

For Him

by sweetflag

When Hermione discovers that an incurable Snape has been left to waste in a secret hospital ward, she sets out to do what so many have failed to do before and cure him.

This is my response to the Dictionary Drabble Challenge. The chapters have to be less than one thousand words and contain the listed words.

For Him

Chapter 1 of 26

When Hermione discovers that an incurable Snape has been left to waste in a secret hospital ward, she sets out to do what so many have failed to do before and cure him.

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"As you can see, we hold out little hope with this case, Miss Granger."

The Healer's fustian tone was so disparate to their portrayed aura of care and healing that it made her shiver. But she wasn't here to pick fault with their conduct; hopefully, another would do that with more vigour and pertinence than she.

Her sherry-hued eyes shimmered with unshed tears as they latched upon the thin wizard wasting in the spartan room no better than a cell. Disgust at the unfairness of it welled-up like pus in a suppurating wound, and she bit down on her lip to stifle her vile outpouring. Severus Snape had saved them, and when he needed saving, no one seemed capable or willing.

"You may of course stay with him."

"So kind," she responded with saccharin sweetness.

Her lips curved into a sneer as her sarcasm passed over his apathetic head; already, his lips had mumbled a goodbye and his legs were leading him away. Narrowed eyes and ill-will followed his retreating back until he disappeared from view.

The small room had no door, just a narrow opening, and she hesitated upon the threshold. Chewing on her lip, she felt rather small, standing up against the best of the Healing profession; she summoned the fire that had warmed her belly and scorched away her post-War numbness, the flame that had ignited when she had discovered that Severus Snape was in a sub rosa ward of St Mungo's.

Hopeless, love.

She loved Ron, but his cold brush-off of Snape's condition had riled her and been the spark that had created the wildfire that roared within her... and it felt magnificent! Alive and hot with new-found purpose, she had scrounged up all that was known of Snape after his encounter with Nagini, and it was meagre. The Healers had been parsimonious to the point of paranoia, and the increased unease made her more determined; she had worked and studied, filled every available minute with the method of

saving Severus Snape.

Fuelled and fierce, she had tracked down the Healer she had needed, and after a short and intense chat, he had led her down to the area set aside for the 'incurables', those who tarnished the good reputation of the hospital—not his words, of course, but she heard them in each carefully constructed response. Severus Snape should be well and mobile, as irascible and as sarcastic as ever, but instead, was as sentient and as vicious as a limp leaf.

It was so strange looking down upon him; the man who had stormed through the corridors of Hogwarts, the man who had been so ...*vital* was so horrifically lifeless. A whimper wormed its way up from her chest and slipped past her trembling lips. The black-clad frame had always been lean, but eight months in hospital had ironically withered him into a skeleton of a man; flaccid tendons poked up through pale skin and neglected nails erupted from the stick-thin fingers.

I know that he did so much for us, Hermione, but what can you do that the whole of the Medi-Wizardry profession hasn't done? C'mon, love, I know that it's tough, but he's a casualty, just like so many others.

Ron's parting words had been a double-edged sword; they had slashed at her self-esteem, but in the other hand, they had given her the sharp edge to slice away at the last of her doubts and insecurities; the latter moiety had given her the cutting edge to ease the pain in her conscience. She had brandished Ron's words before her and parried and riposted every obstacle.

But now!

Staring down at him, her resolve shattered, and she was left reeling at her own arrogance—how could she have ever*thought* that she could help? Squeezing shut her eyes until blue spots flared in the darkness and the orbs hurt, she tried to quell the rising torrent of despair and focus on the plan... the one cultivated in the quiet times, the one nurtured in secret: the one that she had dubbed 'Sub Rosa'.

It had to work.

Nagini's poison had been studied exhaustively; every aspect of that viper's vile venom had been painstakingly examined, and she had slowly discovered the secrets held within the toxin—it was as dire as any Dark curse!

It had seeped beneath his skin and up into his brain where it had taken a firm and vicious grip, keeping his mind trapped within the same destructive thoughts that must have haunted his waking moments and tormented him in his sleep. The venom was flooding his skull, drowning him in his past sins, soaking him in terrific remorse; and despite his sacrifices and suffering in allying himself with the Order, he was contrite: lost in a river of his unshed tears. To be free of the venom, he had to forgive himself.

Weeping softly for him, she sat on the thin sliver of mattress by his side and gently caressed his cheek. Bending so that her lips were close to his ear, she poured her heart out into what she hoped was a route to his mind. Whispering words of forgiveness, she attempted what others had failed to do and cure his soul, rather than his wound.

Footsteps heralded the end of her visit, and she was waiting at the threshold when the elderly orderly arrived to take her back to the exit. Bent and wizened, the old man grinned toothlessly at her as they walked silently along the gloomy hallways, and for some reason, she felt some connection to the quiet man.

At the hidden doorway from 'sub rosa', he gently grabbed her elbow and nodded meaningfully.

"It's good that someone knows what's needed, lass. I guess that I'll be seeing ye again soon and quite often."

Smiling, she nodded and patted his liver-spotted hand, staring over his bowed shoulder into the darkness that would be awaiting her—and for him, she would be willing.

Author Notes: The words and their definitions are listed below.

----- Words with definitions -----

sub rosa \suhb-ROH-zuh\, adverb:

1. Secretly; privately; confidentially.
2. Designed to be secret or confidential; secretive; private.

disparate \DIS-puh-rit; dis-PAIR-it\, adjective:

1. Fundamentally different or distinct in quality or kind.
2. Composed of or including markedly dissimilar elements.

fustian \FUHS-chuhn\, noun:

1. A kind of coarse twilled cotton or cotton and linen stuff, including corduroy, velveteen, etc.
2. An inflated style of writing or speech; pompous or pretentious language.
3. Made of fustian.
4. Pompous; ridiculously inflated; bombastic.

contrite \KON-tryt; kuhn-TRYT\, adjective:

1. Deeply affected with grief and regret for having done wrong; penitent; as, "a contrite sinner."
2. Expressing or arising from contrition; as, "contrite words."

moiety \MOY-uh-tee\, noun:

1. One of two equal parts; a half.
2. An indefinite part; a small portion or share.
3. One of two basic tribal subdivisions.

sentient \SEN-shee-uhnt; -tee-; -shuhnt\, adjective:

1. Capable of perceiving by the senses; conscious.
2. Experiencing sensation or feeling.

parsimonious \par-suh-MOH-nee-uhs\, adjective:

Sparing in expenditure; frugal to excess.

Visions of Another Mind

Chapter 2 of 26

When Hermione discovers that an incurable Snape has been left to waste in a secret hospital ward, she sets out to do what so many have failed to do before and cure him.

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Wind tortured, twisted trees screeched and cracked as the ferocious gale battered at the bleak landscape. Roiling clouds, heavy and dark, dominated the heavens, seemingly pressing down upon the earth with its never-ending furze and copses of corrupted trees. Shielded from the worst of the storm by a collection of smooth, eroded boulders, he stared at the desolate scene and wondered where the hell he was. Chilled and suffused with alarm, he tried to recall the last moments prior to his unconsciousness and the subsequent awakening here.

The hot tension in his neck was a painful reminder of Nagini's fangs slicing through his skin, and he gasped out at the surge of emotions kindled by that fear-inducing moment. Leaning against the cold rocks, he gagged and spat out burning bile. Even as he had bled over the floorboards, willing his memories to Potter, he had tried to escape, but his instinctive desire for survival had been focused more on fleeing than location, and he had attempted to Disapparate blind: had the botched spell landed him in some unknown place?

Moaning out in frustration, he ran a hand down his face and squeezed his eyes shut. Another, more sinister thought wound its way through his despair, and after a startled inhale, his eyes popped open, and he dug his hands into his pockets, fumbling for his wand. With a roar that startled some birds from their nearby roosts, he clenched his empty fists and sank to his knees.

~X~

With the aid of a sputtering candle, she walked down the dark aisle; her fingertips grazed over the spines of the silent books nestled neatly on their shelves, and her eyes eagerly read the embossed letters. How many times had she skulked through the library at Hogwarts to peel open a forbidden book and devour its contents? Countless! And yet, this was the first time that her insides had squirmed so frantically or her heart thumped so desperately.

The smoke from the flickering flame was acrid, and it stung her tired eyes, but she had resolved herself to her task, and nothing would halt her. Coming to the end of the aisle, she clucked in frustration—where was that damned book? There! Nestled between two thick, imposing tomes was a slender book. Hooking her fingertip over the spine, she gently prised the book from its literal fetter and gathered the long-sought book to her bosom. Smiling and running her thumb almost lovingly over the dark, leather cover, she bit her lip as her joy rose up in a formidable wave, but a stifled squeal was the only paean allowed to disturb the revered silence of the Library.

Headmistress McGonagall had decided that due to her almost celebrity status after aiding in the defeat of the Dark Lord, Hermione should have her own private room, and Hermione couldn't have been more thrilled with the privacy afforded her. Kicking off her shoes and hastily tugging off her school robes, she moved to curl up on her bed and held the treasured tome between her trembling fingers. Gold-leaf had once adorned the cover, filling the carved grooves with colour, but age had rendered it subfusc and innocuous—how odd that some of the most glorious things were hidden behind such obvious banality!

It had been almost a fortnight since her first visit to sub rosa, and she had decided that another approach was needed: she couldn't be sure that Snape heard her. Trawling through countless books on topics pertaining to mind and memory, grief and contrition, she had found the name of this little book in an appendix, and it had sent her mind thundering down a new and terrifying path.

Visions of Another Mind. The idea had germinated from the seed the title had planted, and in the gloom of another sleepless night, she had nurtured it. But could she deal with the ramifications and consequences of pursuing that line of treatment? Could she enter Snape's mind and combat what existed there?

~X~

"Does she have the acumen to complete such a task?" The voice was nothing more than a rasp in the dark, but he could hear the surprised admiration within it, but then, a rattling sigh wafted from the shadows. "But she is so young, and relying upon the thesis of a Squib Latitudinarian can only enhance her folly."

"Minerva seems to think so," he replied before chasing a grape pip around his few remaining teeth and ruminating upon his sudden pique at his employer's belittling of Miss Granger. "She's given ye no reason to cavil about the girl before," he responded more accusatorily than he intended.

A dry chuckle burst from the oddly-hunched and indistinguishable shape in the chair before him and then that tapered out into a brittle wheeze.

"Suffer no umbrage," soothed the shadowed creature. "None was meant."

"I have read that book," the sighing voice continued, bitterness lacing the words. "It was written... by a pompous wizard, hiding behind his... own impression of open-mindedness and tolerance, and he failed... to grasp the true horror of what he had penned." There was a series of quick rasping breaths, and the shape lurched as though in pain. "But what he puts forth... will succeed."

Spitting out the grape pip, he lifted his head and idly scratched the side of his nose. "And we don't want that, do we?" he asked, listening to the glutinous wheezes.

The figure gave a violent start, and their indrawn breath sounded like a death rattle.

"He was made a hero!" the voice hissed out. "His sacrifices and bravery... extolled by the surviving members of the... Order. No one... would think... of punishing him for his sins and the corruptions of that... snivelling snake."

Harsh breaths coming in desperate pants filled the space between them, and the old man reared back as he caught the scent carried on the thing's breath: the sickly stench of rotting meat.

"I wish it for Shape... to suffer! Delay her!"

Author's Notes: The required words are as follows.

----- Words with definitions -----

acumen \uh-KYOO-muhn; AK-yuh-muhn\, noun:

Quickness of perception or discernment; shrewdness shown by keen

insight.

cavil \KAV-uhl\, intransitive verb:

1. To raise trivial or frivolous objections; to find fault without

good reason.

2. To raise trivial objections to.

3. A trivial or frivolous objection.

umbrage \UHM-brij\, noun:

1. Shade; shadow; hence, something that affords a shade, as a screen

of trees or foliage.

2. a. A vague or indistinct indication or suggestion; a hint.

3. b. Reason for doubt; suspicion.

4. Suspicion of injury or wrong; offense; resentment.

fetter \FET-uhr\, noun:

1. A chain or shackle for the feet; a bond; a shackle.

2. Anything that confines or restrains; a restraint.

3. To put fetters upon; to shackle or confine.

4. To restrain from progress or action; to impose restraints on; to

confine.

paean \PEE-uhn\, noun:

1. A joyous song of praise, triumph, or thanksgiving.

2. An expression of praise or joy.

subfusc \sub-FUHSK\, adjective:

Dark or dull in color; drab, dusky.

latitudinarian \lat-uh-too-din-AIR-ee-un; -tyoo-\, adjective:

1. Having or expressing broad and tolerant views, especially in religious matters.

2. A person who is broad-minded and tolerant; one who displays freedom in thinking, especially in religious matters.

3. [Often capitalized] A member of the Church of England, in the time

of Charles II, who adopted more liberal notions in respect to the authority, government, and doctrines of the church than generally prevailed.

When Needs Must...

Chapter 3 of 26

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Delay her!

He twisted the mop head in the bucket and then slopped it onto the floor. Wands were forbidden in sub rosa unless some emergency dictated otherwise, and many of the chores, therefore, had to be done by hand. He didn't mind; since the first insurgence of the corruption that was Voldemort, he had had little desire to perform magic; events had rendered him despairing of it. Soapy water oozed out over the dark, tiled floor, and he began the soothing motion of cleaning while his mind was free to ruminate over the task of delaying Miss Granger.

An idea had popped into his head almost as soon as the words had emerged from the hulked thing. How odd that several years ago he would never have thought to obtrude in any way, and yet now, he was foisting his will and intentions upon a few highly influential people. Swallowing the bile and his discomfort, he began to mop with angry vim and reluctantly planned his meeting with Minerva.

~X~

The NEWT timetable was, on paper, less busy than the one constructed for the OWLs, but each highlighted session was an intense, two-hour long battle to absorb as much as possible without the brain collapsing in terror. No wonder they were called Nearly Exhausting! It had bothered her immensely at first, the notion that she was struggling and not doing them aright, but her doubts had been assuaged when she observed the same tensions resting upon the shoulders of her peers.

Next to her, Ron moaned and slumped across the desk. "Is being an Auror worth this?" he whined. "I mean, all the nasty Dark wizards have been got rid off—we did that last year!"

It was a familiar Friday afternoon ritual and Hermione let it drift over her; Ron and Harry generally became more restless as the weekend neared and the chance to release the week's tension on a broom became so teasingly close. She was wise enough to see it as a natural vent, and she was glad of it, recalling the often repeated tirade of the final year student that they had suffered while being students at Hogwarts. While Ron grumbled under his breath, she daintily turned the page, her eyes lapping up the words and her mind thrumming with the theories it disclosed. It was a soothing distraction from her anxieties regarding Snape.

It was a special kind of lure, though; she never moved far away from the thought of putting things right for Snape, and if Ron suspected that she diverted a large proportion of her free time to that task then he said little about it. Perhaps it allayed his fears about his own dedication to the Quidditch team and the hours of practice it demanded.

They parted company at the base of the main staircase in the entrance hall; Ron gave her a peck on the cheek, and Harry waved at her before Ginny swept up, and with wide grins, they hurried down to the broom sheds and the Quidditch pitch. Clutching a book to her chest, she watched them until the curve of the path led them out of her line of sight, and then sighing, she turned and began the long walk to her room.

It was reassuring that the general day-to-day activities of school-life had dulled the impact of them being in school, and as she passed groups of students, they barely battered an eyelid—such a relief after the stares, whispers and awed questions that had pestered them at the start of the year. Absorbed in her own thoughts, it was only at the last moment that she saw Headmistress McGonagall approaching her.

The Office had changed since the last occupant; the gadgets had gone, and a few more potted plants erupted in various corners, and of course, there was Dumbledore smiling down upon her from his portrait.

"I'm afraid to say, Hermione, that after consideration, your excursions from the school will have to cease."

Hermione blinked and then felt her lips twitch in a bemused smile. "But, it was all agreed; I was to have personal free-time beyond the school."

"Certain issues have been raised regarding your safety; if you are outside our walls then we cannot ensure your safety at a time when we have that responsibility."

Frowning, Hermione licked her lips, and Ron's earlier argument sprang to mind. Without the chance to leave the school, she would have no chance to continue her visits to Snape—unless....

~X~

"Your method of delaying her was exquisitely simple."

He bowed his head in mock gratitude. "I expected her to cadge for leniency," he said quietly and with a hint of scepticism. Her acceptance of the situation had been too... quick and it made him wary.

The hunched being gave the impression of shrugging dismissively before a series of wheezes and dry coughs wracked the twisted form.

"You did well," it finally rasped out. "Well enough... for a reward of sorts."

The old man's lip curled up in disgust—disgust at the flutter of excitement in his gut and the way that he was compelled to dangle on the end of the creature's hook... but the bait was irresistible.

"I seem to recall... being courted by a rather... dashing boulevardier," she uttered in a wistful, breathless whisper. "He told the Dark Lord... of a suitable place for *His*

more... lavish experiments and interrogations."

Despite his appalled stance and the hate coursing through him, he leant closer to catch the thing's quiet and struggling speech. He knew that it could just be another dead end, but he couldn't take the risk that this would be the place where his love's tortured body lay unclaimed. Until he found her body and put her to rest, he was tied to the thing chuckling in the chair.

"A small cottage on the... outskirts of a Muggle mire... called Potemkin village." She emitted a hideous, chilling cackle. "Such a... wonderfully apt name."

Author's Notes: Words and the definitions are listed below.

1. tirade
2. obtrude
3. Potemkin village
4. boulevardier
5. cadge
6. aright
7. ruminate

----- Words with Definitions -----

tirade \TY-raid; tih-RAID\, noun:

A long angry speech; a violent denunciation; a prolonged outburst full of censure or abuse.

obtrude \uhb-TROOD; ob-\, transitive verb:

1. To thrust out; to push out.
2. To force or impose (one's self, remarks, opinions, etc.) on others with undue insistence or without solicitation.
3. To thrust upon a group or upon attention; to intrude.

Potemkin village \puh-TEM(P)-kin\, noun:

An impressive facade or display that hides an undesirable fact or state; a false front.

boulevardier \boo-luh-var-DYAY; bul-uh-\, noun:

1. A frequenter of city boulevards, especially in Paris.
2. A sophisticated, worldly, and socially active man; a man who frequents fashionable places; a man-about-town.

cadge \KAJ\, transitive verb:

1. To beg or obtain by begging; to sponge.
2. To beg; to sponge.

aright \uh-RYT\, adverb:

Rightly; correctly; properly; in a right way or manner.

ruminate \ROO-muh-nayt\, intransitive verb:

1. To chew the cud; to chew again what has been slightly chewed and swallowed. "Cattle free to ruminate." --Wordsworth.
2. To think again and again; to muse; to meditate; to ponder; to reflect.
3. To chew over again.
4. To meditate or ponder over; to muse on.

... The Devil Rides.

Chapter 4 of 26

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There was no abating of it; the storm was unrelenting. Shivering and crouched in the lee of the rocks, his eyes darted along the flat horizon. There was no surcease in the level landscape with its stiff gorse and spindly, twisted trees, and nothing to draw his eye as to a better place to be. A surge of panic made him whimper and slump against the boulder: never had he felt so vulnerable or uncertain. Wandless and without any hint of a way to escape this place or even how to *survive* here, his mind spiralled down further until his heart was fluttering wildly and his breath was the merest, frantic movement of air over his twitching lips.

~X~

The small room was even more invisible than Sub Rosa—had she known or even cared—and the heavy spells surrounding it were an ironic façade to the fact that they had no idea how to contain her or even *if* she needed containing. Hiding her in the deepest part of the hospital had been the only option at the time, and over time, the need for her to remain concealed intensified.

The Governor of Azkaban had been vehement in his refusal to take responsibility for her, and it was only her apparent powerlessness which mollified St Mungo's into keeping the wasting form. It was an uneasy compromise, to forgo convention and accept her, even though she was technically still a prisoner of that dreaded gaol. It was decided that she would be sealed away while they pondered how best to deal with her.

~X~

He knew that he should have told his so-called superiors about her ability to communicate; should have told them about the whispered pleas and rasping mutterings, and without hesitation, he should have informed them that she was, to some degree, mobile, but a certain *schadenfreude* had kept him tight-lipped, and he had kept it quiet so he could revel in her terror. It had been his downfall.

How she had managed it, eluded him; her condition should have precluded any kind of output, yet somehow, she made herself heard, and her words had trapped him. For months, he had ignored what she offered, for months he had held himself aloof from allying himself with such as she—his beloved Dorcas would never forgive him! Yet, because of his beloved, he had finally crumbled and succumbed to the creature's whims.

