and hopelessly disorganised. I suppose I was grasping at broom straws to hope for anything more."

"We also searched Arawn's former office and quarters. I'd say that he had most of his information on how to disguise Dementors, and how the foul things can track a person by virtue of a consumed memory, stored in his head. We'll keep searching for a while longer." He withdrew something from the pocket of his robes. "But we did find something useful to you more than anyone else."

Kingsley handed Severus a crystal sphere. "These are the memories Arawn took from Augustus Rookwood. In them were the clues that ultimately sent him in pursuit of you. You were around six years old at the time of these memories, completely innocent of what was about to happen. As you'll see, your mother refused to take service with Voldemort as the bearer of the Llygad y Ddraig, so he turned his attention to you. Rookwood, under Abraxas' instruction, placed a book in your house as a snare a way to introduce you to Dark magic and to prime you for the time when you would arrive at Hogwarts."

Hermione backed away from the Pensieve, still holding Severus' hand. "Gods, Severus... Your mother was so brave to stand up to them. She had no idea that they would set their sights on you..."

"A stringy whelp. Indeed." Severus collected the memories and transferred them back into the sphere. "I'd often hear people say that it was my mother who taught me a repertoire of curses and hexes before I arrived at Hogwarts. It was a false assumption that, out of convenience, I did nothing to disprove."

"Sirius?"

"He was one of the perpetrators, yes."

Hermione paled with anger. "I'd like to know why *he* considered himself such an authority on how many curses someone should know!" She poured two glasses of wine and handed one to her wizard, which he gratefully accepted as he took a seat before the fire.

"Experience, probably. He was one of the Black family," Severus mused, with an absence of vitriol that surprised even himself. Crookshanks leapt onto his lap, purring loudly. "I remember the day I found that damnable book," he said dispassionately.

Hermione sat beside him, sensing his need to speak of the day that had opened his life to the influence of the Dark.

"At the Muggle school I went to, there was a gang of boys who would take great pleasure in tormenting anyone who they thought couldn't fight back. During my time there, several children were pulled out of school with broken limbs and smashed teeth. One even lost an eye."

"And nobody did anything? Teachers, parents, police?"

Severus gave Hermione a bland stare. "Do what? You'd first need to find someone who gave a toss. Best of luck with that."

And Hogwarts proved to be no different Hermione thought with a deep sense of disgust at the Marauders' felonious behaviour and slick evasion of blame or consequence.

Severus leaned back and gazed into the fire. "At the time, I was smaller than them and always alone. I could also read and write, and I enjoyed mathematics. I was interested in learning, which in those streets made you a walking target. I knew I had magic. My mother had explained that much to me and told me that I had to keep it secret. One day, they confronted me on the stairs at the back of the school house. Five against one. Their leader was armed with a length of lead pipe. I dodged his first blow by a fraction as the others egged him on. I wanted to stop him and really hurt him. I was so angry, knowing I had power that they did not... and yet I felt helpless. Then my magic stirred. I didn't lay a finger on him, but I threw him down the stairs and ground his face into the gravel at the bottom. I broke his leg and took most of the skin off one side of his face. It wasn't enough, even though the rest of them fled and one had literally pissed himself with fright. I wanted to know what *else* I could do to retaliate. When I got back to the house, I felt like I was being called. I didn't even think that the summons was a thing worthy of fear or suspicion. I followed the call because it promised to give me what I wanted. In the rafters of the attic, I found a book. A book filled with curses and hexes. Some of them written in blood."

Hermione turned to face him and rubbed his shoulder. "You never told your mother?"

"No. At the time, there was no living person I would ever confide in. You are the first to hear of how I found it."

Hermione stared into her glass, then took a sip of wine. "You told me what Lucius said to you about having to turn you into a proper Slytherin. He was instructed to continue the indoctrination. What chance did you have?" She shook her head sadly. "Augustus and Abraxas... Do you think they did something to Tobias?"

Severus shrugged. "It doesn't really matter now whether they precipitated his addiction or not. The susceptibility he has to alcohol is real and lasting. I think that even if he had a choice, he'd prefer to abstain from partaking of that which, he said to me once, had cost him everything." He examined Hermione's expression. "What?"

"I was just thinking... It's a good thing that Lily came along when she did. I know it went wrong later on... but you were still so young; maybe finding a friend made sure the Dark never got its claws too deeply into you."

Severus turned to her with a half-smile, true appreciation showing in his eyes. "You're an extraordinary witch, do you know that?"

Hermione struck a thoughtful pose. "Aren't I supposed to be some sort of know-it-all? Oh, before I forget, Mum has asked us both over to dinner next Saturday night."

"I'll reserve a space in my hectic schedule." Severus drained his glass and rubbed Crookshanks' ears. "I shall introduce you to Eileen, though I'd prefer to give her another day or two. I sense that her time spent in largely silent and exclusive company has left her a little fragile, in some ways."

Hermione quietly wondered if Severus would ever address his parents by anything other than their given names. *But what experience does he have of being parented? The significance of those titles is probably lost and long gone.* She tickled Crookshanks under the chin, smiling at the half-Kneazle's delight in having the ministrations of both his humans at once. *But everything isn't lost. Is it, Crooksie?*

Toby read Hermione's letter out loud again, then set it aside to examine the two wooden boxes that an alarmingly large barn owl had delivered along with the letter in exchange for a whole rasher of bacon. Still lost for words, he handed the manifestly older box to Eileen, not knowing that Severus had sorted through the contents of the house at Spinner's End for nearly two hours before finding it and holding it aloft in dusty triumph.

He examined the box addressed to himself. "I didn't think Sev'rus'd remember me birthday," he said, sounding completely flummoxed.

Eileen ran her hands over the worn wooden box in her hands, then opened it, her eyes widening with recognition. "My green ghosts! I only mentioned them yesterday, and here they are!" She lifted each Gobstone from its individual satin nest, reacquainting her fingers with the weight and texture of every single one. "Happy birthday, Toby. Isn't it your sixtieth? Aren't you going to open it?"

"Yeah, in a minute. I was 'opin' I'd miss this birthday," Toby grumbled, trying to disguise the fact that he was deeply moved.

"Why?"

Toby shrugged and yielded to Eileen's eyebrow prompt, revealing the contents of the box. "Crikey, get a look at these," he murmured, holding it out to display a set of smoky quartz Gobstones, each one magically set with a central core shaped and coloured like a phoenix feather.

"By the Word, we'll have to initiate those!" Eileen exclaimed. "Hermione wrote that she and Severus had found the perfect gift for you. They're fine pieces."

Toby eyed her suspiciously. "*Initiate?*"

Eileen's smile was utterly serene as she fingered the blue crystal disc containing her power.

Toby took a step back. "Can you access yer power at all?" He bridled nervously. "If y' can, don't go makin' another copy of me, okay?"

Eileen concentrated, sending her awareness deep into the lattices she had created so long ago. The protective charms barred her way but seemed to recognise her and yielded slightly to her probing. Beyond them, her power stirred as though attracted by a magnetism that was not quite strong enough to draw it closer. "I think... No, not yet. I had to create this so quickly, remembering exactly how I did it may take some time. There'll be no extra Toby Snapes today, I'm afraid."