And for his sins, he now knelt in the rubble of a cottage, weeping silent, angry tears. The basement of 'Potemkin Village' had long since been cleared out by Aurors who had investigated it decades before, and time had eaten away at the rest until it had collapsed in upon itself. The talisman he had created from the almost sacred strands of Dorcas' hair, hung limply and unresponsively from its silver chain. There was nothing of her here: no remains to gather and finally restore to their proper place. His vow to his wife was as unfulfilled now as it had been before his dubious alliance.

Closing his eyes, the image of that awful keeper of secrets filled his mind, and he snarled out, letting the anger rampage and riot within him. For the first time in memory, Fulton Meadows felt stirrings of resentment towards his long-dead wife—*how could she have placed such a burden upon me?* But he loved her, and if she wanted to be buried with their children—the children that Voldemort had murdered—then so be it!

The anger shifted and refocused upon the decaying woman in the bowels of Sub Rosa, and using its heat, he pondered how he could rid himself of such an abomination. The edge of the oval-shaped talisman bit into his palm, and a dark chuckle slipped past his curved lips as an idea proliferated in his previously listless brain. It was delightful! How often had he heard the once grandee wizard whisper his wish that Severus Snape was well? Standing and smirking, he brushed the dust from his knees and Disapparated.

~X~

The patina of a wizard coping well with the flung mud was expertly pasted upon his pale features, and it would take a second, more probing, scrutiny to see the lines etched into that skin and the unhealthy hue of his sclera. Watching from the shadows, Meadows saw the tall, elegant wizard buffeted and jostled by the ribald merriment of those who revelled in the sight of the mighty falling.

It had disgusted and wounded many that the pale man had escaped Azkaban, but Meadows had heard the desperate pleas and the heartfelt sorrow of the man, and knew that there was a soul that needed some cleansing. His grin widened as Lucius Malfoy slipped through the doorway to be swallowed by the shadows of Sub Rosa. What better way to destroy a Death Eater than with a Death Eater? His smile became wry; and by a merry happenstance, the same Death Eater would aid in the recovery of another.

~X~

The black-clad man lurched to his feet, and for the merest moment, it looked as though that lean frame would crumple back to the hard ground, but a hand darted out, gripping the stones, and the man stood tall. From some recess that the horrors of his situation could not pollute, he summoned a strength to batter at his intense dread. Armed with his wit—a wit that had kept him dancing just one step ahead of death for decades—and a fierce determination to discover if he could finally call himself free, Snape rode his anger like a devil and stepped into the storm.

Author's Notes: By way of explanation, I have created the character Fulton Meadows, and for the purposes of this, he is the widower of Dorcas Meadows, the witch who was murdered by Voldemort himself. He works as an orderly within Sub Rosa, and is the wizened wizard who took a liking to Hermione at the end of the first chapter. My apologies for the earlier vagueness.

Words and their definitions are listed below.

1. listless
2. vehement
3. ribald
4. forgo

5. schadenfreude

6. grandee

7. patina

-----words with definitions-----

listless \LIST-lis\, adjective:

Having no desire or inclination; indifferent; heedless; spiritless.

--LISTLESSLY, adverb -- LISTLESSNESS, noun

vehement \VEE-uh-muhnt\, adjective:

1. Characterised by intensity of emotions or convictions, or forcefulness of expression.

2. Characterised by or acting with great force or energy; strong.

ribald \RIB-uhld; RY-bawld\, adjective:

1. Characterised by or given to vulgar humour; coarse.

2. A ribald person; a lewd fellow.

forgo \for-GO\, transitive verb;

Inflected forms: forwent, forgone, forgoing, forgoes:

To abstain from; to do without.

schadenfreude \SHOD-n-froy-duh\, noun:

A malicious satisfaction obtained from the misfortunes of others.

grandee \gran-DEE\, noun:

1. A man of elevated rank or station.

2. In Spain or Portugal, a nobleman of the first rank.

patina \PAT-n-uh; puh-TEEN-uh\, noun:

1. The colour or incrustation which age gives to works of art; especially, the green rust which covers ancient bronzes, coins, and medals.

2. The sheen on any surface, produced by age and use.

3. An appearance or aura produced by habit, practice, or use.

4. A superficial layer or exterior.

Confluence

Chapter 5 of 26

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and that it pushes the plot forwards. Word lists and the date they were submitted appear after each chapter. I hope you enjoy!

Lucius waited until the door clicked shut behind him before allowing his spine to bend under the weight of his woes. Wiping a trembling hand over his mouth, he peered into the gloom of a place lurking in the shadow of a salubrious haven and wondered if he had the strength to sit and stare at his friend's motionless body. No longer did he hiss urgent pleas into those ears or grip those wasted arms in desperation to elicit some response, and no longer did he inveigle upon the seemingly lifeless frame...doing so had hurt.

The recurrent abulia seized him; a mental languor, drifting over his mind like some thieving miasma, but to his regret, it never stayed long enough...in that instance, the Firewhiskey helped...and it would all come crashing down upon his quaking back.

The sound of the door opening caught his attention, and his mind gathered itself together like a cobra rising up, readying to attack. Stepping to the side and turning on his heel, his hooded gaze latched upon a bent and elderly man grinning up at him with a familiarity that rankled.

"Don't look like that, Mr Malfoy," he said in response to the cold glare. "I have no plan to gloat or roister. Indeed, I come to offer you some hope with regards to Severus Snape."

"Don't be ridiculous!" Lucius spat out, his lips curling back in a sneer at the sight of the withered wizard. The old man still grinned, and something fluttered deep inside, stirring his guts...could this man hold some clue to Snape's cure?

~X~

At first, he thought to refuse, but the amber liquid looked so tempting, and the shrewd but gentle gleam in the old man's hazel eyes made his protests redundant. He needed the drink, and the old man knew it. The burn was delicious as it slid down his throat, and a subtle smokiness played on his tongue before a hint of juniper signalled the end. He eyed the old man who merely smiled, and Lucius pondered who he was that he would have such high-quality liquor in a small broom cupboard to be sipped as freely as any three Knut rubbish sold in the cheap drinking houses.

"It's an interesting idea," he said by way of dimming his own curiosity about the orderly, "and I suspect that the Granger girl has the wit to carry it out." He recalled how she had stood up against them in his home...previous home now that the Ministry had punished him as best they could...and that flicker of admiration that had warred with his prejudice now fluttered freely. "In fact, seeing that she has bested the best of us, I fail to see how she needs any assistance at all." He took another sip, relishing the texture and quality of it, even as he fought the urge to gulp it down. "Excellent Firewhiskey!" he said while saluting a fellow connoisseur.

"There are those who would see her fail," Meadows answered softly. "Thank you," he said with a gentle tilt of the head. "Sometimes it helps after a long day."

Malfoy waited until his mouth fairly burnt from the whiskey before swallowing to respond. "Severus acquired many enemies...he had the knack...and I'm sure that there are still those who objugate the Ministry's refusal to uphold the charges levied against him." A bout of melancholy gripped him, and he drained the tumbler, holding the lip against his until the last drop seeped into his mouth. Sighing, he placed the empty glass on the rough table. "I fail to see how I can be of assistance; the pin money granted to me by the *beneficent* Ministry barely pays the debtors, and as for influence..." he let out a bitter laugh, "I am more influenced these days."

Meadowes eased back, and his grin was almost predatory. "You have more influence than you think, Mr Malfoy."

Something in the man's tone made him shiver, and Lucius turned his focus from musing to the enigmatic orderly; his sudden vulnerability made him wary, as though he had fallen for some deception and let slip more than was wise, but his state of affairs was publicly known...there was nothing left of the Malfoy name that they could pick at.

"You still have influence with those who wish to forget their past allegiances."

Lucius relaxed and slumped slightly in the rickety, wooden chair. "For a moment, I wondered if I had stumbled across a viper, but you are not that subtle to make an effective strike against me. I have no wish to associate with them, and the lure of recapturing some past power will not entice me. I still feel incapable of aiding yourself and Miss Granger."

The old man chuckled, a deep and hearty chortle. "I am a lowly badger, I confess, but I have learnt that consistent hard work can work just as well as Slytherin stealth...oh! I see you smile, sir. I can see that my way may lack a certain flair, but I sit here, drinking for pleasure and not through need, and my nights are sleep-filled."

"Well played," Lucius replied resignedly. "I still fail to see what use I could be."

~X~

Legs and lungs burning, he struggled to keep his pace; his anger had been exhausted hours before, and only stubbornness and the howling wind kept him stumbling forwards. This land was frustrating and terrifying. In the hours that he had been conscious, the sky had not changed and the light not dimmed. There was no evidence to indicate that the day would ever end. As that thought gained momentum through his mind, it stirred up strange and bewildering theories. Was this a form of Purgatory? Had he died on the floor of the Shrieking Shack? Was this his afterlife?

April 19th

objurgate

miasma

pin money

roister

abulia

salubrious

inveigle

oooXooo

Pain lanced out from his knees, and he cried out as throbbing waves followed that initial agonising surge. Gritting his teeth and clenching his fists, Snape fell to the side to ease the pressure of his battered knees against the gravel lurking beneath the furze. The despair that had robbed him of his faculties was threatening to return. The futility of it all was awesome.

The pain dimmed to a sting, and he lumbered to his feet; for now, his only source of strength lay in the notion of moving, of seeking something in this lonely place. Dwelling upon this as some cruel afterlife had occupied much of his time, and he had even smirked at the irony of it...how often had he prayed to be left alone? But now, it pressed down upon him, and he could not stifle the unpleasant churning in his stomach or the poisonous ramblings falling from his chapped lips.

"I was under the impression that Death was the great soother," he shouted into the wind. "Is nothing what it claims to be? Is nothing honest? It was all supposed to end, damn you!"

In the emptiness, all he could do was lambaste the prickly furze, and with that uncaring, ubiquitous gorse grabbing at his legs, the wind tugging at him and his mind

tormenting him, he continued on his way to anywhere.

~X~

"It's hideous!"

Lucius slammed the small window shut and backed away from the heavy, wooden door. It had taken a few moments for his mind to process what he saw, and no chimera could have equalled her! It was grotesque!

The old man stepped forward and gripped his elbow. "I cannot lionise the use of Occlumency enough!" he hissed into Lucius' ear, and with that warning, he led the stunned wizard back to his makeshift office.

This time, there was no hesitation in accepting the offered drink as his mind battled with the ramifications of her condition...trapped within her own putrefying corpse.

"How is it possible?" Lucius asked in wonder.

"I have no idea, but I want it destroyed," Meadows said matter-of-factly while sipping his own drink.

Lucius could not argue, and he saw the deal that they would strike in this office: the life of one Death Eater for the death of another. Snape would be cured so that he could administer the final severing of soul from flesh, and he would help...Merlin! To be rid of that thing, he would help!

"I know that she's aware of things that she shouldn't be, and that makes me think that she's getting into people's heads. She spoke about the book and that Miss Granger had been delayed before I mentioned it. I suspect that when Minerva came to visit Snape, somehow she was able to take the information from her head."

Lucius choked on his drink. "Bellatrix can *talk*?"

Meadows nodded and Lucius gagged; the whiskey burned as it tried to leave his stomach, and his resolve intensified.

"Bella was... *is* a formidable Legilimens," he finally confirmed in a strangled whisper. The glass paused on its way to his lips as he thought about the man's words and warnings, and he looked upon the old man sitting sanguinely on the stool. "Another condition to Severus' healing?" he asked wryly. "I teach Granger Occlumency."

Meadows saluted Lucius and grinned. "I'll inform Miss Granger of our plan to cure Snape."

~X~

"Eh, Harry?"

Harry yawned and looked up from his scrawled notes. "What's up, Ron?"

Ron's freckled face screwed up, and his gaze darted nervously to the far corner of the Common Room. Harry knew that in that quiet corner sat Hermione. The patience that Ron had displayed, in part due to his own unease with the hours that he had to dedicate elsewhere, was crumbling as the distance between them grew, and if first-years were gossiping about a split in the 'Golden Trio', then it was not farfetched to consider that a break-up was looming. The nervousness that was eating at Ron took a nibble at Harry...he recalled how terrible it had been when Ron had dated Lavender.

"Do you think that Hermione's overdoing it?"

Harry blinked and mentally rearranged the question into the one that Ron had meant to ask...*do you think that Hermione is going to dump me?*..and how could he answer! Sighing, he closed his textbook and rubbed his smarting eyes. If he was honest, then he would admit that he was concerned about the epigone of the Hermione that they had known, but he knew that no one had come out of the last year unscathed. Hogwarts was no longer the winsome sanctuary that it had once been.

"I don't think so, Ron. I think that she's just dealing with it all in the best way she can: she has solving puzzles, and we have Quidditch."

Ron gave up any pretence of attempting his homework and raked his fingers through his hair. "I should cut back on practice," he said thoughtfully. "I don't need to be out there as often as the younger kids. Hermione and me could go walk by the lake... do all that mushy stuff that Lavender was always ranting about. We don't get the chance to spend much time together," he admitted softly. "Yeah!" he said with burgeoning enthusiasm and confidence. "It's about time that we got back to doing things together; I'm marching over there right now and...oh!"

Harry frowned at Ron's crestfallen gasp and followed his friend's saddened gaze. A large owl had swept in and was perched on the back of Hermione's chair, no doubt to deliver the letter which Hermione was reading with almost feverish excitement. They watched on as she pocketed the mystery missive and, without a glance in their direction, hastily leave. Both saw it as a portent of her growing disaffection, and while Ron angrily packed away his books, Harry felt something squirm unpleasantly...they had always been together.

April 26th

1. portent
2. lambaste
3. chimera
4. lionize
5. ubiquitous
6. winsome
7. epigone

oooXooo

Author's Notes: For epocheon... for the inspiration!

Her vision was clouding over, and the sounds that had been clear were becoming nothing more than whispers. Letting out a frustrated scream, she felt herself slip from the mind that had carried her. The lack of senses was a disorientating and disturbing event, and she could not stop that thrill of fear as she travelled...deaf, dumb and blind...from her host back to her decomposing frame. Seeing and hearing through her own sense organs was a shadow of what she could perceive when clinging like a parasite to a convenient mind, and she craved it! She yearned for it!

It had been quite accidental that first foray into someone else's mind; she had struggled and railed against her confines, and after a moment of terrifying nothingness and the sudden maelstrom of bombarding sensory information, she had been blessed with vision and sound. A glance in a reflective surface had indicated that she was inside the head of a young, male Healer, and as he had done his rounds, she had revelled in the freedom.

Meadowes had been resistant to her attempts, and the other patients were too far away to reach; it seemed reasonable to posit that just as Legilimency required eye contact, so this new ability required the host to be within a few feet of her. She bided her time until the Healers did their rounds or some visitor happened to walk past her little cell.

It was during such a confluence of minds that she discovered Snape residing in one of the rooms, and although she saw him as suffering a similar fate, she was less than sympathetic given how he had usurped her from the Dark Lord's attentions and potentially precipitated her current state. But as her excursions had lengthened, she had come to learn of Snape's treachery, and her mind had seethed. Her future had narrowed down to the fulfilment of one task: the destruction of Severus Snape. Struggling and striving, she began to determine the extent of her ability, and used it to gather information about his treatment and visitors, about his status in the Wizarding world and anything else that would aid her in her objective. It was her passion!

The only hiccup in her plan was Granger. The bitch would no doubt find some way to thwart the destiny awaiting Snape; her impassioned speech to the Healer in charge of Sub Rosa, demanding that she see Snape had indicated her level of commitment and with free access to the ward, nothing would hinder her. It was only through good fortune that she had discovered how close Granger could be to a cure when that McGonagall witch had hesitated by her hidden doorway to wipe away a tear at Snape's condition. She could no longer rely upon serendipity to drop nuggets of information in her lap; she had to be more assertive. The first hurdle to leap was to learn how to exert some influence upon the mind she occupied.

~X~

The Room of Requirement looked as it had that day they had returned to Hogwarts to search for Rowena's diadem. She shivered as her mind was pulled to those memories that she had effectively smothered with study, Snape's cure and anything else that promised distraction. But in the cold room with the gaping hole in the wall, she couldn't hide from the rising torrent. Gasping, moaning and bowed beneath their weight, she staggered and clutched at her belly, only the knowledge that she was to meet with the mysterious orderly to discuss Snape's cure kept her upright and in control.

The letter had come as a surprise and a welcome one at that. The Headmistress' withdrawn lenity had disappointed her, and her mind had turned to ponder leaving the school undetected, but she had tempered her impatience to see Snape with common sense. The method described in the book required equipment and ingredients that she did not yet possess; rushing off to see Snape would be foolish unless she had the chance to do good by it.

Indeed, the letter had been so graciously received that she had failed, at first, to read between the neatly written script, and it was only now when she craved distraction did she see the hidden warnings.

But why should she be wary of the house-elves? What steps were being taken at Hogwarts to ensure student safety that could be manipulated to a darker purpose?

She knew that the attentions of the teachers had intensified since the start of term, but they were still rattled by the Final Battle and its ramification: they didn't intend to cloy. The decrees spewed out by the Ministry were just gimmicks to enhance the feeling of security, and the new Ministry-appointed counsellor annexed to the Infirmary was a just a gimcrack attempt at demonstrating that the Ministry was on top of 'helping the youth come to terms with the trauma!'

Sighing, she let her gaze drift from the letter; she knew why she was bitter about the new service at Hogwarts. The counsellors were very good at their jobs and were respected by staff and students alike, and without them, she was sure that Hogwarts would be a less halcyon haven. But she just couldn't make use of them! They represented the act of peeling open her thoughts and feelings, and she saw it as ripping open a weeping wound, and she feared it.

Healing Snape was her way of healing herself... and she knew that she couldn't fail; it had become a desperate aim, her 'unwritten implicit', because no one could know of it or how it burned within her...or how failure would cripple her.

May 10th

1. confluence
2. posit
3. maelstrom
4. gimcrack
5. lenity
6. cloy
7. halcyon

Tea and Sympathy

Chapter 6 of 26

When Hermione discovers that an incurable Snape has been left to waste in a secret hospital ward, she sets out to do what so many have failed to do before and cure him.

This is my response to the Dictionary Drabble Challenge. The chapters have to be less than one thousand words and contain the listed words.

At first, he thought that the dark line carving through the furze was some visual disturbance, some mirage or fatigue-induced hallucination, but as he neared it, he saw that it was a parting in the gorse. Fluttering playfully in that cutting were a few of the ravens that had shadowed him since he began his exploration of this strange land, and as they jumped and flapped vigorously, he saw the coruscation of light on water droplets. Stumbling mid-step as his mind realised what it meant, he changed direction and charged through the stiff and prickly foliage to get to the stream.

Falling to his knees and with mouth hanging open at the wondrous sight of the trickling, glistening water, he let out a choked sob. Sobbing, he crawled forward, his eager lips parted and trembling at the prospect of the cool water trickling down his parched throat. Next to him, the high-spirited ravens cawed and played in the slender river.

Oh, it was delicious!

Scooping up heavenly handfuls, he gulped the nectar down, not caring that it ran copiously down his chin and throat or that those who knew him would be shocked at his lack of usual patrician sensibilities. His only drinking companions were the gathering ravens, and they seemed uncaring of good table-manners. Satiated, he sat back on his haunches, shivering slightly as the wet tips of his hair let cold drips trickle down his collar. One prerequisite, and the most necessary, for survival existed here, and for the first time, he felt some hope flutter in his rumbling gut, but there were two others that he needed—food and shelter. He sighed and turned to study his travelling companions.

“So, how’s the fishing here?”

oooXooo

The letter had suggested some way to prink and disguise her appearance, and as she walked along the passageway, she cast the recommended charms. By the time she emerged, she was taller, blonde, with green eyes, and closer to twice her actual age. Her uniform had also undergone a transformation; her cotton blouse and wool-knit skirt had blended into a russet, calf-length woollen dress, and her shoes and knee-length socks had fused into sleek, dark-brown, suede knee-high boots. The school robe was now a warm, black, hooded cape. Although her face was roughly the same, she suspected that the new colouring and height difference would be enough to allay suspicion—if Ron was anything to go by, then even the change of clothes would have been sheer hyperbole.

Adira’s portrait opened without fuss, and the small girl in the frame smiled and giggled as Hermione slipped into the empty room. Panting with a mix of exertion and exhilaration, she pushed the portrait back against the wall and crept over to the door. It was foolish as the letter had informed her that nothing would hinder her as she made her way to the rendezvous. In fact, the latter had caused a mild surfeit with all the superfluous directives and recommendations, but her feelings had been easily outweighed by her need, and it was with some dark humour that she wondered if she had the time for this clandestine meeting if he was the raconteur that his letter portended.