Toby nodded. "Grand. There's enough of 'em already. With yer power... Sev'rus said 'e'd 'elp in any way 'e could. Take 'im up t' offer, but try to avoid 'avin' yer mind read, if y' can. Y' might need to take the 'ealers' advice and gain a few pounds, too."

Eileen nodded thoughtfully, then looked at him sharply. "Mind reading? Oh, you mean Legilimency. Yes, you told me that Severus was very insistent. When it's involuntary, it can be quite traumatic."

Toby shrugged. "Force ten on the flog-you-senseless scale. But it all worked out for t' best."

"I'll talk to him about what he might be able to do when next he visits. Poor Severus. I spent most of our reunion crying all over him."

"I reckon 'e might've been expectin' it." Toby rubbed his eyes dismissively and took to minutely examining his new Gobstones. He looked up when Eileen spoke again.

"By initiating, I meant using them in a proper match," she said. "There's a games and rehabilitation room on this floor that patients and visitors may use. I'm strong enough to walk there now."

Toby relaxed a little. "In that case, initiate away; I'm up for it."

Eileen gave Toby a scowl of warning. "I can't make you an expert in less than a thousand hours of practice, but I think I might just be able to make you respectable enough

to give those bettors a fright or two."

Toby scowled back. "If you're gonna get *that* serious, we'll need a wager to make it fair dinkum."

Eileen raised a challenging eyebrow. "Go on."

"If I win, you 'ave dinner with me."

"And if you lose?"

"I 'ave dinner with you."

Eileen folded her arms, her cheeks shading to pink. "Very well." She stared at the floor. "I should have told you long ago, Toby... I'm ten years your senior."

Toby waved one hand dismissively. "Sev'rus told me. 'E noted it while checkin' yer school records. 'E wanted to know summat about you, and there were none to tell 'im owt at the time. Makes no diff'rence to me... b'sides, y' don't look a day over sixty."

Tocky winced, pinched the bridge of his nose with both hands and shook his head.

Neither human spoke again until they entered the spacious games room, where a pair of young war veterans were getting the feel of their recently fitted artificial limbs by playing some sort of improvised ball game.

Toby kept his voice low as they surveyed the Gobstones platform set up in a far corner. "Next you'll be tellin' me you're a witch."

They regarded each other for a moment, each remembering when Eileen had "fessed up" about her abilities in a very different situation. An unspoken apology passed between them and was replaced by a sense of purposeful mischief.

"I am." Eileen unpacked her green ghosts, her black eyes flashing challenge. "Right. Line 'em up. I'm going to work you *hard*."

"Jean! This is utterly fascinating!" Andrew emerged from his study brandishing a bronze-clasped volume with a mane-like spine.

"What is, dear?" Jean murmured, thumbing through the *BeWitching Weddings* catalogue inserted in the *Witch Weekly* that Aluco now a very fit and trim owl had delivered with the morning's post. She was trying very hard to disguise her excitement... and more than glad that she had told Severus, quite some time ago, about Andrew's lapse into Austinian reveries concerning the exact situation for the asking of a certain question. Severus had enlisted her as a willing accomplice in implementing a delightful plan involving a very large hound and her household preparations for dinner that evening were completed to the letter.

"Centaur dentition," Andrew breathed. "It says here that the central and lateral incisors, and canines, have the same form as in humans thus allowing perfectly eloquent speech but the thickness and composition of the enamel is what you'd expect to find in a grazing herbivore."

Jean flipped through some pages and unexpectedly came to the centrefold. "That's nice." She cleared her throat as her eyes drifted down the male subject's exquisitely muscled torso. "Well, Hermione did say that they're vegetarians."

"And further... Centaurs don't have carnassials! They have a short diastema between the canines and the first molar..."

Ooooh, *he's moving*... "My goodness!"

"But that's not all..."

"Impressive..."

"I'll say! They have four molars to each quadrant, and each molar has four high primary cusps elongated in an anterior-posterior direction..."

Oh! Hot flush for all the best reasons... "Very impressive..."

"This is classic selenodont! It's all here! Metacone, hypocone, paracone, protocone..."

Sweet eye-candy! Jean primly folded the magazine and tucked it into her bag.

"Jeannie? You look a little... breathless."

"It must have been all the excitement I mean, your average dentist doesn't get to learn about centaur dentition every day."

Andrew handed the book to her. "And there I was thinking that the most extreme thing a dentist could learn was how to perform a root canal procedure on one of the zoo's lions." He looked his wife over. "You still look a little dazed, love." He eyed her concernedly for a moment, then set off to do what most attentive British husbands would do make a nice cup of tea.

Severus smirked contentedly as he prowled through the Sunday afternoon drowsiness of Hogwarts' halls while Hermione revised for Monday's Potions N.E.W.T.

It had been well worth making Petal's better acquaintance during several lengthy discussions with Hagrid on how to best incorporate the appreciation of dragons into his lesson plans, even if it had earned Crookshanks' temporary displeasure expressed with an interesting assortment of mice, rats, spiders, lizards and frogs that had ranged from still twitching to extensively mummified.

The gods had firmly sided with Severus when, on a frosty Thursday morning, the doughty half-Kneazle had restored proper order to the universe by marching into Hagrid's hut, confronting the offending Barghest with a mighty hiss, and dealing the cowed and bewildered beast a clawless swat on the nose. Hagrid, moved to tears by the investigative truce and ensuing friendship between the two creatures, had immediately accepted Severus' casual offer to Barghest-sit for a night.

Overall, I'd say last night's dinner at the Grangers went extremely well! Severus concluded, excessively pleased with himself. Actually, it had been a supreme success.

Between dessert and coffee, Jean had asked her husband to kindly fetch a book from his study. Unobtrusively, Severus had followed, lurking in strategic positions so that he would not be seen. Andrew Granger's yelp of astonishment at finding his study transformed into a library worthy of a gentleman's estate, complete with a mahogany table that, he had exclaimed, was expansive enough to require navigational charts, was Severus' cue to formally request a private audience. The unsuspecting dentist hadn't noticed that his favourite vest had been suddenly transfigured into an elegant smoking jacket, and it was not until Severus had hinted at the cut crystal decanter of port that he beheld a fireplace cavernous enough to hold several blazing logs and the monstrous hound that snored lazily before it.

Perhaps understanding the importance of the occasion, Petal had conducted herself with the aplomb of an aristocrat and, having risen from her place on the hearth rug, had sat beside the speechless dentist with one enormous paw draped over his knees effectively pinning the man in his chair while Severus couched his request for Hermione's hand in the most stately and sincere speech he had ever made.

Of course, Dr Andrew Granger had seen fit to grant Severus Tobias Snape all of the required permissions along with a blessing and an enquiry as to how much Jean knew about the Austinian simulation.

A Slytherin never tells on a comrade in subterfuge even if the truth is strongly suspected. Amid the multiple distractions of a truly brilliant piece of interior refurbishment, Severus had contrived to answer all of Andrew's questions without actually giving him a definitive answer.

Severus' prowling halted abruptly when he spotted a familiar, red-haired wizard ensconced in a windowed alcove, thumbing through *The Quibbler*.

"Mr Weasley."

George looked up, surprised. "Yes, but which one?" he asked with an only slightly lost glance to where his twin would have stood.

"Madam Weasley is still out of sorts?"

George tossed his paper down and got up. "Is she what! Dad's holed up in the Ministry and attending as many meetings as humanly possible. He tried coming home the night before last, but he got packed off to his shed again. We're all in hiding, now. Except Ginny. Ron's bunkered down in Auror Headquarters trying for a secondment in Canada... I asked him if he'd be interested in running the shop with me, but he took off like a stray dog hexed in the arse. Ginny said that Sybill Trelawney cornered him in Diagon Alley. She prophesied about his waistline expanding and his hair falling out if he ever worked behind a counter. I'm running out of siblings!"

"Impossible."

"It's true! Bill is back in Egypt doing what he does best, Charlie's making sure the returned dragons have enough to eat ~~and~~ is setting up a new research program with the Tibetan Council for Dragon Conservation, Percy is a complete prong, Ron has been *warned*, and Ginny is far too spirited to be a merchant."

Merchant? "Have you asked your mother?"

George paled. "Evil."

Severus relented. The young man had released him from a choking hex and had brought Tobias to exactly the right place at the most opportune time. He took a deep breath and braced himself. "Belated, I know, but... I'm sorry about taking your ear off. It was an accident."

George grinned impishly as he cupped a hand around the general location of his missing appendage. "My what?"

Severus scowled. Apologies had never been his strongest suit, a failing rooted in the experience that people didn't seem to believe that he could be truthful or sincere. If he chose to, he could trace that particular sensitivity back to the time when Lily had refused to believe that a tree branch that had fallen and struck Petunia had been nothing to do with him. She hadn't even listened to his protests that he hadn't *made* it happen; his magic hadn't stirred. Even at such a young age, and wildly furious at Petunia's taunts, he had known when and where his magic flowed. He stiffly turned to leave.

George moved quickly to block his route. "Hey, look... Don't go all uber-git. I was just kidding. We all knew the risks; Mad-Eye made sure of that. We knew we'd be targets once we were Potterised and the chances of injury or death were pretty high. Harry told me how it happened, mapped it out on a chess board and all... now the white knight's missing a lug. It was an accident. I'm good with it. It's fine. You're forgiven."

Severus studied George intently. *It was an accident*. George's eyes conveyed nothing but certain belief that this had been the case. He ran a hand through his hair and restored his equability. "Thank you, Mr Weasley."

George put on a convincing display of speechless shock, then smiled sportingly. "I think Fred just had to go lie down. Merlin, I need to lie down as well... but I'll scrounge a pint from the cellars first. Care to partake?"

Severus considered the invitation for a moment, then gave a brief nod. For a short time, he walked with George in silent thought. "If you fancy yourself a merchant," he said, tucking his thumbs into his waistcoat pockets, "there is a small task you could do to buy yourself a little more time away from the wrath of Madam Weasley."

"I'm all ears."

Severus fleetingly quirked an eyebrow. "There is a need to find a suitable substitute for foetal Graphorn hide. It's been several hundred years since it was last used in book production prior to being made illegal, so I'm sure there will be something of comparable durability somewhere on the market."

"Foetal Graphorn hide?"

"Petrus and Madam Pince wish to coordinate a restoration project for a particularly old and valuable book. They've had no result as yet from their standard suppliers of restoration materials and will need to look further afield. Having someone who knows how to exploit an extensive network would be useful at this stage."

George pulled out a note scroll and quill. "I've got plenty of contacts for all sorts of weird and wonderful things. Gods, if it keeps me out of Mum's hex range then I'm the wizard for the job. Can you tell me a bit more about foetal Graphorn hide history, magical properties, that kind of thing?"

"Certainly, Mr Weasley."

Eileen worked steadily, pausing every now and then to close her eyes and remember the words as she had seen them, then writing them down before they retreated once more into the past. In the pale light of a leadlight window, Petrus crouched on a plinth before a scriveners' desk while Cadfael instructed him on the techniques of lettering so as to match the style of *The Book of Nimuë*.

She raised her eyes from her parchment and smiled when Toby and Tocky entered the room, followed by Cuthbert, the Fat Friar, Severus and Hermione.

"Eileen! It's good to see you again," Hermione said sincerely after the ghosts had paid their respects and glided over to examine Petrus' progress. She took Eileen's free hand in a warm gesture of greeting. "How are you finding Hogwarts?"

Eileen placed her quill in an onyx stand. "The sleeping arrangements in the guest wing are far superior to the dormitories, and the food is exactly as I remember it though there seems to be a greater quantity and variety of puddings to choose from. And the library is perfection itself," she added with a glance at Petrus, who responded from the midst of his spectral audience with a contented nod.

"The puddings are probably Luna's influence," Hermione concluded, stepping aside as Severus ushered Tocky forward. "To attract Inkles, apparently. Puddings inspire them to interact with humans."

Eileen quirked an eyebrow. "Inkles? Are they a new species?"

"With Miss Lovegood's unique perceptive abilities, who knows?" Severus said, shrugging in unison with his father.

"Me and Sev'rus were talkin' over some of the things that 'appened over the past few months," Toby put in. "Maybe you can clear up a bit of a mystery."

Tocky straightened his pillowcase and tried not to look overly curious.

"Some while ago, Tocky was able to provide Tobias with information on Merlin's Welsh origins, his siring by a Muggle a Roman and that Merlin's mother was the princess Niniane, a witch," Severus explained.

"None of this was written in our lore books, so it was quite a revelation," Hermione added. "Tocky said that he was under a binding law he couldn't tell any witch or wizard what he knew, but he *could* tell a Muggle. Not that any Muggle was ever likely to ask, but it happened that one did. And Tobias could then tell us. Fate or not, it was exactly what we needed to know."

"Tocky said that not all 'ouse-elves knew it... Only some," Toby clarified.

Eileen stood up. "And you'd like to know why that information was entrusted to *some* house-elves, who gave it to them, and why they were placed under a seal of secrecy."

Three humans nodded, one with a slight scowl at hearing a close approximation of the questions he had once levelled at his father's quaking house-elf.

Petrus waved three gossiping ghosts into silence.

"Merlin himself never had the service of house-elves," Eileen said softly. "When he was a boy, he was very much alone until he met his tutor, Galapas. He had human servants from time to time, as many of Roman heritage did." She turned to Severus. "The villa with its fine red dragon mosaic showing the kinship of Merlin and Arthur... It was built by Prince Gaius Lepidus, Merlin's grandson and staffed by a goodly number of house-elves inherited from Merlin's son, Lepidus, who had made a point of finding house-elves left homeless by past wars and helping them settle with new families.