Her only shift from his pedantic plan was a step to ensure her safety, and that was a thin hair grip that held back her fringe. The slender, metal comb was a Portkey that would magic her back to the safety of her private room if she felt in anyway threatened.

As directed, the corridor was empty, and as she walked closer to the required room so her nerves began to thrum with fear. Breathing erratically and her body trembling, she stopped outside the door. Summoning a strength, she gripped her wand in one hand and knocked firmly on the knotted and peeling door with the other.

It swung open with only the softest of sighs, and beyond the threshold, she saw a fire gently flickering in the hearth and two plush arm chairs angled towards it. Between the chairs and the inviting fire, a table was laid for tea, and with a puzzled frown, she noted that there were three cups and saucers.

“Come in, Miss Granger,” said a familiar voice, and as her head turned to the source, she saw the elderly orderly rise from the chair on her left. “I am so glad that you decided to join us.”

“Us?” she queried in a choked gasp.

“Yes,” he replied softly. “There is another who will be vital to our success, and as such, he was also invited. I assure you that we cannot do without him, despite what you may think.” He smiled warmly at her bemused expression and gestured to the table laid for tea. “Care for some tea while we wait for Mr Malfoy.”

“Lucius Malfoy!”

“Oh, dear,” he said quietly, the smile slipping from his wrinkled face. “I can understand why the prospect seems minatory to you,” he said sympathetically, “but you must be aware that Mr Malfoy has been stripped of his wand, and I would not put you in danger.” He inhaled slowly and wiped a trembling hand over his forehead. “Of course, I accept that that is a matter of trust for you and not a certainty, and I can only implore to your sense of amending a wrong to help you see past what you consider a dubious alliance.”

Fidgeting with her wand, she nibbled her lower lip, and she pondered what she wanted... and then, she began to wonder what would compel Lucius Malfoy to assist a disgusting Mudblood! Curiosity battered at her, and while a part of her screamed out its frustrations at her potentially deadly naivety, she nodded her head and walked over to settle herself in the inviting chair. Meadowes settled back in his chair and studied her carefully—her lack of caution was alarming, and curing Snape seemed too close to an obsession for her... and he feared for her.

Author’s Notes: The words and definitions for this week’s Dictionary Drabble Challenge are listed below.

The word list (swiped from the past week’s list from dictionary.com):

1. minatory
2. raconteur
3. surfeit
4. patrician
5. hyperbole
6. apprise
7. prink

minatory \MIN-uh-tor-ee\, adjective:

Threatening; menacing.

raconteur \rack-on-TUR\, noun:

One who excels in telling stories and anecdotes.

surfeit \SUR-fit\, noun:

1. An excessive amount or supply.
2. Overindulgence, as in food or drink.
3. Disgust caused by overindulgence or excess.
4. To feed or supply to excess.

patrician \puh-TRISH-un\, noun:

1. A member of one of the original citizen families of ancient Rome.
2. A person of high birth; a nobleman.
3. A person of refined upbringing, manners, and taste.
4. Of or pertaining to the patrician families of ancient Rome.
5. Of, pertaining to, or appropriate to, a person of high birth; noble; not plebeian.
6. Befitting or characteristic of refined upbringing, manners, and taste.

hyperbole \hy-PUHR-buh-lee\, noun:

Extravagant exaggeration.

apprise \uh-PRYZ\, transitive verb:

To give notice to; to inform; -- often followed by of; as, we will
apprise the general of an intended attack; he apprised the commander
of what he had done.

prink \PRINGK\, transitive verb:

1. To dress up; to deck for show.
2. To dress or arrange oneself for show; to primp.

Ouroboros

Chapter 7 of 26

When Hermione discovers that an incurable Snape has been left to waste in a secret hospital ward, she sets out to do what so many have failed to do before and cure him.

This is my response to the Dictionary Drabble Challenge. The chapters have to be less than one thousand words and contain the listed words.

It was so easy! Slipping into the mind of a passing plebeian had become so satisfyingly simple, and she had been reascent when she realised that she was inhabiting the mind for longer, but that had highlighted a new restriction—it seemed that there was some limit to just how far her mind could travel from her body. The frustrating discovery had been a blow to her plans as it limited her sphere of influence to those who roamed Sub Rosa, but the cholera had been short-lived. It withered the moment she had managed to make the young, male Healer—a familiar haunt for her wandering mind—write some rather rude remarks on a patient's notes. It was a subtle victory for her as she was sure that the manipulation only enhanced the Healer's deepest predilection; a truer test would be to encourage him to do something that he would normally be averse to.

In the quiet times, when the ward was occupied solely by the patients and the night staff, she would dwell upon the accomplishment of her intentions. How could she make Severus Snape suffer to the fullest extent? Nagini's venom was no mystery to her, and she knew that he was trapped in some mental hell of his own devising, a delicious twist being that the same poison would encourage Snape to be the last to accept such a thing as the toxin twisted his perceptions. It would be difficult for any cogent argument to penetrate his poison-addled brain. A dry chuckle passed her withered lips; the Mudblood would have found Snape most resistant to her help—perhaps it would have been amusing to let the chit face the darker side to Severus Snape as he encouraged her to desist. Bella shuddered at the recollection of Snape at his most... persuasive.

oooXooo

The chair was wonderfully comfortable, the tea was just right, and the blind let in just the right amount of light through the window; in short, it was a room designed to put its occupants at ease. No amount of charms, however, could quite dispel the unease she felt stirring in her bowels at the thought of meeting Lucius Malfoy. Much of what happened while in Malfoy Manor was a blur, and she only had the briefest of images plaguing her mind as to what had transpired, but her nightmares were undeniable, and her study was a dilatory tactic to avoid dreaming; exhaustion had become a wonderful bedfellow, ensuring a dreamless sleep.

The rap on the door made her jump in the chair, and the old man flashed her a warming look before he stood and moved to open the door. Muffled voices drifted to her ear, and then she heard the door click shut. Her heart jolted, and she gripped the chair arms.

When she finally dragged her eyes from the enthralling flames, the first thing that struck her was how weak and broken he looked. To the casual observer, he looked very

similar, but that sneer that had played upon his features whenever he had looked upon her was gone, and those sapphire eyes that had glittered like ice were lacklustre and lifeless. The hair that had shimmered hung in limp tendrils, and his very posture screamed out that only some inner purpose kept him standing. A flicker of recognition and sense of connection flashed through her, but she would not make this easy for him... not after....

"We know why we're here," Meadows said firmly as witch and wizard warily watched each other.

oooXooo

Ron and Harry had the same privileges as Hermione, and as they walked back along the empty corridor to their respective private rooms, they caught the faintest sound of scuffling. After pacing back and forth a few times, they stopped by an impressive suit of armour glistening in the torchlight; the sounds seemed to come from behind the plinth.

Bending low, they peered into the gloom until Harry's wand illuminated the space; they saw the twitching leg first, then the straining body and finally, the pale hands tugging at the thin bands wrapped around a slender throat.

Draco squirmed desperately in the light; his eyes were squeezed shut, his mouth open in a wide, terrified grimace, and his fingernails scratched at the tightening band. Something flickered, and Harry realised that Draco was being strangled by a snake; he hissed out in Parseltongue, and a black, heart-shaped head erupted from between Draco's frantic hands. The black eyes locked onto Harry's, and then it seemed to hiss out laughter before squeezing tighter. Draco bucked and his face went grey.

"Bloody hell, Harry!"

Harry licked his lips and aimed his wand at the murderous snake. The light was extinguished as he uttered the first spell that sprang to mind. Ron swore and ducked as the long, thin snake shot past his ear and with the shatter of glass disappeared out the window.

"Where's that snake?" Draco whispered hoarsely as he crawled past the plinth; his bloodshot eyes darted from one perplexed face to another before latching upon the broken window. His face darkened, and his lips curled up in anger.

"I needed it! Did you have to defenestrate it, Potty?" he hissed out, but without his usual claque milling around, it carried little sting; seeing this, Draco turned to Ron. "Can't you hold on to anything, Weasel?"

Harry realised that Draco was referring to Hermione about a millisecond after Ron lunged forward to grab Draco's robes, twisting the material in his fist until the collar dug into the youth's tender throat.

"Watch your mouth, Malfoy!" he snarled out. "You'd be dead twice over if it weren't for Harry and me, so just keep your mouth shut!" He gave Draco a violent shake before pushing him roughly to the corridor floor. "Keep your trap shut or I'll shut it for you... with the *Avada Kedavra!*"

With that malediction, Ron stormed away, leaving a worried Harry and a wheezing Draco staring after him.

Author's Notes: Words and their definitions are as follows.

- 1.claque
- 2.dilatory
- 3.cogent
- 4.defenestrate
- 5.renascent
- 6.choler
- 7.malediction

Words with definitions:

claque \KLACK\, noun:

1. A group hired to applaud at a performance.
2. A group of fawning admirers.

dilatory \DIL-uh-tor-ee\, adjective:

1. Tending to put off what ought to be done at once; given to procrastination.
2. Marked by procrastination or delay; intended to cause delay; -- said of actions or measures.

cogent \KOH-juhnt\, adjective:

Having the power to compel conviction; appealing to the mind or to reason; convincing.

defenestrate \dee-FEN-uh-strayt\, transitive verb:

To throw out of a window.

renascent \rih-NAS-uhnt\, adjective:

Springing or rising again into being; showing renewed vigor.

choler \KOLL-ur; KOLE-ur\, noun:

Irritation of the passions; anger; wrath.

malediction \mal-uh-DIK-shun\, noun:

A curse or execration.

Meeting of Minds

Chapter 8 of 26

When Hermione discovers that an incurable Snape has been left to waste in a secret hospital ward, she sets out to do what so many have failed to do before and cure him.

This is my response to the Dictionary Drabble Challenge. The chapters have to be less than one thousand words and contain the listed words.

Author's Notes: As in a previous instance, I have combined two drabbles into one chapter. The dates and words of the Dictionary Drabble challenge are included at the start of each chapter. I hope that you enjoy.

June 28th

1. capacious
2. glutinous
3. forlorn
4. Cockaigne
5. harbinger
6. mazy
7. interpolate

Dancing through thoughts, dreams, desires, fears and instincts, she paused, almost breathless with delight, as she surveyed the end of the mazy travels through the Healer's mind. Here was her home away from home! She laughed out and gloried in the same sound bursting from the man's lungs.

So much time had been wasted in trying to take control when all she had needed was to interpolate herself within his thinking and skew it. Once he began to think in a similar way, he had welcomed her in as some newer and better aspect of himself. It was delicious!

She spoke for him, drawing upon his own knowledge and completely revelling in the freedom. She tested her control through a variety of strategies, and when she was confident that she had autonomy, she had visited Snape.

She had hoped to see some sign of suffering on his pale, thin features, but they were smooth and expressionless; all she had to assuage her disappointment was her own faith in Nagini's venom. Climbing up onto the cot, she straddled his thin form and crossed her arms upon his barely moving chest. Her eyes caught sight of the red scarring on his skin: four gashes across his throat from where the snake had sunk in her fangs. Overwhelmed, she slid up him, pressed her lips against the healed wound and flicked out her tongue. The flesh within the scar was smooth, edged by a firm ridge of tissue before becoming supple and coarser skin; no doubt the fine hairs and short stubble added the texture.

Easing back, she saw her spittle glistening on his neck, and she shivered at the sight...had Nagini felt the same flicker of pleasure? Tasted him just as she had done? Scowling, she turned her thoughts away from another who had been favoured more than she.

Staring down at his supine form, she contemplated opening up that wound, letting the blood flow freely, but that would be a gentle death. It would also be the harbinger of her own failure. Her ambitions had grown since she had set her purpose, and now, she sought to escape this prison of a hospital, and hidden within the not-so Cockaigne haven of the Healer's head, she could do what she wanted...and if she was caught... well, no matter! All she needed was another host for her wandering mind.

Staring down at Snape while her mind drifted over the possibilities, she felt something shift deep down. Disorientated and confused, she fell against his body and gripped his bed-linen for support. Closing her eyes and panting as her head swam and her guts trembled, she had the image of a barren landscape explode inside her mind. Image after image bombarded her, and she was left reeling at the sense of intense loneliness, longing and despair.

On instinct, she resorted to Occlumency, and the mental storm ceased almost immediately. Lifting herself up, she felt light-headed with the realisation...she had entered Snape's mind!

~X~

"You're not stopping me, Miss Granger," he said softly. "I would say that you actually *enjoy* having me rummaging around in your capacious mind."

She gritted her teeth and stifled the mounting anger. She could do this... She *had* to do this. Through the scenes of her past terrors and errors, she could see his face as he

witnessed the worst of her life. The forehead was furrowed and beaded with sweat, and his own jaw was tightly clenched with the effort of performing Legilimency with a wand that wasn't his own. A wave of despair crashed down upon her; he was weakened, and yet she still couldn't oust him from her mind!

With a pained howl, she collapsed, and Lucius surged forward at the sudden lack of resistance. Momentarily dazed by the speed through which he rifled her brain, he struggled to withdraw from her suddenly glutinous mind, and just as she curled up and silently wept, so he sat there, head spinning and stomach churning.

Breathing hard due to wielding an uncooperative wand, he settled back into the plush chair generously provided by the Room of Requirement and studied her. It still bemused him that she had agreed to work with him, and not for the first time, he tried to deduce why she would put herself through all this for Severus Snape. What compelled her? The memories that he had called up had been as vague as he could make them...some sense of propriety had held him from delving too deeply into her troubled psyche...and from them, he could hazard a guess that she somehow needed to cure Severus, but what motivated that need, he had no idea.

The forlorn witch slumped in the chair before him seemed so disparate to the one who had suffered the Cruciatus so magnificently and still had the wherewithal to actually *lie*. But the war had done so much to so many; so long as she managed to bring Severus back to him, then he would do what he could for her... for him.

~X~

The tapping of claws against stone woke him, and while brushing sleep from his eyes, he slid out from under the covers and moved over to unlatch the shutter. In the weak light from the full moon, he saw the dark outline of an owl on the windowsill. It hooted petulantly at him...maybe for his tardiness...and then extended its leg. Shivering from the bitter cold, Draco quickly took the proffered note and thanked the owl which promptly clicked its beak and silently glided away.

Hastily closing the shutters, he rushed back to the warmth of his bed and in the candlelight read the letter.

Draco,

My son.

I may have found a way to help you.

Your mother sends her love.

Father

Rereading the short missive, he felt a mix of comfort and frustration: comfort because his father had risked his freedom to contact him, and frustration because that risk had been so obviously pointless.

July 5th

1. indigent
2. condign
3. laconic
4. tutelage
5. dapple
6. meticulous
7. palaver

A portion of the heavens had darkened and gathered itself together into the promise of a terrible storm. Being indigent in this already foreboding realm, he felt flutterings of panic in his guts at the sight of it. It seemed that the onset of such potential rampage had also affected the ravens; his travelling companions had squabbled raucously for some time before parting into two separate and vicious groups.

It seemed that now, he had a direction, and that was 'away'. With the hope that the slender river would lead him both away from the storm and to a more favourable location, he stood and started to make his way along the thin gravel strip between river and resistant gorse. After a few steps, the ravens, with a surprisingly laconic cawing, took to flight to dapple the portentous sky before forming two disturbing conspiracies: one to shadow him, and the other to seek the storm.

~X~

Some noise must have penetrated her slumber because she sat bolt upright with a terrible sense of being watched. Quickly brushing aside errant strands of hair that had slipped over her face during her short and fitful doze, she peered down the aisle, but it was empty. Still feeling uneasy, she sighed and packed away her parchments and books; she shouldn't have fallen asleep in the library, and the crick in her neck was a condign result of pushing herself too hard.

With chagrin, Hermione stood and sauntered out of the library. At the door, however, she glanced back, but the library was as empty as it had been when she had arrived. Shivering at the bizarre discomfort in her haven, she let the door whisper shut behind her and headed for her room.

Within the soft confines of her bed, her mind drifted through the strange sequence of events that had caused her to be under Lucius Malfoy's tutelage as she strived to learn Occlumency. It seemed years ago that she had demanded to see Snape and wept beside him, pouring out her words of solace and forgiveness and begging him to wake up. Inhaling deeply, she turned onto her side and gazed unseeingly at the wall and the shifting shadows created by the flame from the candle which danced in the welcomed draft. A stronger gust rattled the shutter, and her eyes darted up at the sudden, harsh noise; satisfied that it was just the wind, she relaxed, but with her mind sharper, she caught sight of something resting on her desk... Something that shouldn't be there!

Slipping out of bed, she stepped over and sat down on the cushioned chair, her eyes and fingers drawn to the square piece of paper that she ~~sh~~*knew* had been locked in her trunk. Her fingers plucked it from the table, and she opened up the well-worn creases, her breathing short and shallow as the implications of the misplaced note rattled through her mind...someone had been messing with her personal belongings!

The essential note had been painstakingly constructed in the days following her first visit to Sub Rosa, and it was a list of the things that she would need in readiness to perform what was described in *Visions in Another Mind*. Chewing her lip, she thought back on the odd warning in Meadows' letter. Other things suddenly clamoured for attention; the feeling of being watched, the palaver about things being lost, and the surprise at the fact that certain areas of the castle were looking far more neglected than usual.

Nausea welled-up at the thought of the house-elves being employed to keep a closer eye on the students; being such meticulous creatures, they would be the perfect gatherers of information. Crushing the paper in her fist, she wondered how much 'they' knew and if her most precious plan was at risk.

Conspiracies

Chapter 9 of 26

When Hermione discovers that an incurable Snape has been left to waste in a secret hospital ward, she sets out to do what so many have failed to do before and cure him.

This is my response to the Dictionary Drabble Challenge. The chapters have to be less than one thousand words and contain the listed words.

Author's Notes: Same again! Two drabbles in one chapter. The dates and words start the chapters--hope you like!

July 12th

1. gustatory
2. troglodyte
3. emolument
4. contemn
5. propound
6. puerile
7. antediluvian

There were so few private places within Hogwarts; he had never noticed it before, but now, when he sought to separate himself from the others—from everything—there seemed no escape. He had his room, of course, but that seemed no safe cocoon—it stifled him, even if it was larger than the room at the decrepit house that the Ministry had granted the Malfoy family. Despite the fine fabric and the warm bed swaddling him, he longed to have the bare walls, tattered curtains and creaking cot of that ramshackle building—that was his home. The short—painfully short—letter that he had held and then destroyed had encouraged his intense dissatisfaction to mature and swell within his chest.

Sighing softly, Draco sat at the back of the room and waited for the teacher to indicate that he was ready. At first, he had hated the ordeal, then he had come to dread it, but now, he let it drift over him. He ignored the puerile sniggering, and when summoned, he walked calmly over to the desk at the front of the classroom.

Due to Draco's 'unfortunate choices', the Board of Governors had decided that he should familiarise himself with what he had decided to contemn. Thus, he was one of five students taking NEWT level Muggle Studies.

Professor Hardwicke watched Draco approach, the bushy eyebrows that seemed to be attempting to compensate for lack of hair were drawn together in disapproval, and for some reason, the suspicion that the Muggle-born wizard should pity him made Draco burn with bitterness.

He had not fully grasped the nature of the punishment handed out to him—Azkaban, he had understood intimately!—and the confiscation of his wand had not hit him until that first day back at Hogwarts almost six months ago.

~X~

"The Ministry are quite detailed in what they propound, Mr Malfoy," Professor Slughorn said softly. "I can understand their desire to ensure that your fellow students are protected, but I fear that they have neglected to consider your confinement to Azkaban."

Draco sat quietly while inside, it seemed that his brain screamed and his heart thundered. It all seemed so disconnected; he half expected the scene to become vapour and the horror of his cell to condense into view, just as his hopes and dreams had done for the four months that he had been within those terrible walls. He still lay awake at night, fearing sleep, fearing waking and knowing that it had been an illusion.

"Have you read this document, Draco?"

In the expectant silence, Draco felt Slughorn's gaze heavy upon him, but he hadn't spoken in months—screamed, but not spoken—and now, he found it difficult to make his throat work.

"At such times when you are not in a lesson, I will have possession of your wand, and in class, your wand will be returned to you at the teacher's discretion. Contact with various other students is prohibited, and communication between you and your family while at this school will go through myself or the Headmistress. Do you understand, Draco?"

Draco managed the smallest of nods, but it seemed to rile Slughorn who slammed the scroll down hard enough to rattle the collection of glittering phials on his desk.

"You do *not* understand what this means, Draco," he said angrily. "If you did, then you'd be incensed about this travesty and this humiliation!"

Laughter bubbled up his throat, threatening to erupt from his closed lips.