"In the years immediately after King Arthur's death, there were several lesser kings who ruled their lands with loyalty to the high kingdom built by Arthur and Merlin, but there would never again be a high king to match Arthur's vision and valour. Slowly, the kingdom and its internal allegiances began to weaken. As a result of an earlier alliance between Cornwall and Saxony, the last vestiges of King Arthur's kingdom were undermined and violently overthrown. That tragedy began with the murder of Eneuawg, a brilliant military strategist and middle son of Bedwyr. Bedwyr had been King Arthur's loyal friend since they were boys together." She regarded the three ghosts, who had begun to whisper between themselves while Petrus looked on in astonishment. "Gentlemen? Is something not right?"

"Not at all, Madam Snape," the Fat Friar said with a courteous bow. "A coincidence, perhaps... But pray, continue with your tale; our news can wait."

"Coincidence it is not," Cuthbert droned. "The facts are..."

"Hush!" Cadfæl scolded. "Manners before facts. Let our lady speak."

"*Ouil*!" Petrus agreed, looking at Tobias with great interest.

"The Saxons returned in great numbers to destroy and plunder. Caer Camel was shattered and burned, graves and sacred places were violated. As if feeding from the strife and misery, the Dark began to gather strength.

"But the powers of the Dark didn't have everything their own way. Plagues tore through the land in several devastating waves, laying a great number of the population wizarding, Muggle, Briton, Roman and Saxon alike in their graves. Without convenient minions and starved of resources, the Dark was soon defeated by a guerilla force of wizards, witches, centaurs, and many other magical creatures lead by Ætius Gaius Prince. Ætius also had the help of Merlin's magic, through the Llygad y Ddraig, to plan and coordinate a successful expulsion."

"Not *Prince* Ætius Gaius?" Severus asked, quietly amazed at the amount of family history he would have to learn.

Eileen looked at her son, sadness showing in her eyes. "Times had changed, Severus. That which had been a royal title was safer to keep as a name." She stood and began to pace the floor, accepting Severus' offered arm with a whisper of thanks. "But the Dark had made its mark in a branch of our family. It was barely a century afterwards that the dragon mosaic was hidden, Merlin's harp laid to rest in his crystal cave, and the statue of Myrddin the god sealed away. I never learned what became of Merlin's royal cipher..."

"A red dragon on a gold field," Severus said, using his free hand to unbutton his frock coat and reveal the cipher affixed to his waistcoat. "Given to Merlin by his father, Ambrosius. It was hidden in the crystal cave sometime in the sixteenth century."

Eileen stared at it in wonder. "I thought it was lost," she said, reaching out to touch it. "You wear it well." She closed her eyes for a moment, then continued.

"When the villa was finally abandoned in the first half of the twelfth century, Octavia Anwyn Prince gathered the house-elves together one last time and told them the stories and histories belonging to those of Merlin's blood who kept true to the light. A great part of what was told to them came from *The Book of Nimuë* with the exception of Merlin's physical appearance, which was strategically withheld. As their numbers were divided between family members, the house-elves were told to keep their new knowledge safe and alive, never to reveal it to anyone with magic in their blood, and to never speak of who gave that knowledge to them." She looked at Severus in the eyes. "Through visions seen in the Llygad y Ddraig, Octavia knew that there would come a time when those histories would need to be told, but nobody knew how or when, or who would hear them. Also shown was a very real danger that the entire family would either fall slaves to the Dark, or die out."

"It was a near thing," Severus murmured. *I was the last one to be born into the Prince line. I gave service to the Dark. I stood before the Veil.*

"Mistress Eileen?" Tocky fidgeted with his pillowcase, his green eyes wide and sad. "Is... Is Tocky right to be thinking that if only house-elves belonging to Merlin's peoples is been told the histories... and Tocky's elfcestors is passing the histories to their elflings over many, many centuries and many different masters... then Tocky is really belonging to Prince family?"

Eileen got down on one knee to address the house-elf. "You're correct, Tocky," she said warmly. "And what was the Prince family is now bound by blood and..." She looked at Toby and smiled, colour tinting her cheeks as she seemed to forget what she was going to add. "To Tobias Snape's family."

"Then Tocky is in the right place! Tocky is come *home*!" Tocky pressed his hands to his face and wept. "After years of cruel masters who gave Tocky beatings and is stuffing elfcestors' heads, Tocky is being with true masters and mistresses! Tocky is most grateful..."

Hermione very nearly fished out her handkerchief to pass to the sobbing house-elf as tears began to leak between his thin fingers, but caught herself in time. She transfigured a scrap of parchment into a wad of tissues and gave Toby a hinting nod.

"Now then, Tocky," Toby admonished gruffly, seeing that he was required to take charge of his house-elf. "Use them tissues to clean yerself up that's t' way. Y' know," he said as Tocky sniffled and blew his nose, "me old Mam used t' say that everyone 'as their place in this world, but there's some 'as to work a little 'arder and wait a little longer to get to it."

Tocky pressed a tissue to his leaking eyes. "Is Master Tobias found *his* place?"

Before Toby could answer, the three ghosts clustered around him. "Oh, by great grace I'd say that he has," Cadfæl said, sketching a blessing in the air. "But we can help you to know it better, Tobias."

Toby tried very hard not to groan aloud. *'Ere we bloody go. What now?*

"We've traced your paternal family tree," Cadfæl and Cuthbert announced together while the Fat Friar nodded excitedly. "You go further back than coal miners and mill workers, my boyo," Cadfæl added cheekily.

"I... What made y' look?" Toby asked, baffled at the revelation that someone would actually be stirred to inquiry.

"Why wouldn't we look?" the Fat Friar asked. "We've little better to do and you *are* Severus' father. We yielded to the temptation of curiosity and girded our loins to go on a quest."

Toby scowled. "Aren't ghost s'posed to be bound to one spot?"

Cadfael paced through a desk loaded with books, earning a disapproving sigh from Petrus. "Oh, it depends on what one is attached to. If attached to a *place*, then that's where you haunt and that's where you stay. Cuthbert here was attached to facts in life, more so than this school, so he may travel to wherever his beloved facts lay. In life, the Fat Friar loved brewing ale. In all the realm, there is no tavern, cellar, or brewhouse past or present that he cannot pass through."

"Yet there is still no finer drop than my herbed harvest wheat beer," the Fat Friar lamented with a sigh. "The Hufflepuff common room used to be the castle's brewery, you know. I was in charge of its produce until the walls were reconfigured and the brewery moved to Hogsmeade. There are still signs of it for those who care to look the round doors are made from old hogsheads."

"What about you?" Hermione asked the ghostly scrivener.

"*Dominus vobiscum*, dear lady," Cadfael said, grinning from ear to ghostly ear. "My joy in life was illuminating that which would otherwise lay unadorned and unremarked, to place words on page with the same beauty and dignity with which they were spoken, and to find the things in danger of being lost and give them proper record."

"And what does all of that have to do with Tobias?" Severus asked, growing annoyed at the ghosts' tangents.