Humiliation! Slughorn had no idea what humiliation was!

But Draco knew! It had been his emolument for trying to appease a monster and his retribution for his successes. He knew that the Ministry's antediluvian notions of what constituted fair punishment could not equal the ones invented and perfected by the Dark Lord. Ironically, but not surprisingly, it had been Voldemort who had cleansed Draco... And he had managed it years before the boy had presented his innocent left arm.

~X~

The storm that had split the ravens and loomed menacingly had dissipated with preternatural speed, but the surge of energy that it had inspired still carried him forward. It was ironic that after bemoaning the sameness of this land that a sought-after feature had worried him so acutely. Lost in his thoughts, it took the cawing of the birds to remind him that he was searching for something... Something that they had found! Stumbling mid-step, his eyes saw the rounded hillock in the distance.

Squinting, he thought that he could make out a deeper shadow... almost like the mouth of a cave. Scrutinising the local environment, he wondered if the dark streak in the

gorse, running close to the possible cave was the river. Knowing that he needed to rest out of the wind that still battered at him, he edged his bets and aimed straight for what he hoped would be shelter. Behind him, a conspiracy of ravens roosted and watched.

~X~

Draco extended his thin hand, and Hardwicke slapped the slender shaft of wood into his palm, but did not release his hold when Draco's fingers curled around it. Surprised, Draco's gaze flickered up, and he caught frustration in the old man's hazel eyes.

"I'm getting tired of the constant disruption in my classes, Mr Malfoy. And it seems that I'm not the only one."

Frustrated that he was being blamed for the Ministry's precautions and puzzled by the wizard's odd closing statement, Draco gripped his wand tightly and strode back to his seat.

~X~

Chest constricting with emotion and his eyes straining to produce tears, Snape slipped into the small cave. All he needed was some gustatory delight, and he would be one happy troglodyte!

Laughing and weeping, he curled up on the dry floor, pressed his hands against his painfully insistent stomach, and while he cramped from hunger and fatigue, his mind finally accepted the demands of his body, and he fell asleep.

July 17th

1. cupidity
2. fiduciary
3. mephitic
4. anodyne
5. tatterdemalion
6. malinger
7. insensate

Looking like a tatterdemalion, Snape stretched painfully out on the cold floor, but his discomfort was nullified by the gnawing pain below his ribs—he had to eat! Years of potion study had given him a broad knowledge of what edible delights existed, ready to be picked from the land, but his eager eye had not seen anything that equated to food. The ravens that seemed to have adopted him were his hope for a meal—the carrion creatures had to survive on something!

Using a trick that he had learnt as a young child, he tugged his belt tighter, and he lumbered to his feet. His search for food had to begin in earnest. Braving the cold wind, he left his little cave. His eyes firstly sought out the ravens, and he was relieved to see the half that had stayed with him were dotted around his domicile.

As a child he had known hunger; it hadn't struck very often, but it had lurked on the edges, waiting. Money had always been cited as the problem, and that was true, but when his father died, his land had become one of milk and honey. Of course, debtors came round for the monies that his father had owed from various card and dice games that the dead man had been rather dismal at playing, but his mother had come alive after the Wake, and her wand had nullified the cupidity of the callers.

This place was a nightmare! Or maybe the lack of people actively trying to kill him gave him too much time on his hands, but such memories and thoughts had plagued him since his arrival here. The peace that he had hoped for after death eluded him, and he felt that that was the greatest betrayal of all! Frustrated and bitter, he kicked out at the furze which merely scratched him and bounced back mockingly.

Not quite knowing what he believed, he hadn't dwelt too deeply upon the notion that he could be with Lily now; he felt that to do so would have been masochistic, and he had organised his head to prevent such dalliances towards self-torture—much to his dissatisfaction.

Potter! Now there was a name that he could dwell happily upon! He snorted into the wind at the image of two black-haired fiends, and he felt his lip curl up. It seemed that his life and future had been set by those two—one set his unhappiness, and the other set his longevity. He wondered bitterly if James was in some way pleased that he had suffered or whether he had writhed at the thought of *Snivellus* being a primary fiduciary of his son. But he knew that those were trivialities compared to his most fervent desire—forgiveness from Lily! With tears prickling his eyes and the furze his shins, he turned away from the wind and wept into his hands.

You'll never get that!

His head snapped round, and he staggered as the sudden motion generated waves of dizziness. Trying to focus on the vista, he searched out the source of the voice. The ravens looked at him almost with bemusement flickering in the onyx depths, but otherwise, they seemed oblivious to any words carried on the wind. Thinking that his mind was fabricating demons to torment him further, he snarled out and strengthened his mental barriers. He had faced worse than a boring landscape, and he was damned if this place was going to break him!

No matter what you've done or what you do, you will always have had a hand in her death. It was you who told the Dark Lord of the prophecy. She'll know by now that it was you! I doubt that dear Sirius would let you be a hero! He'd gladly tell her that it was you who sent her to her grave. That it was you who orchestrated the intended killing of her son!

Swaying on the spot, his eyes squeezed shut and his mouth hanging open, Snape tried to deny the whispered words thundering in his head. But he knew that they were right! At his first scream, the ravens tensed; at his second, they took to flight, and while the man they looked over screamed and writhed in the furze, they flew in lazy circles in the darkening sky.

~X~

The quality of the air in the cell was mephitic in more ways than one as Meadows backed into it with his mop and bucket. It seemed that no one had been in the room for days to cast a Purging Charm, and the air was downright fetid! Not that it really mattered as the only person who entered the room was the humble orderly—no Healer would willingly sully themselves with such a thing as either a Death Eater or a dirty floor. But something seemed amiss... But that was daft, surely! She was just in one of her snits and wanted to unsettle him. He mopped the floor close to the bed, and something disturbed his anodyne motion of cleaning. Hoping that his old eyes were betraying him, he looked again, and after the third study, he knew that his eyes were uncaringly accurate—footprints on the floor! He looked across at what he knew was a completely insensate Bellatrix LeStrange, and fighting the urge to vomit, he fled the room.

The mop left a slick trail that dried up just before the office and Meadows only realised he still held it in a vice-like grip when he tried to knock on the door. Disgusted at his own foolishness, he lodged the mop against the wall and knocked on the door lightly. Forcing down his anxiety and faking a downcast look, he entered the room, looking for the matron. It was something that he hadn't done—oh, he had had time off work before, but always with good reason, and now he had good reason to malingering! Too good a bloody reason!

Epiphany

Chapter 10 of 26

When Hermione discovers that an incurable Snape has been left to waste in a secret hospital ward, she sets out to do what so many have failed to do before and cure him.

This is my response to the Dictionary Drabble Challenge. The chapters have to be less than one thousand words and contain the listed words.

Author's Notes: Three drabbles in this chapter, and that brings me up to date. Dates and required words precede each drabble. Thank you for reading this far, and I hope you enjoy.

July 26th

1. supernumerary
2. gamine
3. vituperation
4. melange
5. sempiternal
6. diadem
7. extol

Bella nibbled on the Healer's ragged thumbnail and held herself across her midriff as if the act could somehow quell the intense emotions thundering through the body. Occasionally, a stifled squeak would pass her lips, but she stomped down on her rising and rebellious glee; it would not do to make the Healer look too out of character, but it was... just... so... *glorious!*

I can get into his head! I can get inside his head and play around... Oh, how I can make him suffer!

The thought screamed through her mind, sending all other thoughts scurrying in the face of its fearsome ecstasy. Her skin tingled and her heart pounded... She hadn't felt this alive since the Mark had burnt on her arm, darkening as her Master had called her. But He was gone now; Snape and the others had connived to kill him, and He was gone... He was gone and she was still here, just as He had been... Not quite dead; not quite alive. She could not extol her new gift enough... The Killing Curse had elevated her to a new state... a new power!

So, he loved the Mudblood, Lily! Well, I can use that to better effect than mere taunts.

It was as if slipping into Snape's mind had heralded her epiphany, and she felt herself fall into a manic melange of burgeoning possibilities, her mind carrying her on relentlessly. Her rapid breath misted the glass as she pressed her head against the cool, refreshing surface; her thoughts were spiralling out of control, dragging her into some chaotic vortex as they surged onwards, tugging her towards some terrible and yet intensely alluring, almost erotic, conclusion.

Whimpering and lips trembling, her eyes fluttering closed, and her skin burning, she collapsed against the window, her slick hands scrabbling at the glass as she slid to the floor, succumbing to the power of her fantasy.

I should be dead, but I am not!

Panting and almost writhing on the tiled floor, her hands gripped her hair as if the sting of nails across scalp could ease the power of the thoughts rampaging through her skull. Mouth open and feeling unfamiliar stirrings in her lower abdomen, she tried to resist the allure of her greedy mind's imaginings.

Just like Him... but he is gone.... Gone! No Horcruxes keep me tied to this world, she mused jubilantly. Nothing to end my stay here! No fragments of my soul to hunt down and destroy. How would they stop me?

Tears streamed down her face as her thoughts condensed into one staggering and exquisite thought...she could be the next Dark Lord... and she would be sempiternal!

Grinning and giggling, she squirmed sensuously on the floor, her hands sliding out over the tiles, anchoring her body as her mind descended further into the delirium of her desires. She would make them pay for what they had done: all of them! She would destroy them. She laughed out as one, final idea rose up like the head of a Basilisk...she would give them places of honour; Potter's eyes, Weasley's tongue, Granger's brain and Snape's heart set in gold upon her head: a diadem of the dead.

~X~

Something battered at the glass, and as Narcissa cried out in alarm, Lucius darted from his chair, his eyes wide and his face deathly pale, to stand between window and wife. Glancing back at her, his heart stuttering at the sight of fear gripping her, he waited until she backed away to crouch behind the tattered armchair. Smiling weakly, he nodded and strode over to the shutters and whatever was beyond.

The owl screeched in alarm as it was shoved from the sill, and Lucius almost laughed out at the bedraggled thing in the hedge, fluffing out its drenched feathers. Recognising the bird as the one that had delivered the invite to that first meeting of the triumvirate working on Snape's behalf, he extended his arm towards the sulking owl.

On realising that the racket was not a continuation of the vituperation that had plagued them, Narcissa slipped out from behind her shield and stepped over to where Lucius stood, his face set in grim lines, and a letter held in his trembling fingers.

"What is it?" she asked softly. Nibbling her lip, she stepped closer, her hands almost reaching out towards the paper. "Is it from Draco?"

"It's from Meadowes," he replied gently. "He wants to see me in the morning; he claims that his precautions were not as supernumerary as he thought."

She nodded slowly and wiped a painfully thin hand across her brow. He studied her for a moment, and a selfish urge stirred at the sight of her eyes still glistening and her cheeks flushed from her fright... So reminiscent of their courting when the gamine wonder would steal his breath with one glance or quirk of her lips.

Tearing his eyes away from her, he folded the letter while stepping over to the meagre fire, and threw it into the hungry flames. He watched the cream parchment blacken and curl as the fire licked at it before devouring it in one bright bite.

The slightest pressure on his shoulder shattered his control, and he spun round to gather her up in his arms, pressing his face against her neck and inhaling her scent...not the fine perfumes that he had bought almost without thought, but *her* aroma, and he savoured it. He heard her gasp and felt her arms slide up his back so that her fingers could graze his scalp, and he shuddered. The slender body pressed against his, and he heard his name tumble from her lips.

Crushing her closer, he kissed her skin, amazed that she was in his arms after everything that he had done, after everything that she had suffered. Sobbing, he now understood why Draco begged to come back to this filthy hut no bigger than the entrance hall to Malfoy Manor...this was home!

August 2nd

1. quondam
2. pusillanimous
3. sesquipedalian
4. egress
5. panoply
6. sapient
7. brummagem

Hermione slid the silver hair band into her blonde hair and pushed Adira's portrait closed. The letter that had asked...no, insisted!...that she meet with Meadows and Lucius was folded in her pocket, and she found herself fleetingly wondering about the quondam model pupil and how her life had become so complicated.

The sitting room was as she remembered, neat and cosy, but the fearful and desperate expression on the face of her sesquipedalian cohort made her pause fretfully on the threshold. Upon seeing her, Meadows smiled out of courtesy before rushing over to shut the door and usher her into one of the three armchairs.

Brimming with curiosity and tension, her eyes darted from him to the man sitting in the chair adjacent to hers. Sapphire eyes locked onto her gaze, and she shivered at the desperation and longing that she saw in those azure depths. The mouth that had formed such vile things trembled, and she felt herself suddenly rendered pusillanimous by the hovering dread in the room.

"Mr Malfoy says that you're behind in your Occlumency studies, Miss Granger," the elderly man said carefully and tonelessly, and Hermione had the distinct impression that he was battling either anger or fear.

Partly fearful and partly annoyed, she glanced between the two men. "I'm struggling with it, but I know that I can learn how to do it."

She saw Meadows' white eyebrow arch challengingly or cynically...she couldn't decide...and then, he was leaning down towards her, his own eyes blazing with some inner zeal that worried her.

"Can you learn by this afternoon?" he asked with surprising cheerfulness. "Only, I think that if we want to help Snape, then we'll have to do somethin' about in the very near future."

Hermione spluttered and mouthed silently while her suddenly tumultuous mind sought out what it wanted to convey first...she was in no way ready to help Snape. There were various items still to acquire; a Pensieve, a potion that required a week to make and a further week to mature, and most importantly, a plan of attack once she had access to Snape's thoughts and memories. The sudden time constraint was daunting.

"I..." she began timorously only to stutter to a halt...could she? Could she master the skill that seemed to be her Achilles heel?

Meadows noted her downcast expression, and his attention turned to Lucius, who seemed equally apprehensive about the girls' ability to learn so quickly. Licking his wrinkled lips, he straightened and rubbed his chin thoughtfully... Maybe Occlumency was a moot defence anyway? He had no idea how Bellatrix was moving her mind or, more disturbingly, where it was, and although he was fairly sure that his own mind had not been invaded, he couldn't say that his own skill at Occlumency had protected him. But it seemed so prudent that the girl learn!

"The harsher the assault," Meadows continued softly, "the quicker the skill is learnt... in general."

Witch and wizard looked at him; both anxious and both looking for an alternative. Hermione had heard Harry protest the horror and pain of his lessons with Snape, and given that it was her mind that would be attacked, her fears and weaknesses exposed, she felt that this could be the thing that turned her from her task...there were things haunting her that she had never divulged to either Harry or Ron; to anyone. Nightmares tormented her during sleep, and dark thoughts harassed her through the day...she did not want them summoned and studied; not by Lucius, and not by herself.

The old man had told him of what he suspected, and the thought had turned his insides to ice: Bella free to move around as she pleased; latching onto some brain like a hideous parasite. The thought had revolted and terrified him. But neither did he want to rape the young girl's memories just on the off-chance that she would learn Occlumency through sheer mental survival.

"We can give Miss Granger time," Lucius said firmly. "From what we have discussed, some time will be needed to prepare. I'm sure that the need for Occlumency is not that drastic at this stage of our plan."

"Brummagem concern, Mr Malfoy?"

Lucius glanced away, and then, he restored his gaze, and Meadows saw a flinty hardness in the blue depths: eyes like chips of ice.

"We have no assurances that Occlumency is needed; I suggest that it would be more productive to begin preparing for the procedure involved in Severus' recovery."

Meadows felt his eyes widen, and his breath lodged in his throat. *Didn't he understand what was goin' on? The worst Death Eater of them all was at large... able to slip in and out of minds without a care! We'd never know where she was or what she was up to!*

But there was some logic to the man's argument. Meadows relaxed and sighed, letting the tension drop a notch. A mental panoply could not guarantee their safety...much to his consternation...and pushing for something that *may* only be helpful was almost counter-productive. The more sapient option was to cure Snape, and with his help and knowledge, they would all stand a better chance at stopping and destroying Bellatrix.

~X~

They discussed what was needed, and Lucius smirked at the idea that his role was nothing more than a delivery boy...collecting and delivering items, but, in truth, it was all

that he could do, and so long as he was careful, it would not jeopardise his freedom.

Hermione would brew the potion detailed in the book and research around the required technique to weed out any potential problems, and continue Occlumency with Lucius in what was left of her spare time.

As they sought egress from the room, Meadows caught Lucius glancing at him warily, and he wondered what lurked behind those blue eyes... feeling only the merest flicker of fear that it could be Bellatrix.

August 9th

1. obeisance
2. vituperate
3. spoony
4. asperity
5. vexillology
6. tittle-tattle
7. exalt

"You know very well why I can't make use of the more respectable premises," the silky voice drawled out in the gloom. "The tittle-tattle about my purchases would reach the ears of the Ministry, and I can hardly afford that."

"No, I can understand that, like, but I hears that ye ain't got much to afford owt as it is," said the seller with asperity. "So, I'm wonderin', like, what ye got to make me sell to ye, either!" The thin man with pock-marked skin grinned, exposing his blackened teeth to his potential customer.

Lucius reared back and shuddered at the offensive maw, lifting a hand daintily, seemingly to waft away the unpleasant odour that he imagined must have emanated from such a mouth. A rebuke rose to his lips, but he reined-in his desire to vituperate the vile vendor, and instead, he feigned intense disappointment.

"How quick we are to forget that money is not the only thing that holds value, but whereas that currency holds the same value to all, there are some gems which have a varying value depending on whom you offer them to."

The grin that greeted the purveyor was commonly seen in the sea, usually just after the flick of a fin, and the seller's own smile died as dread settled in his guts. He had dealt with the Malfoy family before, but then, he had some protection in the idea that they would not wish to be associated with the likes of him, but now, they had nothing to lose by admitting more of their follies, whereas he could lose a hell of a lot...his freedom for a start.

Swallowing nervously, the seller broke eye-contact and shifted the wares on the tray before him; Lucius smirked and threw a leather pouch next to the man's yellowed fingers.

"I assure you that there is enough there to cover the first six items on the list," he said in clipped tones. "Deliver all that I require before the end of the week, and I shall give you what I owe."

Showing his obeisance in the presence of money and blackmail, the seller bobbed on the spot and smiled obsequiously while his hand smoothly swept the pouch into the recesses of his voluminous and tatty coat.

"'Twould be me pleasure, Mr Malfoy, but I'm wonderin' why ye would be wantin' so much vellum and pigs' blood?"

Lucius paused as he strode away, a grin tugging at his twitching lips. Turning to glance over his shoulder, he sighed nonchalantly.

"An interest in vexillology."

~X~

The Room of Requirement shifted from the room that led to Hogsmeade as soon as Lucius stepped through the gaping hole; barely had the exhausted wizard said 'good evening' before a roaring fire warmed him, a soft armchair cocooned him, and the light dimmed to a cosy level. The walls enveloped them, comforting them with row upon row of books, and a low table supported a tempting array of snacks and a steaming pot of coffee. He could not exalt the Room enough.

Hermione settled into her own plush chair, and nervously tapped a fingernail against her chin. Occlumency had not been going well, and Meadows' odd behaviour had upped her anxiety to an almost unbearable level. It did not comfort her that her initial plan was one step closer to completion; in truth, the closer she got to it, the more reluctant she became.

"I find that I am in no mood for teaching this evening, Miss Granger."

She jolted at his voice and frowned. "Then why come, Mr Malfoy?"

Although his tone had been lazy and the way he moved to look at her had been languid, they had misled. The eyes that bored into her were determined and undeniable; even if she had mastered Occlumency, she doubted that she could have stopped him if he had pierced her mind. The intensity of that stare stopped her breath.

"Occlumency will not help you in this endeavour, Miss Granger. The book implies that you must open yourself up to Severus completely; let him enter your thoughts without hindrance...essentially, to become one combined entity." As he spoke, urgently and softly, he saw her face whiten and her eyes widen with terror. He felt his heart clench painfully at the sight...if she feared it, then she would fail, and all his plans would fall with her.

He had to look! He had to see what hulking thing threatened all of it!

Slipping into her mind was as easy as slipping under silk sheets, and he wound his way delicately through her thoughts. It did not take long for an image to solidify before his questing mind.

She was roughly the same age, but thinner and ashen-faced; he'd hazard that this memory was from the time she was hiding from the Dark Lord with Potter and Weasley. She sat amongst the roots of a large oak tree, curled up and crying, her hands gripping and tugging on her hair. His view altered, and he saw thin rivulets of dried blood on the backs of her hands and something glittering around her neck. Shifting again, he caught sight of a locket, and he hissed out when he recognised it...a Horcrux.

Licking his lips, he had some idea of what that thing was doing to her mind as she wore it so daintily about her throat. Some evidence of it was noted in her distress and the keening sounds worming themselves out past her lips. Listening to her, he caught the odd phrase, whimper, plea and prayer... and then he knew.