"Everything," Cadfael answered dramatically. "Tobias, we followed you father's trail, then your grandfather's, and so on, through town and village of mine and mill, through cannon foundries and blacksmiths' yards until we got to North Yorkshire. There, around 1490 A.D., the trail vanished."

"We were at a loss for some while and searched the dust of surrounding centuries without turning up anything," the Fat Friar said. "But Cuthbert had a moment of inspiration and consulted the *Domesday Book* with the help of Kewpie, house-elf for The National Archives. We picked up your happily unusual family name there and followed several lines to the late fourteen hundreds, where we found that there was only one possible match!"

Cuthbert tucked his thumbs into the lapels of his robes. "From A.D. 1086, when the *Domesday Book* was written, we had to come forward in your family's timeline so that we could establish that we had the correct branch before returning to trace it back before the eleventh century," he explained. "The late fourteen hundreds were a tumultuous time for England; factual accounts proved hard to..."

"Bless you, Cuthbert, you'd put an archangel to sleep," Cadfael declared. "Luckily, Britain has an abundance of ghosts who are very pleased to hover and chat. They don't get much of a chance to mingle these days, with all those carriageways and noisy wagons with blazing lamps intruding on their haunts."

"You mean motorways," Hermione clarified. "Are there really so many ghosts?" she asked.

"Britain is built on bones," the Fat Friar said, lacing his fingers over his ample, semi-transparent belly. "In *fact*, if you took all the bones out of British soil, the ground level would drop by three feet."

Cuthbert adjusted his teaching robe indignantly. "That is an outrageous conjecture."

The Fat Friar shook his head with a patient smile. "Our search brought us to the vicinity of the Battle of Bosworth. I decided I'd inspect the site of the original *Blue Boar Inn* there's a modern travelling lodge built there now, no spirit at all and happened upon a helpful young half-blood knight who had fought his last for the white rose. Turns out that he knew one of your people, Tobias. James Ellis Snape of the king's cavalry the fellow had a real gift for training horses and treating their wounds."

"Your northerner forbears had a hard time of it after the Battle of Bosworth, which was why they laid low and left precious few records of their existence. But *before* 1485..." Cadfael paused for dramatic effect.

Severus raised his eyebrows and stared at his father, who shrugged noncommittally.

Cadfael hovered before a window, nearly vanishing in the streaming light. "We then toured numerous battlefields..."

The Fat Friar fidgeted excitedly. "With the help of some poor unfortunates walled up in what is left of fine castles and forts along the northern Welsh border..."

"And the Screaming Skull in Wrexham!" Cadfael interrupted. "She had plenty to say about her tenth-century neighbours though she could have kept her voice down about young Martin Carnwath Snape and how he avenged her murder with naught but a longbow and a single arrow. The Muggles in the guesthouse across the way were quite affrighted and called for the constabulary. We had to glide for it!"

"For you, Cadfael, it wouldn't have been the first time," Cuthbert droned dryly.

"And when the Maker of All Things needs to extinguish the sun at the End of Days, *you* will be called forth to cast a great wet blanket over it!" Cadfael retorted.

"*Messieurs, s'il vous plait*, if you could keep the voices down," Petrus reminded the ghosts.

Cadfael recovered his scrivener's dignity. "We managed to go back further, Tobias... We followed your ancestors' footprints back to a knight of King Arthur's Table." He savoured the collective gasp. "None other than Arthur's best friend, Bedwyr. But there was a semi-secret scandal! *He* was the one who took Queen Guinevere as lover. Of course, she never bore him a child, but Bedwyr did have illegitimate offspring from earlier dalliances. The boys, Amhren, Eneuawg, and Bran, were each brought to court to be trained in arms and horsemanship on their sixth birthdays. Amhren fell by Mordred's spear at the Battle of Camlann. After Eneuawg's murder, and the beginning of a Dark Age that would only end with the coming of the Grail of Light, young Bran became something of an outlaw, leading attacks on the Saxon colonists and then vanishing with his men like shadows in the night. He would hide out wherever the land was hard and inhospitable hence he was known as Bran of the *Snaep*."

Severus allowed Merlin's memories to come to him, feeling his vision shift into the shadows of his ancestor's past...

Toby shoved his hands in his pockets and looked at the floor. "Oops." He guiltily glanced at Eileen. *Takin' up with royalty is a bit of a family specialty, then* "Some best friend... So it weren't Lancelot?"

"Oh, no. Lancelot *du Lac* was a revision inserted by the Normans," Cuthbert said, firmly restoring a fact to its proper place.

Hermione frowned. "Why do you say 'semi-secret'?"

"King Arthur knew of it." Severus said, returning to the present. "Even as Merlin decided to break the news to him, Arthur revealed his knowledge. He told Merlin that he understood Guinevere's loneliness and her longing for love he was away from home so much and at Caer Camel only a few days a year. He said that he would rather have his queen lie in the arms of a known friend than seek solace with a potential traitor. If Guinevere had been able to bear heirs, it would have been very different and Bedwyr's life would have been forfeit, but Arthur knew by then that he would never sire a child by her and the end of his reign was inexorably approaching."

Toby remembered what he could of the stories. "Was it Bedwyr who cast the sword into the lake when King Arthur died?"

"It was." Eileen said, moving to stand beside him. "Bedwyr proved his worth at the last and resisted a mighty temptation. At his dying friend's bidding, Bedwyr sent Caliburn, Sword of Kings, home through the waters." She looked at him wonderingly. "But I swear I didn't know he was your ancestor..."

"Yeah, well," Toby scratched his head, then affected a lordly stance and bowed. "Princess Eileen."

Eileen laughed. "Don't start that, please it's not a title that I have any desire to hold or hear. From you or from anyone else."

"This is a thing *extraordinaire*," Petrus mused out loud, "how these ancient allegiances have held true over time and showed themselves in places and in methods most unexpected. But we should all give thanks that they did." He addressed Hermione, his ears pricked with interest. "Is *Mademoiselle* Hermione also to have *les heritage* researched? There may also be some wondrous discovery awaiting you, *Mademoiselle*."

"It would be our pleasure to do so if you desire it, Miss Granger," the Fat Friar offered, with an enthusiastic nod from Cadfæl and a thoughtful frown from Cuthbert Binns.

Eileen allowed her eyes to rest on the shifting gleam of sunlight in coloured window glass. Her Sight stirred, showing her a young witch clad in a robe of emerald green and a cloak of purest white. As Eileen watched, the witch placed the Grail of Light upon a stone set on the edge of a high sea cliff. Kneeling before it, she sang incantations as the Grail began to shine with a brightness that surpassed even the sun in high summer. Then the light faded, and the Grail vanished into the clean blue air, its purpose fulfilled. Still kneeling, the young witch smiled, then looked back over her shoulder to where her suitor, a Muggle knight, waited for her with a pair of horses... *It is not yet time for you to know this, Hermione. But when you are ready, I shall tell you with great joy.*

"I think Mum might have most of it done already," Hermione replied. "But should I need some gaps filled in, you are the first ghosts I'll come to for assistance. That's a promise!" She looked Petrus in his silvery eyes. "But what about you, Petrus... Don't you want to know..." She bit her lip. "I'm sorry, it's really none of my business."