Sighing softly and closing his eyes, he pondered the feelings she had for her Potions master that he had gleaned from her confused brain: no spoony schoolgirl crush as he had half-expected to find, but a dread! She dreaded Severus Snape, yet strove to cure him. Exhausted by the complexity of it all, he asked the heavens what it all meant.

The Key

Chapter 11 of 26

When Hermione discovers that an incurable Snape has been left to waste in a secret hospital ward, she sets out to do what so many have failed to do before and cure him.

This is my response to the Dictionary Drabble Challenge. The chapters have to be less than one thousand words and contain the listed words.

Author's Notes: Words and definitions follow the chapter.

"Have you managed to speak with him?" she queried fretfully, her hands writhing around each other as she battled her nerves.

Lucius had never felt so lackadaisical; it seemed that events were sapping his energy, and it pained him that his lassitude reared itself as he stepped into his home: Narcissa did not deserve such treatment. He had come close to asking the Granger girl to help, but his request had withered on his tongue—how vile was this task that it grew between his family and himself, pushing them apart as it sought satisfaction.

"Not yet, but soon." He saw her eyes dart over his face, trying to see what could be potent enough to enervate him to the point that he would neglect his own son. Incredulity settled on her face, and with lips pursed bitterly, she turned away from him.

"I wonder," she said waspishly, "if you would be more compelled to determine the wellbeing of our son if you were not obsessed with some quixotic endeavour to save a man that deserved his fate!"

"Deserved..." he repeated slowly, letting the concept ignite his wrath. Lunging forward, he grabbed her elbow and tugged her round to face him, holding her against his tense body. "You forget how he protected Draco!" She flinched at the ice in his voice and paled at the depth of his fury. "You sought him out and begged him, even placed him under an Unbreakable Vow, so do not dare think that we owe him nothing!"

Watching her face twist in anger, some part of him revelled in the sight of his wife so animated and passionate; after months of nurturing the nebbish shadow, she was emerging from her dread armed with fire.

"I will not nullify a terrible wrong with a noble right," she said hotly. "I cannot forgive him for being a part of it."

At her words, his stomach rolled and his chest constricted. Lifting his trembling hands, he cupped her face, seeing the pain hiding behind the anger.

"Narcissa, my love; his part in it was as hated as mine," he said softly, his voice breaking with the waves of emotion it carried. "Had he known what dreadful purpose he had brewed that potion for, he would have fallen apart." Fat tears rolled down her cheeks, and her breath came in stuttering gasps, her chest heaving against his. "I never told him what the Dark Lord had ordered of me... of us."

He closed his eyes against the horror of it: Severus' expression when he was told to give the draught to Narcissa, her terrible acceptance of it all, and his own desperation as he watched her drink the potion that would terminate the life of their unborn daughter. His head fell against her shoulder, and he felt her begin to weep against him.

"I don't know who to blame and who to hate," she whispered frantically. "She's dead—murdered—and I don't know what to do." Her plea ended in a strained whisper, and he comforted her as best he could. "Draco is all we have now—that vicious potion has ensured us of that!"

Pulling her away from him, he cupped her face once more and fixed her with a determined and resolute stare. "The Dark Lord!" he proclaimed firmly. "Severus is no blackguard," he uttered into her ear as he held her close. "He is the key to our future."

Breathless from the range of emotions that she had ascended, she clung to her husband and let his words wash over her, cleansing her of the ravaging emotions that had suppurated within her.

"Trust me," he murmured. "I will make this right, but we need Severus."

~X~

He wondered whether keeping the incident about the murderous snake to himself had been such a wise decision. Potter and Weasley had seemingly not divulged what had transpired, but he suspected that it was more out of habit than any wish to assist him. Keeping it to himself ensured that his father would remain oblivious of the incident, and thus, not risk what he had left; it was better if it was secreted away for the time being. Since that night, no other attempt had been made, but he remained vigilant.

"Mr Malfoy!"

The sound of the harsh address yanked him from his musings, and with some mild embarrassment, he straightened on his stool and sought out its provenance.

"Sir?"

Professor Hardwicke shook his head slowly and exhaled in exasperation. "I was discussing liberation through fashion: the rise of the hem. Mary Quant, Mr Draco, what can you tell me about her?"

"She... she..." he stammered, trying to drag his reluctant mind to attention to see if he had managed to absorb anything on the sly. To his amazement, Hardwicke looked surprised and then chortled.

"Very good, Mr Malfoy," he said good-humouredly. "However, despite her chichi tendencies, I was hoping that you could relate her to the empowerment of women, but seeing that time is against us, you may as well pack up now."

Over the sound of parchments being rolled and stools scraping across the floor, Draco heard his name, and he noted that Hardwicke was gesturing him over.

The class had been dismissed, and when the hubbub from the corridor had died down, Hardwicke turned to Draco and held out his hand for the young man's wand.

"Sometimes, we endure because we have no choice," said Hardwicke in a faraway voice. Draco paused, and held his breath, unsure as to what the old man meant. "We may endure, at times, because we choose to, but it is, sadly, more common that we endure because some mean, twisted bastard wants us to."

Draco almost choked, and he stared incredulously at the man standing so innocently by the desk.

"What you have to do, Mr Malfoy," he continued with some new edge to his voice, "is decide what you want to endure for."

16th August

1. provenance

2. enervate

3. chichi

4. lackadaisical

5. blackguard

6. quixotic

7. nebbish

.....Words with Definitions.

provenance \PROV-uh-nuhn(t)s\, noun:

Origin; source.

enervate \EN-ur-vayt\, transitive verb:

1. To deprive of vigor, force, or strength; to render feeble; to

weaken.

2. To reduce the moral or mental vigor of.

chichi \SHEE-shee\, adjective:

Affectedly trendy.

lackadaisical \lack-uh-DAY-zih-kuhl\, adjective:

Lacking spirit or liveliness; showing lack of interest; languid;

listless.

blackguard \BLAG-uhrd\, noun:

1. A rude or unscrupulous person; a scoundrel.

2. A person who uses foul or abusive language.

adjective:

1. Scurrilous; abusive; low; worthless; vicious; as, "blackguard

language."

transitive verb:

1. To revile or abuse in scurrilous language.

quixotic \kwik-SOT-ik\, adjective:

1. Caught up in the romance of noble deeds and the pursuit of unreachable goals; foolishly impractical especially in the pursuit of ideals.

2. Capricious; impulsive; unpredictable.

nebbish \NEB-ish\, noun:

A weak-willed, timid, or ineffectual person.

Mixed Blessings

Chapter 12 of 26

When Hermione discovers that an incurable Snape has been left to waste in a secret hospital ward, she sets out to do what so many have failed to do before and cure him.

This is my response to the Dictionary Drabble Challenge. The chapters have to be less than one thousand words and contain the listed words.

There was nothing!

Snape hurled the handful of grit and soil into the whistling wind. No larvae, no insects; nothing thrived here aside from the prickly bushes and the ravens, and it seemed that soon, they would once again be the only forms of life in this terrible place. His stomach growled painfully—a visceral knell, and as the pain radiated out in ever-tightening spasms, he curled up, clutching at his belly. How long could a man live without food? How long would he suffer before death finally eased everything?

The ravens!

Lack of food must have addled his brains! The ravens were flesh and bone... meat! But that seemed so... wrong! They had led him to water and shelter; they had kept him company and seemed to watch over him. A snigger leapt past his dry and cracked lips—he had killed and had watched people be killed, and he was now concerned about eating a bird. It was absurd!

He looked across at the gathered birds as they gambolled and cawed. He would have to kill as many as he could in one strike; it was highly doubtful that they would stay with him after he slaughtered some of their number. With breath hitching and palms tingling, he sauntered over to a group that were rolling around in the smooth gravel by the edge of the river. Trembling fingers fumbled with the buttons on his coat as he approached, and his heart pounded as he restrained his primitive urge. Allowing his hunger to foment his intention and stifle his reluctance, he slipped his arms free and held the garment out in front; he suspected that he could trap at least four of the birds beneath the fabric, maybe five, if they moved a little closer together.

Sweat trickled down his back, and the beads on his brow tumbled down into his eyes; blinking away the stinging droplets, he crept closer to his prey. He knew that he had to do this, his hunger was adamant, but he found that some part of him rebelled. Through the years, he had done so much and lost so much, having been forced and cajoled into performing deeds that had robbed him of both joy and sleep; here, he had a choice, and that made him feel like a murderer.

Sobbing, he collapsed. He couldn't do it! Clutching his dirty coat to his chest, he wept into the dark folds. Maybe... maybe hunger would push him to accept the horrible Hobson's choice.

From beyond the blood thundering past his ears, a sudden bruit made him jolt and glance frantically around. The ravens had fled, and he felt despair tear through him, but then, he turned towards the source of that raucous din. The sky was a frenzy of black shapes ripping across a storm-laden sky! Falling back in shock, he watched as the ravens battled in the heavens, swirling and slashing at each other—no! There were too many of them: the two factions had combined with murderous intent!

~X~

It was an effort! Oh Merlin! It called upon reserves that she didn't know she had; panting and almost falling, Bella slumped over Snape's inert form, ironically using him to support her as she strove to destroy him.

It was a completely new form of magic; the severing of mind from body had stripped her of her witchy ways, but it had granted her new and exciting talents. Her mind had replaced her wand as a weapon of war, but it strained her; this new juju demanded more of her than her wand ever had, and as she summoned her strength to complete her assault, she found something resisting her, something that seemed just as powerful and just as desperate.

As her vision faded, and she was ousted from his mind, she caught sight of his face: pale, haggard and fearful. Breathing hard and with trembling limbs, she straightened and stared down at him, her lips pulling back into a vicious sneer. There was time, she comforted herself; there was time and a multitude of ways to ruin him.

Exiting his room, she smoothed down her robes and almost bumped into McGonagall. Slipping into the witch's mind was almost instinctive, and the brief moment that Bella was privy to the woman's thoughts, she saw a snippet showing a house-elf holding out a heavily-creased piece of paper. Bella nodded to the passing woman and then grinned. It seemed that the Granger girl was almost ready. Maybe the Mudblood would be enough of a distraction so she could administer the fatal mental slash.

Satisfied that her plan was still in motion, Bella settled on her other aim—to escape the hospital, and in that, she had an idea. She was anchored to her body, but to what part of her body was she tied? If she divided her body, would that increase her anchor points; would that give her myriad places to return to? And considering that it was her body and not location to which she was tied, could that division be carried. If she sliced off a portion of her body, could she get the Healer to carry her out?

~X~

No aestival blessing could equal it! No sun-ripened fruit or summer honey could ever be as sweet! Falling from the sky were the victims of the battle; coming down as manna were the dying combatants.

Uncertainty held him, but the sight of a few ravens picking at a corpse shattered his reservations, and he lunged to grab the closest morsel. Grasping and ripping out the ruffled feathers on the bird's breast, he exposed the grey skin, and with a desperate ferocity, he tore his teeth into the flesh. No philtre could have slid down his throat as eagerly or have made him love his feathered companions more.

24th August

1. philtre
2. knell
3. aestival
4. bruit
5. juju
6. Hobson's choice
7. foment

.....Words with Definitions.

philtre \FIL-tur\, noun:

1. A potion or charm supposed to cause the person taking it to fall in love.

2. A potion or charm believed to have magic power.

transitive verb:

1. To enchant or bewitch with or as if with a magic potion or charm.

knell \NEL\, verb:

1. The stroke of a bell tolled at a funeral or at the death of a person; a death signal; a passing bell; hence, figuratively, a warning of, or a sound indicating, the passing away of anything.

intransitive verb:

1. To sound as a knell; especially, to toll at a death or funeral; hence, to sound as a warning or evil omen.

aestival \ES-tuh-vuhl\, adjective:

Of or belonging to the summer; as, aestival diseases. [Spelled also estival.]

bruit \BROOT\, transitive verb:

To report; to noise abroad.

(also brū'ē) Medicine. An abnormal sound heard in auscultation.

Archaic.

A rumour.

A din; a clamour.

juju \JOO-joo\, noun:

1. An object superstitiously believed to embody magical powers.

2. The power associated with a juju.

Hobson's choice \HOB-suhnz-CHOIS\, noun:

A choice without an alternative; the thing offered or nothing.

foment \foh-MENT; FOH-ment\, transitive verb:

1. To nurse to life or activity; to incite; to abet; to instigate; -- often in a bad sense.

noun:

1. Fomentation; the act of fomenting.

2. State of excitation.

Loose Lips

Chapter 13 of 26

When Hermione discovers that an incurable Snape has been left to waste in a secret hospital ward, she sets out to do what so many have failed to do before and cure him.

This is my response to the Dictionary Drabble Challenge. The chapters have to be less than one thousand words and contain the listed words.

Author's Notes: The words and their definitions follow the chapter.

"Again!"

"Please, no!"

"*Legilimens!*"

"No... Please."

"You will learn, Miss Granger!"

"*Protego!*"

"Not good enough, Miss Granger. *Legil—*"

Dazed, disorientated and sick to her stomach, she collapsed as the spell slipped from her mind; through the fog of intense fatigue, she saw two indistinct shapes scuffling: one was her tormentor, and the other, her unexpected saviour. Trembling, she crawled towards her chair and clumsily clambered into the soft cushion. Harsh words hissed out, and then, she heard the susurrus that came with the room morphing into one that suited best. Opening her eyes, and tilting her head to the side, she saw Lucius standing before the hearth, his back was bowed, and his hands gripped the mantelpiece with a fierce strength.

"If I had known that he would have attacked you so viciously, Miss Granger, I would never have relinquished my role of tutor to him." The usually clipped voice was thick with disgust, and Hermione's eyes swept the familiar room; Meadows must have fled after Lucius grappled him.

Pulling the cushion from behind her back, she cuddled it against her straining chest and swallowed to moisten a throat that still burnt from her cries. "I agreed to his tutoring," she whispered.

The tall man whipped round and strode towards her, his face white and trembling with rage, and his eyes narrowed and hard. "You asked to be taught Occlumency, not to have your brain violated; there is a difference."

"He believes that I need to learn, that the ski--"

"Don't be such a naïf!" he spat out angrily, interrupting her foolish attempt to redress Meadows' actions, and content to berate her over her Gryffindor pride. "Forcing you to learn Occlumency will not help us to heal Severus."

The anger did not diminish at the sight of her discomfort, and he thought back to their last lesson. If she hoped to learn the skill to keep Severus out of her head, then she was deluded: the man was too talented. Sighing, he gracefully slipped into the chair opposite hers and lazily traced patterns on the chair arm with his forefinger.

"Do you really think that you could keep Severus out of your head?" he asked casually. He didn't need her to speak or nod; the way that her head dropped while her hands writhed nervously around each other gave him his answer.

"Was this some hunt for glory, Miss Granger? Did you seek to eclipse Potter by curing a man that could not be cured?" he demanded harshly, ignoring the hurt flashing across her face. "Now that the time to complete the task looms, you realise that it requires more hard work than you had originally thought, and you no longer think the prize is worth the effort!"

"What do you want, Miss Granger?" he queried bitterly. "Accolades? Recognition? To be more than merely Potter's side-kick?"

"Cure Professor Snape," she said breathlessly.

"Then forget this foolishness of learning Occlumency and focus on that task," he hissed out.

It was there on her face—her fear making her desperate to object to the idea of letting go of her chance of protection. Her lips trembled as she tried to formulate some argument, and her dark eyes shimmered as she silently beseeched him not to make her surrender her only defence.

He saw her hands dart out to grip the chair arms, the knuckles whitening, and she lurched in her seat as though tugged by an invisible hand; with alarm, he watched what colour she had drain from her face and her eyes roll up in their sockets. One trembling hand flew to her mouth, and as she struggled to stand, he saw her heave.

Lucius leapt to his feet; fear and anger surged through him—it couldn't fail, not now! Gripping her bicep, he spun her around to face him, using his arm around her waist to pin her in place against him. From the corner of his eye, he saw her right hand swoop up in a tight arc, her wand pointed at his chest; he grabbed her wrist, squeezing and twisting, ignoring her gasp of pain. She struggled, and he tightened his grip until he felt the bones grind together; the wand fell from her limp fingers.

"You will stop this foolishness!" he snarled out, pushing her away from him and swiftly moving to pick up the dropped wand. "Decide now whether to help me or slink away; do not waste my time or Severus'!"

"I... I can't," she muttered weakly, massaging her reddened wrist and watching him warily.

"What could possibly stop you?" he demanded. "*Legilimens!*"

Ignoring her startled gasp and look of betrayal, he forced his way into her brain. No perceived comity on her part would stop him from ensuring that she cured Severus. Using the anger and resentment that had bubbled away beneath the surface for the last four years, he ploughed through her mind, searching for something that would either answer his questions or force her to learn what she thought she had to learn.

~X~

"Foolish fop!" the man muttered viciously as he stormed through the ward. "Somethin' akin to a chthonic being is on some demonic peregrination, and he's worried about *manners!*" he spat out while unlocking the door to his office.

"First sign of madness," said a voice jovially from behind him, "talking to oneself."

"Healer!" he let out in a surprised gasp. "Just the ramblings of an old man; ignore me."

"Quite fortunate for me that you have such a tendency to prattle on," said the young man with a strange smile haunting his face. Suddenly, Meadows felt quite vulnerable. "Oh, yes," he breathed as he stepped closer. "You used to mutter in my room all the time; no doubt, the result of working alone for so long."

Meadows backed into his office—a stupid, silly thing to do, but his brain was still processing all the hints—and the Healer followed, closing the door behind him—*her!*

31st August.

1. comity
2. berate
3. peregrination
4. naif
5. chthonic
6. redress
7. fop

.....Words with Definitions.

comity \KOM-uh-tee\, noun:

1. A state of mutual harmony, friendship, and respect, especially between or among nations or people; civility.
2. The courteous recognition by one nation of the laws and institutions of another.
3. The group of nations observing international comity.

berate \bih-RAYT\, transitive verb:

To scold severely or angrily.

peregrination \pehr-uh-gruh-NAY-shun\, noun:

A travelling from place to place; a wandering.

naif \nah-EEF; ny-\, adjective:

1. Naive.

noun:

1. A naive or inexperienced person.

chthonic \THONE-ik\, adjective:

Dwelling in or under the earth; also, pertaining to the underworld

redress \rih-DRES\, transitive verb:

1. To put in order again; to set right; to emend; to revise.
2. To set right, as a wrong; to repair, as an injury; to make amends for; to remedy; to relieve from.
3. To make amends or compensation to; to relieve of anything unjust or oppressive; to bestow relief upon.

noun:

1. The act of redressing; a making right; reformation; correction; amendment.
2. A setting right, as of wrong, injury, or oppression; as, the redress of grievances; hence, relief; remedy; reparation; indemnification.

fop \FOP\, noun:

A man who is overly concerned with or vain about his dress and appearance; a dandy.

Silence

Chapter 14 of 26

When Hermione discovers that an incurable Snape has been left to waste in a secret hospital ward, she sets out to do what so many have failed to do before and cure him.

This is my response to the Dictionary Drabble Challenge. The chapters have to be less than one thousand words and contain the listed words.

Author's Notes: Words and their definitions follow this chapter.

The admonition from Hardwicke echoed in his head, and he recalled the angry exclamation from Slughorn at the start of the year, but he couldn't see how the gubernatorial decree that affected almost every aspect of his life at school could be ignored or reversed. It only added to his growing despair. This was almost as terrible as trying to live under Voldemort's wing.

Contrary to his original thinking, he had found a quiet place, and it was with some relief that he slipped into the cool dark of the disused classroom. Whatever had been taught in this room mustn't have been that popular as it could only have held at most ten desks, and unlike all other rooms that he had studied in, this one was semi-circular. Four narrow arched windows were clustered closely together in the curved wall opposite the door—an odd arrangement that meant on sunny days, he had to shield his eyes from the glare when he entered.

It had been neglected and foul when he had stumbled across it; a bevy had used it as a roost, flying in through a broken pane in the window, but after a fortnight of smuggling in various items and elbow grease, he had ousted all signs of the birds and turned it into a pleasant haven. From the windows, he could see across the lake and the wisps of smoke coming from the chimneys in Hogsmeade, and during dark nights, he could see the lanterns burning and the stars twinkling. But most importantly, it meant solitude and a chance to put in order the thoughts and nightmares that threatened to immolate what was left of his mind. His life had been one directive after another, and now that he was free, he was utterly lost.

~X~

How foolish to have returned, he mused as Bella sat down on the rickety chair opposite his: only the table divided them. *How bloody stupid!*

"This 'foolish fop'," she asked amiably, "who could it be?"

Meadowes' gaze flickered to the door, and when he looked back, he saw her smile widen and her eyes glitter with malicious glee.

"Think that you could make it?" she asked with a giggle. "You could try," she continued with feigned encouragement, and then, her face split into a manic grin, "but I think we both know that you couldn't."

Meadowes slumped: he had been struggling against some strange bonds since she had pushed him backwards so that he had fallen into his chair. *I should never have stopped pushing; Granger needs to learn Occlumency... I should have stuck to the plan. Malfoy! Why did you have to be so obstructive?*

She leant forwards and licked her lips. "Now," she said softly, "I know that you've set yourself against me, and it now seems that you have a friend to help you... or maybe two?" Her expression hardened, and she eased back with a thoughtful expression. "You always muttered, you know; it was from your ramblings that I found out about 'dear Dorcas'—such a fool: so keen to think that I would have known about her!"

Perhaps, he could have coped with the knowledge that he had acted foolishly and been caught so easily, even handled the idea that he was possibly about to endanger Lucius and Hermione, but he found it impossible not to feel the sting of realising that he had set and baited his own trap.

"Your desire to put Dorcas to rest was laudable," she went on unsympathetically. "I'm sure that one of my guesses would have yielded something sooner or later. But now, we'll never know, will we?"

"What can ye do?" he rasped out, trying to use anger to smother his sudden hopelessness. "Ye have no wand down here."

Bella laughed out and slowly clapped her hands. "Bravo!" she exclaimed with amusement. "You have some fight in you after all." She sobered and pouted. "Don't glower like that, Fulton, it does nothing for you. And why am I only dangerous when armed with a wand? That's very short-sighted of you!"

Fulton watched her carefully, watched how she seemed momentarily lost in some dark thought and then studied her warily as she slowly rose from the chair to open up the small store cupboard in the corner.

"I was short-sighted once," she said distractedly. "It took some effort on my part to realise what I needed to do to see clearly."

From his seat, he watched her rifle through the cupboard until she let out a squeal and giggled. She looked across at him and withdrew what had delighted her. His eyes bulged at the sight of the chisel held in her hand, and he strained against the frustrating bonds.

"I'm guessing that you are helping that Mudblood behind my back," Bella hissed out. "Oddly, that doesn't concern me," she continued in a gentle voice. "What bothers me is who else you've got on your side. I have been lucky this far, but I don't really believe in luck—I think that we decide our own fates, and in some cases," she said while grinning, "someone else's."

"Torture won't help!" he spat out.

Merlin, forgive me! I should have listened to Malfoy and made her brew that damned potion!

Bella paused, looking surprised; she gesticulated between man and chisel and then chuckled. "Torture?" she managed to utter, using her empty hand to wipe away her tears. "Oh, you silly man, this isn't to hurt you. I have a much better plan for you." Bella eyed him hungrily, as a starving waif would stare at some comestible creation, and Meadowes shuddered. She stepped behind him and bent to whisper in his ear.

"You'll help me, and in the process, you'll tell me everything that I want to know. Have no doubt, though; I'll be torturing you, Meadowes... in ways that you cannot imagine, and my touch will linger on you for what remains of your life."

September 6th

1. gubernatorial
2. admonition
3. comestible
4. glower
5. immolate
6. bevy
7. laudable

.....Words with Definitions.

gubernatorial \GOO-ber-nuh-TOR-ee-uhl\, adjective:

Of or pertaining to a governor.

admonition \ad-muh-NISH-uhn\, noun:

1. Gentle or friendly reproof.
 2. Counseling against a fault or oversight; friendly caution or warning.
-

comestible \kuh-MES-tuh-buhl\, adjective:

1. Suitable to be eaten; edible.

noun:

1. Something suitable to be eaten; food.
-

glower \GLAU-uhr\, intransitive verb:

1. To look or stare angrily or with a scowl.

noun:

1. An angry or scowling look or stare.
-

immolate \IM-uh-layt\, transitive verb:

1. To sacrifice; to offer in sacrifice; to kill as a sacrificial victim.
 2. To kill or destroy, often by fire.
-

bevy \BEV-ee\, noun:

1. A group; an assembly or collection.
 2. A flock of birds, especially quails or larks; also, a herd of roes.
-

laudable \LAW-duh-bul\, adjective:

Worthy of praise; commendable.

Release

Chapter 15 of 26

When Hermione discovers that an incurable Snape has been left to waste in a secret hospital ward, she sets out to do what so many have failed to do before and cure him.

This is my response to the Dictionary Drabble Challenge. The chapters have to be less than one thousand words and contain the listed words.

Author's Notes: Words and their definitions follow the chapter.

Overhearing Meadows mumbling to himself had seemed too much like serendipity for her to feel comfortable any longer—she had to leave! Licking her lips and wincing at the feel of stubble beneath her tongue, she tapped the edge of the long chisel against the table and pondered how to accomplish it all.

It was mildly amusing, the way his rheumy eyes followed each stroke she made—it was about all that he could move—but he still proved a most inconsiderate burden. The small, stinking cell that she had been forced to inhabit was only a few yards away from where she now sat, but with the possibly evanescent old coot, it may as well have been a mile away.

Easing back, she resolved herself to her course of action—she had no choice really, and if it failed, she would only have risked losing a host and a few fingers. A smile played on her lips as she pondered the delightful rewards of her auspicious endeavour—should her theory prove right—and just as her breath stuttered and her eyelids languidly closed, she considered her new status as a mental cosmopolite... with the key to all minds and immune to exclusion.

Meadowes felt his chest lurch and his bowels tremble as Bella stood and smiled down at him. So much was unfulfilled, so many promises broken, and so much that he should have said—the weight of his negligence crushed his will. Maybe that sense of hopelessness and the lack of inner zeal that had kept him going had aided her; he didn't really care anymore, not even when he felt her shatter his mental shield, and after that, he was no longer in a position to feel anything.

~X~

The ravens took his invite to regale, and they clustered around him, their beaks slashing and feathers flying: their feeding almost as torrid as their fighting. Indeed, clothed in black as he was and feasting just as feverishly, he almost seemed kin to those sleek killers. But the food was welcome in his belly, and his companions were quiet and tolerant; Snape revelled in the sense that he was, for once, considered blameless.

~X~

So much suddenly seemed wrong! Her vision was clouded, some strange noise whistled in her ears, and she appeared to be crouching. Staggering, she clutched at the table and saw the hoary hairs on the back of her wrinkled and twisted hands—Meadowes' hands! Straightening, she felt dry lips crack into a smile, and her old eyes sought out her abandoned host.

The Healer had crawled into a corner; his despair was beautiful to see—such sorrow that he was now bereft of her! Approaching the curled up, trembling man, she heard his plaintive moans, and her eyes widened to drink in the sight of what her departure had done to the man—he was a wreck! Satisfied that he would pose no problem, she picked up the chisel, secreted it within Meadowes' robes, and left his office.

Walking was a problem; it seemed that no joint of his was free from some sort of pain, but this was a temporary necessity; when this was over, she would be young forever! The corridors were empty; no one visited this late, and the Healers who lived in this foul place for the course of their duty would no doubt be tucked up in bed by now. Emboldened by this, she sped to her cell.

The smell hit her first! Suddenly, seeing her body no longer seemed such a carefree prospect. Steeling herself, she turned and lifted her gaze to the blackened, desiccated thing on the cot. The limbs had wasted, the skin clinging to the bones beneath looked like leather, and it seemed as though the body was trying to curl up into that foetal pose that must have comforted in the early days of her life—well, she was in a new life, and she needed no such comfort. Although, the taut grin that her dried lips had created was slightly disturbing—it seemed to make her look a little mad.

Removing the chisel, she stepped closer and reached out to grip one emaciated and brittle finger on the clawed hand; to her surprise, it snapped free: the chisel became redundant... for now. Snapping all the fingers free, she dropped the hardened digits into her pocket, and satisfied that she had enough, she moved to complete her set task.

Closing the office door behind her, she studied the man rocking back and forth, and bemoaning the effort it took, Bella knelt next to her used host. Crooning softly, she assured him that his pain would end very soon, and as he turned to her, his eyes empty shells, Bella kept her promise.

Stepping away from the expanding pool of blood, she watched with keen interest as the Healer tried to push his intestines back through the gash that the chisel had made. It was futile though; the slash in his throat rendered his effort moot. Ensuring that she was suitably covered in evidence, Bella almost danced out of the room, whooping with delight and waking the residents of Sub Rosa; some howled and screeched in sympathy, and soon, there came the shouts and commands of the orderlies and the Healers.

Grinning and laughing, she fled through the corridors, rejoicing in the looks of horror on the faces of those she passed. Her joy increased—she was passing them! She was going further than she had before... Her theory was right! Just as she reached the hidden door to slip through to freedom, she heard those exquisite words that she had waited to hear.

"Meadowes has gone nuts! He's killed a Healer!"

September 13th

Plaintive

Cosmopolite

Regale

Torrid

Evanescent

Hoary

Auspicious

.....Words with Definitions.

plaintive \PLAYN-tiv\, adjective:

Expressive of sorrow or melancholy; mournful; sad.

cosmopolite \koz-MOP-uh-lyt\, noun:

1. One who is at home in every place; a citizen of the world; a cosmopolitan person.

2. (Ecology) An organism found in most parts of the world.

regale \rih-GAY(uh)L, transitive verb:

1. To entertain with something that delights.

2. To entertain sumptuously with fine food and drink.

intransitive verb:

1. To feast.

noun:

1. A sumptuous feast.

2. A choice food; a delicacy.

3. Refreshment.

torrid \TOR-uhd\, adjective:

1. Violently hot; drying or scorching with heat; burning; parching;

as, "torrid heat."

2. Characterized by intense emotion; as, "a torrid love affair."

3. Emotionally charged and vigorously energetic; as, "a torrid dance."

evanescent \ev-uh-NES-unt\, adjective:

Liable to vanish or pass away like vapor; fleeting.

hoary \HOR-ee\, adjective:

1. White or gray with age; as, "hoary hairs."

2. Ancient; extremely old; remote in time past.

auspicious \aw-SPISH-uhs\, adjective:

1. Giving promise of success, prosperity, or happiness; predicting good; as, "an auspicious beginning."

2. Prosperous; fortunate; as, "auspicious years."

Weeding

Chapter 16 of 26

After invading her mind, Lucius has to face Hermione

Author's Notes: Words and their definitions follow the chapter.

She allowed the anger to suffuse her, relishing the chance to just let it burn—so controlled for so long—and now, she could just let go! There was no real thought, just some primal urge... There was the man who had hurt her, and that was enough.

Lucius had just enough presence of mind to end legilimency, but not enough time to defend himself before a furious witch launched herself at him. Surprised by the ferocity of her assault, he merely lifted his arms to ward off her blows. Cursing, he tried to aim the wand while blocking her punches, but she was a mad dervish, an ever-moving target, and ironically, a ballistic weapon can be rendered moot when the target is too close.

Relying upon his own instincts, he grabbed hold of her—physical assaults could also be hampered by proximity—and he suffered her shoes against his shins, her nails against his skin, and her fingers ripping his hair. Grunting with the effort of holding her and from the sharp sources of pain, he manhandled her so that her back was

pressed against his chest, and he clung on.

A particularly nasty elbow to his solar plexus knocked the wind out of him, and he involuntarily collapsed onto the floor, curling up around his throbbing abdomen. Using his sudden disability, she yanked her wand free and lunged away from him.

Through his tears, he saw her spin and point her wand at him, and after rummaging through her mind, he wondered if she really was as bad as she feared. A tintinnabulation filled his ears after the surcease of her vociferous protests, and in that dreadful silence, he waited for her to strike. He wasn't kept waiting.

"*Crucio!*"

Gritting his teeth and tensing, he expected his muscles to explode into agonising life, but other than a sharp sting from where the spell struck, and the hint of what could have been strumming his nerves, there was nothing. Licking his lips, Lucius slowly rose to his feet and walked over to the closest chair, falling into the soft cushions. *She couldn't do it!* The thought buzzed in his skull, and he hoped that he could manipulate it to suit his goal. *She had put her all into it, and she hadn't been able to cast the curse.*

"*Crucio!*" she screamed out again, her body vibrating with the desire to hurt the man who had abused her.

Lucius, despite his unease, smirked. "Give it up, Miss Granger," he drawled. "You just haven't got it in you." He was gratified to see her anger burn all the hotter; it was a dangerous game, but sometimes a point could only be made and understood through pain. "You misprize me, and yet, you just cannot do it... I, who have hurt you and worked to kill those whom you care about, and you *still* cannot summon enough hate to harm me!" He waved disdainfully at her and sneered. "Your suffering is nothing more than some kitsch attempt at martyrdom."

Her mind was a mess. Memories and emotions had combined and colluded in a way to convince her that her hate and desires to see others suffer for their crimes indicated some inner evil. Those terrible thoughts stirred up by that Horcrux had twisted her affections, giving them a rawer and more primal aspect that had contradicted her normal thoughts and feelings she had felt for her friends. The Horcrux had made her view them... differently, and in turn, had introduced her to some very basic and confusing urges. At this particular stage of her life, and given her possible lack of experience, those ideas would have potentially seemed so very wrong. Lucius almost felt pangs of remorse for her: such a precious aspect of a relationship tainted by a fraction of Voldemort's soul. In short, she thought she was in some way damaged and rotten.

Hermione feared that she had been polluted, corrupted, and that deep within her, she had some terrible seed; she feared it growing, and she feared its discovery. Keeping it from her loved ones had been her main focus, and her current task made it impossible for her to keep that vile secret to herself: Snape would unearth it.

Feigning languor, Lucius crossed his legs and idly plucked loose hair from his clothes. From the corner of his eye, he watched her simmer and the way she cogitated over her next course of action. Swallowing nervously, he hoped that she was too furious to recall that some very nasty hexes required little emotional investment... He doubted that he'd survive sectumsempra.

"*Avada Kedavra!*"

The smallest of whimpers bubbled up from his paralysed lungs when she cried out her curse, but as that terrible, green light washed over him, he realised that it lacked intent. Exhaling, he sagged and almost laughed out. Through his sudden exhilaration, he saw her sway and clutch at her head, muttering incomprehensible phrases.

As she fell to the floor, he slipped off the chair and knelt next to her. While she wept, he pulled back the cuff of his jacket until the faded, but still recognisable Dark Mark was exposed.

"I can't..." she mumbled. When she realised that he was next to her, she looked up, her eyes shimmering, and her cheeks red and damp. "I wanted to hurt you," she said simply. If she was surprised by his accepting nod, she made no sign. "I'm... I'm *scared*," she sobbed out, her breath coming in huge, erratic gulps. "Scared that I'm..."

"Because you burn with hate and anger, because you feel that you need to hurt or destroy, don't let it disconcert you; it does not make you a proponent of *this!*" he hissed out. Her eyes widened, her gaze flickering to his forearm. "It just makes you human... Hermione."

She sobbed out, tears pouring down her already slick cheeks, and she fell against him, weeding out all that shouldn't be thriving.

The word list (swiped from the past week's list from dictionary.com).

1. kitsch
2. suffuse
3. disconcert
4. vociferous
5. tintinnabulation
6. misprize
7. proponent

.....Words with Definitions.

kitsch \KICH\, noun:

1. Art characterized by pretentious bad taste.

adjective:

1. Relating to, or characterized by, kitsch.

suffuse \suh-FYOOZ\, transitive verb:

To spread through or over in the manner of fluid or light; to flush.

disconcert \dis-kuhn-SURT\, transitive verb:

1. To disturb the composure of.
2. To throw into disorder or confusion; as, "the emperor disconcerted

the plans of his enemy."

vociferous \voh-SIF-uhr-uhs\, adjective:

Making a loud outcry; clamorous; noisy.

tintinnabulation \tin-tih-nab-yuh-LAY-shuhn\, noun:

A tinkling sound, as of a bell or bells.

misprize \mis-PRYZ\, transitive verb:

1. To hold in contempt.

2. To undervalue.

proponent \pruh-POH-nuhnt\, noun:

One who argues in support of something; an advocate; a supporter.

Friends and Feathers

Chapter 17 of 26

The easiest traps to stumble into are the ones we make for ourselves, and we can keep ourselves stuck in them better than any gaoler could hold us.

Author's Notes: Words and their definitions follow each chapter. In this offering, there are two drabbles in one; I hope you enjoy them.

"You want me to pass on messages to Draco?"

"After the recent melee, I feel that this small sign of beneficence on your part will go some way to ease my pains," drawled Lucius.

Hermione stared at the enigmatic man sitting calmly across from her; she could see the long, red welts on his cheeks from where she had scratched wildly at him, and guilt flickered in her guts. Her limbs still trembled from what she had suffered, and she felt that peculiar light-headedness that comes with trying to process some huge event.

"But why can't you deliver the notes yourself?" she asked tentatively. Her tongue and lips felt sluggish, and her voice seemed distant and lethargic, but something in his sudden expression dispersed that lassitude.

"There are certain topics that I wish to discuss with my son that will not be permitted by the Ministry," he said after an uncomfortable pause. "Nothing that should alarm you; my days of following that vile creature ended long before Potter executed him," he said soothingly. "I have no intention to edify you on my intentions; all I wish is to determine Draco's wellbeing without the Ministry scouring every word. I need to be able to speak freely to him about..."

The mouth suddenly snapped shut, and Lucius withdrew, as though trying to distance himself from the words hanging in the air, and Hermione felt the last scraps of emotional fatigue evaporate. Infused with energy, her mind trawled through what she knew about the Malfoys after their arrest, and she realised that it was rather meagre.

The headlines from the *Daily Prophet* paraded through her mind, and she remembered sharing in the outrage as a result of the Malfoys serving lenient sentences, but the man before her screamed out a punishment that transcended the one that had been made known publically. But what could the Ministry have imposed that would have been worse than Azkaban?

Interest flared, but she reined it in; prying would only reinstate that old tension, and she found that she quite liked this tentative relationship that had developed between them. Inhaling slowly, she just nodded and forced her curiosity to capitulate to common sense.

"Of course I'll act as a go-between."

It seemed that he struggled for words and settled on a curt nod before glancing away and pressing his fingertips against his lips. Hermione felt a similar inadequacy with words and contented herself by picking at loose thread on the seam of her cuff.

"The ingredients for the potion will be ready tomorrow," Lucius said, breaking the uncomfortable silence. "The money provided by Meadowes will not cover the cost, and as my own wealth has become a matter of mere numismatics for the Ministry, we need alternative financing," he said tactfully. "The vendor has had a sudden blight of intelligence and realises that the ingredients themselves can be construed to be dubious, and he has threatened to 'let slip' that I require them," he said bitterly while staring at the hearthrug.

At the first giggle, his head snapped up, and he stared incredulously at the young girl trying to smother her laughter by shoving her knuckles into her mouth. At the second, he narrowed his eyes and eased back into the chair.

"What could possibly be amusing about this situation, Miss Granger?" he demanded waspishly. "Without those ingredients, our plans falter."

Hermione felt her sides burn with the effort of trying to stop herself from laughing, and she could feel her tears running down her face, but the thought of Malfoy being broke was just too overwhelming! The man had been one of the richest wizards around, so rich, in fact, that people refused to charge him on account of his presence being such a wonderful compliment upon their premises. Despite seeing his eyes narrow to slits and his lips thin at her hysteria, she couldn't summon the energy to battle her humour.

"I'm... sorry; I... didn't mean to laugh," she said while hiccupping. "But... you... asking for money from a Mudblood is just so... *funny!*"

Blinking several times, he processed her words, and soon, he felt his own lips twitch in sympathy; it did have that certain wry humour that had once appealed to him. How long had it been since anything had amused him? Watching Hermione as she strained to stop her laughter, and feeling his own humour bubbling in his chest, he wondered if he had taken and retained something from her through legilimency; had some aspect of her brain restored something that he had thought irretrievably lost?

How this girl pulled the rug out from under him at every meeting!

Nothing about their working alliance seemed to be following the expected norm; he had expected bitterness and hate, and although she had unleashed her pain and vitriol, she was still content to sit with him and laugh at his predicament, and surprisingly, he felt that same comfort and ease. He could excuse her for her sentimental sensibilities...Gryffindor that she was...but it just wasn't very *Slytherin* of him! For Merlin's sake! He had almost told her of *Scion Nullificare*.

His humour drained, and that terrible dread settled in his stomach...his son had been rendered infertile by the Ministry; a terrible punishment upon them both, and Draco had no idea of his curse or his father's terrible duty to explain. Closing his eyes, he felt that familiar despair, hate and crippling abulia smother his thinking, and he no longer cared that someone was witnessing his descent...it was just too much.