"*Mademoiselle* Hermione, I do know what I am and how I came to be. Do I not have access to every resource that would show me the way? And I do not refer only to the books which I know you have already absorbed."

Hermione knitted her brows in thought.

"D'y' mean what you told me, Petrus?" Toby asked. "That you 'ave to search inside as well?"

"*Exactement, Monsieur* Tobias."

Hermione was sorely tempted to ask Petrus what kind of being he was. Her own research preceding Petrus' hearing before the Wizengamot had been far from conclusive... Though she did have some inklings, especially after pudding... *But I did say that it was none of my business* she thought. *And Petrus deserves to have his privacy respected just as much as anyone else does.* She sighed as she took Severus' arm and steered her thoughts elsewhere. "Three treasures gone from the world... The Sword, the Grail, and now the Spear." She looked into her wizard's eyes. "That leaves the Platter of Replenishment."

Severus surveyed the questioning looks that focussed on him. "It is not yet time for the Platter to be found, and, Hermione, the Platter is not for me to touch. It must be left for those who are yet to live." He considered what he had Seen, knowing that some of what he was about to say was heavy news indeed. "I cannot say *when* the things I witnessed shall take place, but there is a time coming that will strike the Muggle world with torment upon torment. After great suffering, the wizarding world will be asked for help. When both of our societies combine without prejudice, then the Platter shall be found."

Hermione wondered what sort of world Severus had Seen. "One of our children?"

Severus shrugged. "The one who raises the Platter from its hidden place to replenish the Earth and soothe its hurts will be of our blood yours and mine, Hermione but it could be decades or centuries from now."

From the midst of boxes and open trunks, Hermione regarded Severus with amused disbelief, reminding herself that he had little experience of parental behaviour. "Oh, come on!" She said at last. "Your mother gave him a very discreet, congratulatory kiss... Tobias did pretty well to win two games out of five against Professor Flitwick, and the decider was a *real* cliffhanger. Take comfort in the panicked looks that went between Professor Schultz and the Headmistress when they realised that Professor Addams was going to clean up on the final points tally."

Severus scowled. "She didn't have to do it in front of everyone," he muttered under his breath, still haunted by whistles and cheers and the sudden profusion of an appalling amount of mistletoe.

Hermione indulged a moment of wicked glee. "It wasn't as though Tobias responded by pinning her to the wall and snogging her breathless he was quite gentlemanly, actually."

Severus stared at her, aghast. "Obliviate me now."

"Severus love, that's not the worst thing one can unexpectedly witness one's parents doing. Believe me, you've been lucky... so far." There was a knock at the door. She grasped his arm. "Sh! Here they are."

Severus schooled his expression into heavily starched formality as Hermione welcomed Tobias, Eileen, and Tocky into the room.

"You're nearly finished packing, then," Eileen observed a little forlornly as she gave Severus and Hermione a sincere, slightly unpractised embrace.

"It's getting there," Severus said. "Minerva would have me stay on longer if she could wheedle Kingsley into an agreement, but he's standing firm. And I'm more than ready to take up my role in the Ministry. There is much to do." He glanced at Tocky, who had newly attired himself in an old calico coin bag to celebrate the finding of his rightful human family. "How goes the restoration?"

"Very well, indeed. My memory of the excised pages has proved better than I ever expected with a little help from the Llygad y Ddraig. Petrus then transcribes each day's work ready for illumination. Cadfæl is having a wonderful time teaching Petrus the art."

"We're nearly there," Toby added. He dangled a shred of parchment for Crookshanks to attack from inside a cardboard box. "Another week should do it, we all reckon."

"And," Eileen put in a little shyly, "after we've restored *The Book of Nimuë*... Severus, Toby has asked me to go with him to Australia."

"If that's fine by you, 'Ermine."

"Of course it is, Tobias," Hermione said fervently, delight shining in her eyes.

Toby winked at Eileen. "And don't be strangers, either of you. Them Portkeys're 'andy little devices."

Severus felt his mother's presence at the edge of his mind. He lowered his ever-present shields.

Don't worry, Severus. We'll be fine. You've done quite enough to provide for us already. Her message took on a note of amusement. *Only a true Slytherin could have negotiated such a profitable sale of that old house. And talked Toby the Stubborn into accepting the entire amount. He's given me half of it, by the way.*

Severus met his mother's eyes. *Not being deceased, Spinner's End was always his by the law of inheritance. If things don't work out, let me know at once. As I told both of you, I have the resources to assist if the need arises. I believe that Kingsley told you the same while he interviewed you.* "And how goes *your* restoration?" he asked out loud.

Eileen smiled and took off her brass crucifix. Placing it on top of a sealed box, she walked to the other side of the room and drew her new wand. "*Finite Incantatem*. I had enough magic left to restore it earlier on," she told Toby, "but I needed to be sure... Besides, it's nice to use a wand again." She smiled at her son. "I've gained enough strength to cast my Patronus, but its form is still a little indistinct."

Toby stared at the brass ornament that Eileen had worn around her neck for so many silent years, his eyes wide with astonishment and pride. He picked up the chain which now looped through a familiar brass ring. He held it in his hand as he searched Eileen's eyes. "I can get you a proper gold one, now."

"There's nothing improper about that one," Eileen replied graciously. "I'd like to keep it. In fact, I'll accept no other."

Toby coloured a little and shrugged one shoulder. "Ah... As y' wish."

Hermione busied herself with a scrap of parchment and quill, then blotted the result and handed it to Toby. "That's our address in the Ministerial lodgings. It's also where I'll be fretting over my impending N.E.W.T.s results."

Severus rolled his eyes when Hermione wasn't looking.

"We'll be there until we get a place of our own. Severus tells me he's working on it," she continued with a hopeful glance at her smugly secretive wizard.

"Your N.E.W.T.s will be outstanding, Hermione," Eileen assured her. "I was talking with Filius over lunch, and he was in raptures over your twelve-point proof for third-order concealment charms he said it was a truly remarkable piece of deductive reasoning and that even if you hadn't answered the other questions, it would put your results in the top five percent."

"There is one thing that still evades *my* deductive reasoning," Severus grumbled, gazing fixedly at his mother. "I understand that the Llygad y Ddraig recognises the flesh contact of those of our blood and allows Merlin's power to flow through us. However, when Tobias wore the true Llygad y Ddraig on the night you made his golem, you accessed its power even though you weren't touching it. You said that you could do this because you were standing close to him and, you told Tobias, through a bond you shared with him. I confess to being at a loss to understand what bond allowed Merlin's power to flow *to* you so that you could wield it."

Eileen thought deeply for a moment. "I can't say for certain... Perhaps when we were married part of our vows stated that we become one flesh."

"D'y' think it 'ad some magical component to it?" Toby asked, taking Eileen's hand.

"Not really flesh," Tocky offered hesitantly. He took a deep breath and placed his hands behind his back so as to hide their trembling. "House-elves is not supposed to be giving advices but... it is because you is been loving each others. Love is being powerful magic it is being the essence of the Deep Magic which rose out of the First Fire. Deductions is never finding how and why it works. Love is making good bonds. Very powerful bonds. Master Tobias, Mistress Eileen, Master Severus and Mistress Hermione can all be knowing this without making reasonings and proofs. Love's bonds is letting magic flow, and love is magic that is lasting forever."

Epilogue – January 1999

Chapter 32 of 32

Severus has something to show Hermione – with very pleasing results. A birthday lunch provides the opportunity for an important announcement.

A/N:

This story would never have happened without Severus Snape, and it is to him that I owe the greatest thanks for the experience of writing this story. It was his original prompt, while I was revisiting *The Crystal Cave*, that set the whole thing in motion. There I was, reading Mary Stewart's description of young Merlin when suddenly my mindscape was invaded by a rather impatient, insistent wizard whose forceful enunciation of "Sound. Familiar?" precipitated an avalanche of plotting and a personal adventure that I wouldn't trade for worlds.

My sincere thanks also to Justice for beta reading the early chapters, linlawless, who stepped in to help, and TeaOli, who broadened my grammatical horizons fit to leave me speechless (and is probably sorry she ever introduced me to the em-dash), and an unknown number of Administrators from *Ashwinder* and *The Petulant Poetess*. Thanks also to AmyLouise for advising me in the proper use of the French language and to bleddyn for verifying my geographical description of the Welsh countryside.

Thank you to everyone who has taken the time to read and to those who have reviewed. I really enjoyed sharing the story with you all.

Hermione's reference to a locked garden and a helpful robin is drawn from *The Secret Garden* by Frances Hodgson Burnett (1911).

Pugsley Addams is the property of the cartoonist Charles Addams. I make no profit from his character.

Senior Auror McPhee is adapted from the character Nanny McPhee in the film *Nanny McPhee*, Universal Pictures, 2005.

Canon characters are the property of J.K. Rowling. I make no money from them.

My thanks and gratitude to my beta, TeaOli, who very kindly offered to beta read several years (!) ago. Tea, your advice, knowledge, wonderful sense of fun, and talent for giving a touch of class made writing, editing, editing, and editing both an education (believe it or not) and pleasure. I salute you!

Eileen heard the *cracks* of multiple Apparitions and hurried downstairs, excited and apprehensive at the same time, while being thankful that Toby was not too far away. After so many years spent in largely silent contemplation, her confidence with strangers was still a little tenuous. Seeing the number of visitors, she was also relieved that Hermione had legalised her Portkey arrangements to a proper international arrival base serviced by Australian Wizarding Customs and Border Protection and now had a designated Apparition point in an outdoors location.

She need not have worried about her capabilities at offering hospitality; Jean Granger followed, wiping her hands on a kitchen towel.

"Madam Snape, I presume?" a cheerful, grey-bearded wizard called with a genial wave. Behind him, a small retinue of Magibotanists burdened with the paraphernalia of their profession looked about them with expectant delight.

"I am," Eileen answered, remembering to raise her voice a little. "And here is my friend, Doctor Jean Granger."

"Professor Leif Bellamy at your service, mesdames!" The professor bowed gallantly. "I hear that the experimental site is a reasonable hike from here?"

Eileen smiled. "That depends on how fit you are. Toby can do it in twenty minutes, but it takes me nearly half an hour."

"It's quite a pleasant walk after a good cup of tea," Jean said, coming to Eileen's side. "We've just managed to tame a real meatosaurus of a woodstove into producing a decent batch of scones, if you'd all care to join us for morning tea?"

Eileen gave Jean a grateful smile at the very English chorus of "Ooh, yes, please!"

She summoned Tocky, who appeared at once with soap suds clinging to his fingers. "Fetch Toby and Andrew from the work shed, please. Tell them the kettle is on and we have Magibotanical company," she instructed.

"How's the water?" Hermione called.

Severus withdrew his hand from a ceremonial dip in the River Severn. "Bone achingly cold," he called back. Climbing up the bank, he proved his statement by placing his benumbed hand on Hermione's warm cheek, cutting off her shriek of protest with a captivating kiss.

The ninth of January had dawned clear, crisp and bright, and it was still early enough for only the hardiest souls to be out and about. In a daze of complete happiness, Hermione struggled to pay attention to her surroundings. She tore her eyes away from the engagement ring adorning her left hand. *Sneaky wizard. You knew I'd never have refused you, especially on your birthday!* "It's lovely here," she said, looking across the Severn's shimmering breadth. "It's sad, though, to think that Eileen played by the river with her brother when they were children... but at least they were happy memories. Enough for her to name you after it."

"Hm," Severus responded. "Now that I've personally met the geographical feature, I think it's time to show you what I've been thinking of." He smirked at Hermione's sigh of impatience and firmly took hold of her left hand. "So you don't keep looking at it and fall over something. Come along." He wended along the riverbank in what Hermione suspected was an extended route. Gradually, he began to work his way uphill.

"Harry sent me a letter yesterday," Hermione said, talking to assuage her excitement. "He was feeling a bit glum because he's starting to enjoy working with Senior Auror McPhee, which means that he mightn't have much more time with her."

"He'll have her for a while yet, Hermione." Severus glanced at her wryly. "Inside knowledge," he said in answer to her unasked question. "But he can't keep her. Senior Auror McPhee doesn't work that way. She'll go to wherever some goose-cap scapegrace needs her guidance."

"Have you heard any more from Draco?"

"You *are* getting fidgety, aren't you? Draco leaves for Borobudur tomorrow night. Yesterday evening, Kingsley himself escorted him and Narcissa back from visiting Lucius in Azkaban and then took Draco back to Hogwarts for a few parting words of wisdom from Pugsley and Mr Longbottom."

"Draco's mother doesn't object to him going overseas? I gather she was a bit clingy," Hermione said, recalling Professor Addams' opinion that Draco really needed to get away from maternal apron strings.

"A little. The prospect of an empty nest troubles her, but her compulsory rehabilitation sessions and part-time work at Madam Malkin's will see her through the adjustment."

"Professor Addams has worked wonders with rebuilding the reputation of Slytherin House there's pride there now. *Good* pride, not the arrogant kind."

Quirking an eyebrow, Severus patiently picked a route through a copse of trees. "Indeed. Pugsley will never take any grief from the stuffier elements of the Pureblood set as some have already found out. Titles and wealth carry precious little weight with him."

Hermione fidgeted with building anticipation. "Wasn't it good news for Petrus?"

"Yes, Irma and Minerva said that he now enjoys something of a rock star status with the students."

Hermione frowned quizzically. "Does he? I was referring to the Ministry granting him full rights as a British citizen so he can travel whenever and wherever he wants to but he said he really loves the library and wants to stay there. He's even got a dual nationality passport, now. And a Gringotts account!"

"Being a paid staff member, he'd have to put his earnings somewhere," Severus pointed out with exaggerated patience.