The very air seemed to undulate around him, dispersing his grief and bitterness across the room from where it rebounded to crush him further. He would have thought himself incapable of weeping had not Hermione thrust a handkerchief into his trembling hands, and he would never have thought that she would have offered him any sympathy, but as he looked up, he saw her dark eyes shimmering.

1. beneficence

2. undulate

3. scion

4. numismatics

5. edify

6. melee

7. capitulate

.....Words with Definitions.

beneficence \buh-NEFF-i-suhns\, noun:

1. The practice of doing good; active goodness, kindness, or charity.
2. A charitable gift or act.

undulate \UN-juh-layt; UN-dyuh-\, intransitive:

To move in, or have, waves; to vibrate; to wave; as, undulating air.

scion \SY-uhn\, noun:

1. A detached shoot or twig of a plant used for grafting.
2. Hence, a descendant; an heir.

numismatics \noo-miz-MAT-iks; -mis-; nyoo-\, noun:

the collection and study of money (and coins in particular).

edify \ED-uh-fy\, transitive verb:

To instruct and improve, especially in moral and religious knowledge;

to teach.

--edifying, adjective

melee \MAY-lay; may-LAY\, noun:

1. A fight or hand-to-hand struggle in which the combatants are mingled in one confused mass.
2. A confused conflict or mingling.

capitulate \kuh-PICH-uh-layt\, intransitive verb:

To surrender under agreed conditions.

Snape nudged the last two stones into place with his toe and admired his new bed frame; it was just tall and wide enough to accommodate his body, and he intended to fill it with some of the gorse from outside and then, cover that prickly mattress with the feathers that had gathered on the ground. It was plausible that there would be sufficient to make a bed more comfortable than the cave floor; it would also help him to conserve precious heat, as the gorse and feathers would insulate his body. Grinning as he worked, he revelled in the idea of being a slugabed for the first time in nearly twenty years.

With a panache that belied his predicament, he wove between the bushes, collecting the black remnants of the vicious donnybrook that had ironically given him almost all that he needed to survive and be comfortable. The strange sky no longer bothered him, and although the prospect of his next meal worried him, he felt in fine fettle as he listened to the ravens caw and play around him.

It was almost as though he truly belonged here, and as his mind drifted back to those memories of his life before all this, it seemed that it had been such an awful and confused mess of demands, questions, expectations, dismay and despair. Why should he waste time even thinking about venturing back to that challenging and unrewarding realm? There was nothing there but pain and hopelessness. No, it was better here, he thought; no worries, no Dumbledore, no Voldemort and no Potter... either of them.

Without permission, his mind unfurled his memories of Lily, and he staggered as his chest lurched. It felt as though it had been decades since he had thought about her, and guilt rampaged through his chest at the mental and emotional desertion. But he had stood in a lonely littoral prison, watching her from across the forbidding ocean of his bitterness at their choices that he felt a rising petulance that she should have some influence in this new haven of his! He had lived and almost died for her, and she had given him nothing, and she never would!

Snarling in fury, his mood did a volte-face, and the peace that had tried to soothe him was rudely ousted. Kicking out at the neat stones, suddenly despising the lie that they supported, he destroyed what he had created that so cruelly disguised his fate...this was no haven! This was a hell! Seething, he stormed from the cave...nowhere was he safe from his ghosts!

~X~

The stunned faces of the hospital staff and patrons would delight her for years, she was sure, but first, she needed to keep hold of Meadows long enough to drain his memories. She had control, but his mind was slippery, and the more she tried to delve into it, the more it darted away. It was of secondary importance at the minute though as she wheezed and limped towards a safe place. She could peel back his mind one sliver at a time at her leisure once she was safe at her little hideaway. It would be interesting to see what the old fool and the Mudblood bitch had been up while she had been busy; she would cure Meadows of his fondness for verbiage and teach him alacrity.

Keeping her palm flat against the deep pockets of Meadows' coat to protect the precious cargo, she moved further into Muggle London. Time was her ally at the moment; it would take time for the shock to disperse enough for the alarm to be raised; it would take time for the Aurors to arrive, and even more time to sort some kind of search. She grinned... This was the cost of complacency. While they panicked and milled around, asking questions, she would be gone.

1. panache
2. verbiage
3. fettle
4. slugabed
5. donnybrook
6. littoral
7. volte-face

panache \puh-NASH; -NAHSH\, noun:

1. Dash or flamboyance in manner or style.
2. A plume or bunch of feathers, esp. such a bunch worn on the helmet; any military plume, or ornamental group of feathers.

verbiage \VUR-bee-ij\, noun:

1. An overabundance of words; wordiness.
2. Manner or style of expression; diction.

fettle \FET-l\, noun:

A state or condition of fitness or order; state of mind; spirits --
often used in the phrase "in fine fettle."

slugabed \SLUHG-uh-bed\, noun:

One who stays in bed until a late hour; a sluggard.

donnybrook \DON-ee-brook\, noun:

1. A brawl; a free-for-all.
2. A heated quarrel or dispute.

littoral \LIH-tuh-rul\, adjective:

1. Of, relating to, or on a coastal or shore region, especially a seashore.

noun:

1. A coastal region, especially the zone between the limits of high

and low tides.

volte-face \vawlt-FAHS; vawl-tuh-\, noun:

An about-face; a reversal, as in policy or opinion.

Charges

Chapter 18 of 26

Hermione finds that her charged task is not as straightforward as she first thought, and Lucius really does discover that caveat emptor should be respected.

Author's Notes: Words and their definitions follow the chapter.

Weaving through the throng of chattering pupils, Hermione headed along the corridor, following the intermittent flash of sunlight on blond hair. Any attempt at subtlety was rendered moot by the sheer press of bodies as she elbowed and nudged people out of the way, but in a way, the multitude concealed her intentions—for all intents and purposes, she could have been on an expeditious mission to find an *alfresco* sanctum.

Draco had been a feature of her day-to-day existence, but despite being constantly aware of his presence, she had never really paid that much attention to him, and so it was with some shock that she saw the same echo of concealed pain in his sloped shoulders and drawn features as she had seen in his father. It was also odd to see him so alone. Not so long ago, a group of satellite, sycophantic Slytherins had orbited him, but now, he was a solitary star, pulling and shining upon no one.

Nibbling her lower lip, she wondered how she could be so... forgiving. The Malfoys had been the worst of the worst; they had had a hand in some of the most terrible of atrocities, and yet, here she was, sympathising with them. It was confusing: almost... abnormal. Shaking her head, she edged past a group of first-years, cursing under her breath that they should waylay her now after all her previous efforts. Pushing past them, and with a rush of adrenaline, she jogged to the main doors and out into the bitter, autumn weather. Draco was nowhere to be seen.

Huffing in peeved disgust, she wrapped her cloak around her body and sauntered down the stone steps. It seemed pointless to continue chasing; her target had disappeared, and searching the castle grounds would be otiose. Wiping windswept hair from her eyes, she watched the wind torment some distant trees and the black specks of birds flitting across the bruised and heavy sky. There was a storm brewing.

~X~

The black-toothed maw opened up, and Lucius felt his stomach churn. Reminding himself that this was just a small part of a much larger scheme, he smiled back and extended his gloved hand and purse to the smirking vendor.

"It's all there, but do feel free to check," Lucius said sardonically while the man ripped open the purse and tipped a few of the galleons onto his palm.

"O' course, I believed ye," he replied smarmily, "but it pays to check."

With a grin, the seller shoved a large leather satchel into Malfoy's chest. "It's all in it, but feel free to check!" he added facetiously and winked as he pocketed his money. "A pleasure doin' business wi' ye."

Seeing that as his hint to leave, Lucius nodded and made his way out of the dingy alley, cradling the desperately needed satchel and ingredients against his chest. Knockturn had never been a pleasant place even when he had been considered a welcomed visitor, and now, it suffocated him and made him feel incredible filthy. Wandless, it was also now a place to fear. Pulling his hood further round his face, he hoisted the satchel upon his back and headed to the less precarious cobbles of Diagon Alley.

The junction was just up ahead when he heard a sound that made the hiss of a Basilisk seem a euphonious melody—he heard the muted pops of Apparating wizards. Inhaling sharply and closing his eyes as he sent out a rapid and silent plea to whichever god was still on his side, he upped his pace towards Diagon. As he peered into the darkened shop-front windows, he saw the reflection of the duplicitous vendor point him out to two large and brutish wizards before slinking back into the shadows.

Swallowing and feeling nauseous, Lucius gripped his precious burden, and he frantically pondered what he could do. Breathing hard and with sweat trickling down his back and temples, he caught sight of a group of potential allies. Slowing down so his pursuers could close in, he aimed for a group of well known witches, who were chatting and laughing raucously around a brazier. The women had the ironic sobriquet 'ladies of the hour'—they were not ladies, and you rarely got the hour's worth.

Barging through them was almost suicide in its own right given their tendency to hurl curses with both tongue and wand, but he had no choice but to ignite their wrath. When the two wizards came to follow his example, the 'ladies' introduced the two to their intense disapproval. Smirking and relieved that the women had turned on the closest targets for their vengeance rather than the instigator, Lucius breathed a sigh of relief as his feet struck the less stained cobbles of Diagon Alley.

~X~

The feel of warm lips against her temple drew her from her sleep, and her sore eyes focused upon the smiling face of her husband. Something in his expression halted her breath and made her heart leap—such a long time since she had seen such unfettered joy. Her lips couldn't resist lifting up into a smile.

"I have a way to talk to Draco, my dearest," he said softly. "We are on the path to freeing ourselves from this nightmare."

Narcissa's hands slowly reached up to cup his face, her fingertips tracing the outline of his smiling mouth and catching the tear that slid down his cheek. His eyes had never looked so brilliant or so clear as he looked down upon her, knowing that he had finally found a way to rescue them from this pitiful state.

"I am sorry for doubting you," she whispered up to him, regret and pain thickening her voice.

He swooped down and pressed his lips against hers. "I doubted myself at times." He straightened and held out his hand to her. "Severus *will* wake, and when he does, he will spill all the secrets that he has kept for us."

1. euphonious
2. sobriquet
3. otiose
4. waylay
5. sanctum*
6. expeditious
7. alfresco

*(Number 5 on the list was a repeat from a previous week's challenge.

The word given was chosen at random from a previous month's list on dictionary.com.)

.....Words with Definitions.

euphonious \yoo-FOH-nee-uhs\, adjective:

Pleasing or sweet in sound; smooth-sounding.

sobriquet \SO-brih-kay; -ket; so-brih-KAY; -KET\, noun:

A nickname; an assumed name; an epithet.

otiose \OH-shee-ohs; OH-tee-\, adjective:

1. Ineffective; futile.
 2. Being at leisure; lazy; indolent; idle.
 3. Of no use.
-

waylay \WAY-lay\, transitive verb:

1. To lie in wait for and attack from ambush.
 2. To approach or stop (someone) unexpectedly.
-

sanctum \SANK-tum\, noun;

plural sanctums or sancta::

1. A sacred place.
 2. A place of retreat where one is free from intrusion.
-

expeditious \ek-spuh-DISH-uhs\, adjective:

Characterized by or acting with speed and efficiency.

alfresco \al-FRES-koh\, adverb:

1. In the open air; outdoors.

adjective:

1. Taking place or located in the open air; outdoor.

Give and Take

Chapter 19 of 26

Events push the Malfoys to make a move, but where will it lead them?

Author's Notes: Words and definitions follow the chapter.

"How dare you?" she cried out shrilly. Her thin hands clenched into tight fists, and her face flushed as her anger ignited. "You can't come here and make those demands; such malfeasance will not be tolerated."

"Not tolerated by whom, my dear lady?" At the sight of her fluster, his grin widened, and he casually indicated her husband standing quietly by the cold hearth. "Your husband understands the way of things, I think. In this bailiwick, all that I say is all that you need to know. You may of course limn your quandary to your landlord," he added with ironic generosity.

"Narcissa," came Lucius' subdued voice, "pay the increased rent and let him go."

Her lips moved in a stunned, silent protest, and then, she straightened and stepped stiffly over to the rough table and snatched up a battered tea caddy. Fumbling with the lid, it suddenly clattered open to reveal their meagre savings. Glaring at the bailiff, she counted out the required monies coin by coin, pummelling his palm with each stolen Knut.

"My gratitude, my dear lady," he said with a sickening smile and a mocking bow.

Narcissa opened the door for him, watching with disgust as he sauntered out of their home, and slammed it on his back with a satisfying crack. Breathing erratically, she spun on her heel to glower at Lucius.

"You didn't castigate that... that thief!" she said with bitter bemusement. "How could you say nothing as he took the last of our money?"

"He was right about me knowing how things work, Narcissa." He kept his voice low and even as he turned from staring at the cold ashes to his wife's heated expression. "We are alone. We are fodder for all the parasites and the leeches of life. We are nothing."

Grabbing the coarse cloth scarf about her throat, her anger was extinguished by the rising dread inspired by his simple words, and she stumbled over to the ripped armchair.

"We are a synecdoche for all that is to be chewed and spat out," he said bitterly, his lips parting in disgust.

"And that is that?" she asked in a strained whisper, beseeching him to be mistaken about the futility and emptiness of their lives.

In three strides, he was standing before her, his eyes darting over her frantic features and his fingers digging into her shoulders.

"No, that is not that!" he hissed out. "Gather only what you need—nothing that suggests more than a gentle stroll to the market—all that you cannot do without. Meet up with me at the Hog's Head in one hour." With that strange request, he kissed her on the forehead, grabbed his cloak, winked at her and left.

~X~

Sipping his coffee, he watched a skein of geese head over the lake towards Hogsmeade, and he admired not only their freedom, but their simple sense of purpose—they knew without question what they had to do. A sense of purpose was something that Draco had lost a long time ago.

Tearing his eyes away from the taunting birds, he stared at his shifting reflection in the black coffee; somehow, the distorted image was reassuringly vague, and he could stare at it longer than he dared when looking in the mirror hanging in his bathroom. The steam rising from the mug was warm against his cheeks and forehead, and the smell grounded him; it reminded him of mornings on the terrace at the manor. His eyes closed sharply: there was no terrace any more.

A sharp chorus of laughter pulled him rudely from his thoughts, and he glanced up at a group of sixth-year girls, who had paused to enjoy his destitution; at his glare, they sniggered and continued on their way.

Watching them as they left the courtyard to their next lesson, he wondered if they had any idea of who they were and what they were doing. A sudden, terrible thought gripped him; he would be leaving Hogwarts at the end of the year: what would he do then? Feeling nauseous, he poured the rest of his coffee away and Vanished the mug. Here, he still had timetables and tutorials, lessons and study... What would he have after that? What was he fit for?

"It's a fine day, isn't it, Mr Malfoy?"

At the voice, his eyes widened, and Draco twisted on the stone bench to look up at Professor Hardwicke. His apprehension morphed into horror as he saw what his professor was holding daintily between forefinger and thumb.

"Makes you glad to be alive, doesn't it?" Hardwicke said in the same jovial tone.

Draco just swallowed and nodded, his gaze glued to the limp snake held aloft as if it was nothing more worrying than a cut flower. Slowly, his eyes drifted upwards, following the stonework until his gaze alighted upon a stained glass window—one that just over a week ago had been smashed by an overenthusiastic Potter.

Finally, Hardwicke stopped admiring and basking in the glory of the day, and focused his attention upon Draco. The look was familiar, and with a mix of relief and trepidation, Draco wondered what the professor had plucked from his brain on previous occasions. Aunt Bella's plenary lecture had always been that for a powerful Legilimens, there was only knowing and rarely suspecting. Even a casual glance could give away more than was bargained for.

"You recognise this creature, Mr Malfoy?" His voice was no longer light and conversational; it was gruff and demanding.

Draco thought carefully, and something, some sense, warned him that lying to Hardwicke would be another in a long line of mistakes. Looking into the old wizard's eyes, he licked his lips and very slowly gave one important nod.

Hardwicke huffed in what Draco hoped was approval, and then, he dropped the dead snake and immolated it—not even ash remained.

"We are never truly lost, Mr Malfoy; sometimes, we just need a better map."

1. bailiwick
2. malfeasance
3. synecdoche
4. castigate*
5. plenary
6. limn
7. quandary

.....Words with Definitions.

bailiwick \BAY-luh-wik\, noun:

1. A person's specific area of knowledge, authority, interest, skill, or work.
2. The office or district of a bailiff.

malfeasance \mal-FEE-zuhn(t)s\, noun:

Wrongdoing, misconduct, or misbehaviour, especially by a public official.

synecdoche \si-NEK-duh-kee\, noun:

a figure of speech by which a part is put for the whole or whole for a part or general for the special or vice versa

castigate \KAS-tuh-gayt\, transitive verb:

To punish severely; also, to chastise verbally; to rebuke; to criticize severely.

plenary \PLEE-nuh-ree; PLEN-uh-ree\, adjective:

1. Full in all respects; complete; absolute; as, plenary authority.
2. Fully attended by all qualified members.

limn \LIM\, transitive verb:

1. To depict by drawing or painting.
2. To portray in words; to describe.

quandary \KWAHN-duh-ree; -dree\, noun:

A state of difficulty, perplexity, doubt, or uncertainty.

Message Received

Chapter 20 of 26

Some messages are less hazardous than others.

Author's Notes: The challenge has now ended, and I am continuing this as a regular story. I hope that you enjoy.

Hardwicke worried him. Granted, the wizard had only seemed to want to extend a helping hand, but Draco couldn't fathom why. The motives behind the generosity perplexed him, and he wondered if it was some cruel joke. Pondering his lot, he walked along the corridor towards his room. In the distance, he could hear the dull roar of the Quidditch match, and he quashed the rising envy. So much had been so important to him, and it was now laughable, but it had represented a normal life, and he ached for that. Shrugging his shoulders, he smiled wryly. Maybe Hardwicke was right; maybe it was just a question of having better directions.

Lost in thought, he couldn't react to the pale hand darting from the shadows to latch onto his arm. Gasping and trying to pull away, Draco tried to prise the tight fingers from his bicep, but the grip was excessively determined. Struggling, the hand tightened, and its partner emerged to grab his collar. He caught someone's groan over the rush of blood in his ears, and then, he was hauled into the gloom. His face smacked into the wall, and he felt his front teeth grind against the cool stone.

"Oh, I'm so sorry."

A *girl!* his mind supplied quickly, part of it fluttering with excitement...when was the last time he'd been dragged into a secluded alcove by a girl?...but another part, the greater part, recognised the voice and trembled. *Granger!*

But she *had* apologised.

The hands let go, and he turned slowly to his possible aggressor. Her wand flared to illuminate the small space, and he saw her pale and tired face. *What on earth did she*

want?

"Granger," he said sanguinely, as if they were colleagues merely meeting up in the local.

"Dra... Malfoy," she replied unsteadily.

"Did you want to have a word with me about something?" he asked softly while feeling the edge of his tooth for damage.

Her sheepish grin was quite cute, and Draco felt the world tilt slightly more towards insanity. Could things become any more surreal?

"In a way," she said carefully.

He was intrigued by her apparent wariness; her eyes kept darting towards the empty corridor.

"I need to give you something," she finally confessed; her voice was breathy and fast.

"Oh," he replied with a smile which exploded into a grin at her shocked gasp.

"Nothing like that," she retorted indignantly.

"I didn't think so, but you're worth a try."

Teasing Granger was fun! It rekindled something deep inside: mischief, humour, life! At each comment, her blush intensified, and he revelled in the way she didn't know whether to smile or sneer. But he wasn't a fool, so he knew that Granger was after something noble or righteous; the Gryffindors just couldn't help themselves. But something that required him? Interesting!

"I have something from your father."

The smile evaporated from his face, and he leant closer to her. Something from his father? The image of an owl on a sill sprang to mind, and he recalled the letter declaring that his father had found someone to help him. But *Granger*?

"What is it?"

Her hand slipped into the deep pocket of her school robe, and he tensed, but she only pulled out a harmless, cream envelope.

"A letter," she said simply.

Plucking it from her fingers, Draco fought the urge to rip it open and tear out its innards.

"How did you get it?"

"I'd rather not say," Hermione said sharply. "The letter should explain everything."

He grabbed her arm as she tried to slip past him into the corridor. "What do you mean by 'everything'?" he demanded almost desperately. "You've seen him?"

"Read the letter, Draco," she suggested firmly while tugging her arm free. "Lucius said that you'd understand."

'Lucius' had been wrong. Even after reading the letter for the third time, he was as puzzled as ever. His father wanted him to work with Granger on some project? Was he delusional? The witch had been partly responsible for putting him in Azkaban, and his father wanted him to help her? An inspiration struck him, and he lifted the letter up to the light, looking for the hidden message that just had to be there! Nothing! His father must be losing the plot in that hovel.