"And Madam Pomfrey says that Moaning...*Miss* Myrtle is a lot happier now that she has Paulus to float around with. They've been inseparable. Madam Pomfrey told me that they're a tremendous help to the younger students who need someone to talk to about the war. Or just school in general."

Rolling his eyes, Severus pushed through a ramshackle hedge and murmured an incantation. The air ahead of them rippled and settled.

Hermione gasped.

"I've put a holding deposit on it," Severus explained. "Of course, I need to know that you're happy with it before we proceed any further."

"It's gorgeous!" Hermione breathed, taking in the two storey stone house, a row of walled gardens, and a view across the Severn into England. "Was this your mother's family home? I wonder if one of those gardens has been locked for years and years and only a robin redbreast can help find the key?"

"You haven't seen inside, yet," Severus cautioned, handing her a small bundle of keys. "No, this wasn't where she lived it was a few miles downriver and was demolished over a decade ago. *This* property has been under Muggle ownership for over a hundred years. No resident ghosts or house-elves," he clarified as Hermione eagerly opened the door. "It's been extended from its original two-up-two-down construction which was built by a tea and spice merchant as a holiday retreat and, I suspect, to strategically stockpile merchandise but most of the original features are still in place. As for the gardens, I haven't found any of them to be locked. And why would you require a robin's assistance when Alohomora would do the job far more efficiently?"

Hermione smiled happily as she went inside. "It's just a story I read, once. Actually, I read it so many times that the book fell apart."

For a moment, Severus lingered at the front door, listening with growing satisfaction to the rapid, shallow echo of Hermione's footsteps in empty rooms and her delighted exclamations over stone fireplaces, mullioned windows, exposed oak beams, and the tasteful incorporation of modern conveniences. He sauntered into the hallway and braced himself as Hermione charged down the stairs and flung herself at him, covering him with kisses and words of love.

"But will it be the right choice for *you*, Severus?" she asked, catching her breath. "You said you wanted a laboratory for your potions work."

"Present and accounted for," Severus affirmed. Leading her into the kitchen, he opened a wardrobe-sized cupboard and lifted a hatch concealed in the floor. "*Lumos*."

Hermione counted thirty steep steps before reaching the floor of a generously proportioned, stone-lined room. The air carried the faintest scent of black tea, cloves and bergamot. "I can picture this with workbenches, mazes of glassware, row upon row of neatly labelled, impeccably ordered ingredients and softly simmering cauldrons," she said. "It's you, Severus."

"Thank you, m'lady," Severus intoned with a half-bow. "Bewitching and sensually ensnaring as that vision is, I was thinking of housing something else in here as well." He pointed to a featureless side wall. "The dragon mosaic from the villa would fit perfectly there. I can't, in all conscience, leave such a work in the open air."

"Nor should you!" Hermione agreed. "It's part of your heritage. What's going to happen to the rest of the villa?"

Severus wrapped his arms around his witch and held her close. "Now it's part of your heritage as well, my dear. Oriens is taking care of the villa. He's having it incorporated into an existing nature reserve as a protected area for the staged reinstatement of magical creatures which will also give an extra layer of protection to the link to Merlin's cave. And, apparently, there's a pair of pine martens living by the villa now, which delighted Oriens greatly." He held her at arms' length to look into her eyes. "Are you happy with it?"

"I am, Severus. It feels like home already."

"Good. Now there's just the nuptials to get through," he said through a sigh of sufferance. "We should have a centaur-style ceremony," he teased, thinking of Firenze's description of what would take place as, on Bane and Esnyë's behalf, the palomino centaur invited Severus and Hermione to the springtime celebration. "It would be far less fuss."

"Yes, I'll just quickly go and build a stone circle out the back complete with a crystal heart stone. Then we'll stand before the heart stone, and you shall place thereon a sprig of holly, and I'll put beside it a sprig of ivy, we'll pledge each other in mead, feast all day and consummate our vows under the stars," Hermione replied evenly while wandlessly casting a rather complicated charm.

Severus raised his eyebrows. "Firenze didn't say anything about consummation." Glancing upwards, he beheld a velvety night sky dotted with bright stars and animated constellations.

"Ah, but if we really did have such a ceremony....," Hermione murmured, seductively running her hands down his chest and stomach.

Severus felt his pupils dilate as her quick fingers found a path to his skin. He hoped that he would never lose the sense of amazement that came with the very physical evidence of being desired and loved it was like a secret ingredient that enhanced the passion of his response. *Now there's a bit of glory that cannot be bottled* he concluded before his rational mind went elsewhere.

Having cleaned, oiled, and neatly stored the tools he had first arrived in Australia with, Toby clattered up the stairs for lunch, remembering to leave his boots at the door and reminding Andrew to do the same. "Just shake 'em out when y' want to put 'em on again," he advised. "The spiders 'round 'ere could eat an Acromantula for breakfast."

"Yes, I met one of them behind the bathroom door last night you don't have to convince me." Andrew spread his fingers to show Toby that the spider known as a grey huntsman easily measured a handspan. "It was a good idea to hide out in the shed," he said, catching a glimpse of the perfectly laid table and neatly transfigured interior. "The ladies have been busy, and I have a real knack of getting under foot."

"Yeah, same 'ere."

"Besides, rebuilding that old Triumph's engine was far more interesting. I've never done anything like that before! Arthur will be delighted at how well it's come up."

"I 'ope so. 'E wants to get t' whole thing ready for that Potter bloke's weddin' in June, I think 'e said. Plenty of time, yet." Toby stepped inside and shook his head in wonder. "Look at this... I wouldn't recognize the place from what it was yesterday. Magical coolin' and all." He accepted a tankard of chilled pumpkin juice from Tocky, then blinked at a loud *crack* from outside. "Gunshot, Apparition, or another bloody gum tree droppin' a branch," he said as Eileen and Jean rushed to the window to look.

"Apparition," Andrew affirmed as he listened in on the women's excited whispers. "The birthday wizard has arrived..."

"It's the tenth today," Toby grouched airily.

"Steady on, Toby, he's a wizard, not a Time Lord. He's arrived exactly when he said he would. Our young folk would've had a lot to do, I suspect, and there are some things you just shouldn't rush," Andrew said with an indulgently hopeful smile. "Look! Hermione is glowing! Good Lord, Severus looks so different when he smiles I'd say he's gone ahead and asked her."

"Smilin' is 'e? Quick! Take a photo!" Toby sneaked a look at the couple over Eileen's shoulder, affectionately sliding an arm around her waist. "If Sev'rus ain't scowlin', she must've said yes. Good on you, lad!"

Severus took Hermione's left hand, holding it so that the yellow gold of the summer sun burnished the white gold of her engagement ring and made the three small, practically sensible diamonds sparkle merrily.

Hermione watched him study the tiny rainbows of dancing light and smiled. "Some would say there's magic in that," she said.

Severus gave a half-smile and tucked her hand into the crook of his arm. "They're probably right. But I always knew that there was more to magic than foolish wand-waving."

Together, they made their way to the house, where two sets of parents eagerly awaited their news.