However, his father had seemed sure that the letter would be understood, so maybe there was something in the text itself, some secret message hidden in plain sight.

Dear Draco,

Please accept my apologies for not contacting you sooner, but this had to be handled delicately.

Do you remember what I said to you as we were manhandled out of the court? I told you that there was a way out and that we would be free to live again. You must think that that was a pie-crust promise from a desperate man, but I was sincere. We do have the means to escape what our life has become. I cannot tell you the details, just as I cannot tell your mother, and just as she accepts my word, I ask you to do the same.

The key to our escape is Severus. Again, the reasons are beyond my ability to explain at this moment in time, but I can tell you that his future and ours are linked. You cannot imagine my frustration at being forced to keep things from you, Draco. Accept that it cannot be avoided.

Your godfather has been languishing in St Mungo's for almost a year now; the Healers have made no progress to heal him, but we can. Or more accurately, Hermione can with our assistance. You are the only person within Hogwarts whom I can trust... trust completely. I am imploring you to work with Hermione as she works to cure your godfather. It will be a difficult task, one that requires absolute secrecy, but I have faith in you.

*I give you the **option** to assist us. I know that over the years, you have been ordered and expected to do your duty, and I will no longer follow the old ways. No longer will you be without choice. If you decide to help, then deliver a message to me through Hermione: she knows where to find me. If not, you shall always be my son and be loved.*

Father

The cheap paper trembled in his fingers as his eyes devoured the lines once more. Even after the fourth time, his heart stuttered at his father's written desire to give him something so valuable as a choice...he'd never realised how precious it was. Aside from the word usage suggesting that his father was under some obligation to remain silent, it was fairly straightforward...help Hermione.

Sighing, he fell back onto the duvet. He knew that he would help Hermione. The thought of his godfather lying in that hospital had not really affected at first...he had had his own problems to contemplate...but as time had passed, he had grown to see it has the ultimate sign of dispassion towards the man. Snape had given his existence to keeping them safe, and in return, they were leaving him to rot. Something stirred. Something that he hadn't felt since Voldemort had made his mother drink that disgusting potion...oh yes; he knew about that!

He had come across his mother weeping in the summer house, clutching at her belly, her face red and swollen. Words had tumbled from her lips, and he had gathered them up, piecing the fractured woes together until he had formed the framework for her grief. A blade through his chest couldn't have hurt more... It had hurt almost as much as Potter's *sectumsempra* had when the brat had found him crying over the murder of his sister.

Draco felt anger. Not the petty kind that flares after a frustration, but the steady and long-lived anger that will warm the belly for years. Oddly, with that emotion that usually so readily snatches sense, his mind cleared, and he lifted the letter once more.

Pie-crust promise...

Sitting up and frowning, he looked at the words; his father had said something about pie-crust promises when they had been frog-marched to their cells. *What was it now?*

The Ministry make pie-crust promises... just like the Order!

oooXooo

Hermione gently brushed her fingers over her forearm. Draco's grip had been painful, but despite the warm throb, she felt good about completing the task for Lucius. Her lips twitched; it hadn't felt that bad to have been complimented by Draco either. Hysterical laughter bullied her, and she let a few giggles escape. *Giggles! How childish* she scolded, but she didn't really care. Why shouldn't she be young and foolish for a few moments in the privacy of her own room? For seven years she'd been the mother and the balance. For seven years she'd been mature and strong...why should she have to carry that mantle now? The war was over, and granted, many people had perished, but she had survived, so why shouldn't she live?

With that thought, she realised that she was lonely. Ron had slipped from her life like fog under the sun, and Harry cast her pained glances during the few lessons they shared. When had they parted? Her sudden gaiety ebbed away, and she felt terribly empty. Even the thought of curing Snape failed to warm her.

Standing by her desk, her gaze drifted over to the small book that she had borrowed from the library: *Visions in another mind*. The book had changed her life. It had somehow...incredulously...brought her closer to a man that she should despise, and through that strange union, she had found an outlet for her distress. It also represented the hardest thing that she'd ever done, and it was made harder for the fact that for the first time in quite some time, it was something that she had to do for herself.

Lucius had been quite reticent on divulging the content of the letter to her, and she had not read it, despite the urge fluttering in her belly, but she had faith that the wizard would not conspire against her or those who were dear to her. It was odd, but she firmly believed his declaration that he had stopped following Voldemort years before Harry had fulfilled his destiny. This faith extended towards him helping Snape. What would happen afterwards was out of her hands, but she knew without doubt that Lucius would give his all to help her. Goosebumps teased her skin. The smallest flicker of despair made her wince...the thought of losing Lucius stung.

Focusing on the task, she sat at her desk and pulled out some parchment from the top drawer. After seven years, she had never quite mastered the quill, and so, she slid out a Biro from her breast pocket. Reading the method, Hermione planned out the brewing process, her mood lifting with every step.

The ingredients were still with Lucius, and they'd probably stay with him for another few days at least; she needed to find a better place than the girls' toilet to work. The house-elves being on high alert increased the difficulty, and she doubted that she could work anywhere within the school, but where could she brew? The Room of Requirement had sprung to mind, but she had been unsure about the potion's stability in an environment prone to change; also, she would need access to the potion at regular intervals, so being denied access for any reason was not an option. Nibbling her lower lip, she tapped the Biro against the desk and pondered. Where and when could she brew the damned thing?

oooXooo

"Where shall I hide you?"

The elderly voice wavered as the words tumbled past dry and cracked lips.

"Somewhere safe, but somewhere close," whispered the voice almost lovingly. "I can't risk losing you or being too far from you, my sweets."

Arthritic and wrinkled hands lined up ten short and brittle stumps on a cotton pillow case. Hunched over the table, Bella used Meadows' wand to cut the cloth into strips which she used to carefully wrap up the fingers. Something niggled at the back of her mind, and she grinned.

"I can feel you squirming, Meadows," she trilled. "It won't do you any good, you know. I have no intention of leaving just yet." Humming a senseless tune, she bound the last finger and sat back. "All done," she said with a satisfied smile. Laughing, she picked up a thumb and forefinger and sang, "Two little fingers met in a lane; thumb bowed to finger and bowed once again." She laughed again. "It's strange to think that these shrivelled things were once mine. They're certainly better than these ugly things that you have, Meadows. How did you cope with them?"

Something nagged at her mind, and she paused to study the gnarled and liver-spotted hands. "The blood?" she queried. "Oh, yes. You weren't in your right mind at the time, were you?" she asked snidely. "In case you've quite forgotten, you went berserk and gutted a Healer." The irritating nigggle on the edge of her awareness intensified. "I assure you," she affirmed sulkily, "that in your sudden delirium you killed a Healer! It was quite gruesome. The others never knew that you had it in you."

It was quite pleasing to have him writhing and ranting as she enveloped him. It was like watching a spider struggle to climb out of a bath. And just as that spider would eventually either curl up and die or slip down the drain, she knew that staying in Meadows' mind would cause it to wither or slip away. That couldn't be allowed to happen at the moment; she needed what was trapped in his skull. She needed to know who his accomplices were and what they were up to. It was no longer a matter of her survival, but it involved Snape, and she saw him as a personal demon to slay. Until he was dead and gone, she would never be able to wear her crown comfortably.

Placing the thumb and forefinger on the table, she folded her arms across her chest and peered out the window. Almost at the same time that her eyes latched onto something interesting, she felt that part of Meadows that still fought turn to ice. It seemed that they shared some level of consciousness, and as an idea bloomed in her mind, so it slithered into his.

It was almost possible to hear his repeated mental cries as her eyes followed the young woman pegging out washing.

"What else could you do that they thought was beyond you, Meadows?" she hissed out menacingly. "What would be worse for you than breaking your silence?" she added, making it impossible for him to miss the underlying message.

The fraction of mind shuddered at the horrors that she was conjuring for it to witness: terrible images of what would be committed if it remained reluctant to answer her questions. Deep inside, Meadows screamed and wept.

Change of Pace

Chapter 21 of 26

Lucius discusses a plan with Hermione. The plan will grant Lucius and Narcissa some peace, but may lead Hermione into danger.

Standing outside the Hog's Head was becoming uncomfortable. Without her wand, Narcissa had no protection from the biting wind and the gawping masses. But she'd

rather face the cold stares and the freezing wind than go into the pub alone.

Her blue eyes scanned the drably dressed wizards, looking for a flash of blond hair. She was sure that the hour had passed. The anxiety was gathering momentum, rolling unstopably towards panic; her heart was thumping, and her chest was uncomfortably tight. As time had worn on since graduating, she had found being alone an almost crushing weight. It had either given her time to think about their status or caused dread to settle like stone in her guts as she waited for Lucius to return from the Dark Lord.

It had always been a trial to be parted from Lucius; in a way, joining the Death Eaters during her son's fourth year had been a bitter blessing. They had been able to stay close. But as with everything, what they were given with one hand was taken away with the other. They had ensured each other's survival, but at the cost of their daughter. Either the thought of it or the harsh wind snatched tears from her eyes.

She wiped away the tears with her numb fingertips and straightened. She wouldn't be weak... Not when her son and husband were under some terrible strain. Whatever bothered her husband was beyond her to fathom, but she knew that the Ministry had done something to punish Lucius... Something that had almost broken him. He had never discussed it with her, but she had the idea that he couldn't rather than wouldn't. It pained her that something existed between them, but she trusted her husband, so she would be patient.

But waiting in the cold street was beginning to stretch her patience and test her endurance! She'd never been out of the hut for long, only out long enough to purchase food and collect the money they had been granted. The number of people milling around were causing her alarm—they could easily recognise her: a lone ex-Death Eater and an easy target. Licking her lips, she tried to blend in with the mottled stone at her back. She could feel the weight of eyes upon her.

"Where are you?" she muttered into the wind, watching the people as they scurried past, waiting for the inevitable finger-pointing and shouting.

Almost as if the Fates had heard her plea, she caught sight of Lucius working his way through the shoppers. She smiled and walked out to greet him midway.

She was about to speak when he cupped her elbow and spun her round, leading her into the Hog's Head. The blast of warm air was heavenly, and she felt her protests at his brusqueness melt away. The lanterns cast a subtle and relaxing light, and after a quick glance over the clientele, she felt slightly more at ease.

Opting for the wooden bench in the far corner, close to the fire, they wove past the early evening drinkers. Pulling out her chair, he sat her down and kissed her hand before leaving to walk to the bar. She saw him talking to the spotty youth polishing glasses, who seemed rather disinterested in the conversation, and then, Lucius threw a leather pouch onto the bar top. The effect was almost magical! The youth perked up, smiled, nodded and rushed off to carry out whatever her husband had tasked him with. She would have found the entire thing comical had not the pouch looked like it contained their allotted money for the week.

"Don't look so concerned, Narcissa," Lucius said softly as he sat down opposite her. "Please, trust me."

"Have you been gambling?"

"No," he said with a laugh, reaching forward to place his hand over her clasped ones. "I never gambled when we had money; I'd hardly do it now when we're practically destitute." He could see various expressions flickering across her wan face; she wanted to argue, tell him that frivolous spending was a thing of the distant past, but she knew that the money was already lost.

"What will we do for money for the rest of the week?" she asked. The fretting caused her to stiffen and tremble; never had she had to worry about money before. This scrimping and constant care was exhausting. She always felt that she was making the wrong decisions. She felt so insecure. The idea that he was throwing that care into the wind made her feel sick to her stomach and somewhat angry after months of personal agonising over whether to buy fuel or food.

"We don't have to worry about that now, do we?" he asked in a whisper that sent a shiver down her spine. The tone hinted at future delights.

She wanted to argue, to shout; she wanted to tell him that he'd been foolish, but it had been so long since they'd gone out for a meal. It had been so long since she'd felt like any other woman, rather than the shadow of the witch she was. Her arguments crumbled, and she relaxed.

"No. I think we can pass on that particular topic." She was almost breathless with the thrill of it; it was a feeling bordering on fear, but was still the right side of pleasure. Her skin tingled, and it was quite possible that she would fly apart at the merest touch: that or slip into hysteria!

Lucius smiled, and Narcissa felt her breath stutter. Suddenly, his frivolity was the best thing to happen in years.

"The sommelier recommended the House wine, and the beef stew with dumplings is apparently the best you'll get this side of the street." It was good to hear her laugh, and he paused just to listen to her. "He advised against the semolina pudding, but extolled the wonder of the Spotted Dick with custard."

"Spotted Dick? Isn't that the sponge cake with raisins in?" she asked with a frown.

"I sincerely hope so."

Oh this was glorious! She laughed out again. *Who cares if we go hungry?* she thought happily. The change in him was astounding. He'd been supportive and so patient, but it seemed that the life had been drained from him; to see him like this was wonderful beyond words. It was like the last twenty years hadn't been: no Voldemort; no Death Eaters; no pain.

In the flickering firelight, her hair looked like burnished gold; the lantern's weak light darkened her eyes until they looked like pure sapphires, and her lips were soft and inviting. She was divine. He caressed the back of her hand with the edge of his thumb, and he saw her lips part ever-so slightly.

"So," she said after moistening her lips, "what are we celebrating?"

"Oh," he replied with a casual wave of his hand, "merely our escape from this life."

Narcissa was about to inhale and bombard him with questions when a shadow fell across the table and silenced her. Glancing up, she saw the spotty bartender, who lifted his hands to show them the two wineglasses and carafe he was carrying. She smiled and withdrew her hands so that he could arrange the glasses and wine in the centre of the table.

"So, that'll be two beef stews and Spotted Dicks?" he asked without much enthusiasm. He seemed far more interested in the grain pattern on the polished table and didn't seem to be offering them a choice.

"Yes," said Lucius curtly, glaring at the young wizard. If looks cast curses, then the man would be suffering no-end.

Narcissa nodded in agreement, and she was gratified to see him saunter away. When she was sure that he was out of earshot, she turned on Lucius, armed with questions and determination.

"What do you mean?"

Lucius merely smiled and poured the wine. "I doubt they opened the wine to let it breathe: no sense of good dining etiquette."

"Lucius! Please," she begged, her hand darting out to clutch the glass stem as if the familiar action would soothe her frazzled nerves.

Relaxing back, he brought the glass to his lips and took a sip; given the ambience and the cost, the wine wasn't that bad. Or maybe Narcissa just made everything seem sweeter, even if she was scowling.

"I have acquired a colleague of sorts," he explained, and then, he launched into describing how he had spent the last hour.

~X~

It was rather exquisite. Lucius had certainly never expected it to happen, and he quite enjoyed turning the tables. The silence stretched, only the crackle from the fire and the soft ticking of the clock disturbed the unusual peace. Across from him, she sat on the leather chair; her eyes and mouth were wide as if he had truly shocked her. A paralysing curse couldn't have affected her more thoroughly. Hermione Granger had been rendered silent!

Surely, he had suggested nothing beyond her understanding? Also, he hoped that it wasn't beyond her capability. He had effectively tied the future of his family to her abilities. In another universe, he would have died rather than be forced to ask a Mudblood for anything, but these were strange days. And now, he was almost begging Hermione to help him: strange days, indeed.

After what seemed an age, she relaxed, and her mouth closed into a bemused smile. "You want me to help you escape the Wizarding world?"

"Yes."

She still seemed highly perplexed about some aspect of his request.

"From the Wizarding world... and to the Muggle one?"

"I know that it seems so out of character," he said with a wave of his hand, "but I've developed a certain fondness for living on the edge of magic. I want to go the whole hog and go native."

A laugh erupted from her slack mouth. "You want to live as a Muggle?"

"I'm almost existing as one now," he said.

Something in his tone sobered her, and she withdrew into the soft cushions with a thoughtful expression on her face.

"You do know what kind of trouble that could get us into?"

Underneath the illusion of appalled shock, he could almost hear her pondering the request. He smiled and sat back; she'd do it if only for the challenge... but he hoped that she would do it for the bizarre friendship they'd created.

"You'd need a place that was unplottable... where no one would disturb you."

Lucius nodded; his smile widened, and his spirits lifted as she immersed herself in the problem. Soon, they'd have some respite from their current dilemma. Of course there'd be consequences, but when it all came to light, the Malfoys would be welcomed back... and then, he would visit those who had made his and his family's life hell.

"The house would be unknown to anyone, and the neighbours could be mildly befuddled to disperse any suspicion." She nibbled her lip. "It can't be as hard as it was to get my parents away, and—when do you want this move to happen?" Her shift from reticent partner to ardent abettor caught him by surprise, but it seemed that his answer was superfluous. "Of course," she continued without pausing, "I'd need access at set times, and the Portkey couldn't be tied to the house itself, otherwise we'd lose the unplottable aspect." She sighed and stared off into the fire. "I wish I knew more about how the unplottable thing worked. I know the basics of it, but not enough about the mechanism of casting."

Access? Portkey? he thought. "What are you rambling on about, Hermione?" But the question bounced off her like deodorising spells off Hagrid. *It almost seems that she's thinking of visiting us!* Shifting uneasily in his chair, he saw her gathering enthusiasm as something to fear; Hermione seemed to have plans.

"I'll need access at set times for the potion." She tutted and shook her head. *Honestly! It's like talking to Ron.* "I need somewhere to brew the potion and cure Snape."

It was Lucius' turn to feel the world shift, and he had to snap his own mouth closed. "You want to use our hidey-hole to brew the potion *and* cure Severus?" He moistened his lips and swallowed hastily. "Wouldn't that entail 'borrowing' Severus from St Mungo's?" Suddenly, he felt that this had been a very bad decision.

Hermione nodded and grinned. "It's perfect really; I'd never have thought of it without your help."

Oh goody! he grouched. "Do you have any idea what sort of trouble that could get us into?"

She laughed and unfurled herself from the chair. "I have some work to do, but I don't see a problem with securing you a Muggle house."

He stood and smiled down at her. "Good! I'll go and collect Narcissa and meet you back here when you're done."

She stumbled as she spun round. "What?"

Her mouth formed that rather delightful 'O' shape, and her brown eyes bored into his. Lucius smirked at her and gave a small bow.

"I will help you pinch Severus from that hospital, and for that assistance, Narcissa and I will seek sanctuary here."

Her lips worked silently, but her hands waved quite effusively. "But what will you do for food and water and..." she paled and looked nauseous "... bathroom facilities?"

"We will still have access to the Hog's Head; so long as we make it appear that we haven't disappeared entirely, we won't stir up any suspicions, and we can continue to exist more safely and comfortably here." He closed his eyes as though pained, and she just caught his last mumbled words. "And we'll have access to our son."

"You'll need money?" But his expression answered that question. "I see. Aren't you supposed to pay me for helping you?"

"I always pay what is owed, Hermione."

He said it with conviction, but his tone wasn't what made her shiver; she saw his words as a warning. However, despite her earlier stance, she'd have done it for free; the thought of them being treated worse than house-elves was enough of a reason, and of course, she would need help getting Snape out of St Mungo's. And she knew more about them than Lucius would like. Some weight hung over them: some sword of Damocles.

"Okay," she said softly. "It took me several months to arrange for my parents to be re-homed, but it can't take that long for somewhere in the UK. I know a few houses where you can stay until I arrange somewhere more permanent." As she spoke, she studied him, her mind going over what it would be like for them living as Muggles. Rather than the irony she had expected, she felt sorrowful; they would find it a bittersweet experience.

"Thank you, Hermione," he said hoarsely. He reached out as if to accentuate his gratitude with a friendly touch on her shoulder, but his hand trembled as it approached, falling back to his side as he sighed. Coughing and straightening, he gathered himself together and smiled at her. "I intend to leave the Wizarding world with as much flourish as I can afford, so expect me home late!"

She laughed as he winked. Moving away with a lively step, he pulled back the tapestry that concealed the way back to the Hog's Head, but turned back to her. "Whatever happens," he said sternly, "I will do everything within my power to protect you from any repercussions."

Hermione smiled. "Thank you." She sniffled and hugged herself. "Enjoy your evening."

"Will do, my dear."

"Don't worry about the money," she called out as he entered the tunnel. "I'll go and see Meadows over the weekend; he'll be delighted about our news."

Coming Together

Chapter 22 of 26

Things are working out well for Bella, and Snape is having a hard time.

The cawing woke him. It had been a while since they'd made such a racket. Puzzled and wary, he tried to lift himself up, but some weight prevented him. Looking down, he saw a black blanket covering him... A blanket with dozens of eyes and sharp beaks. His breath caught in his throat and then sped from his lips in a shocked gasp. The ravens had lain upon him and kept him warm. At his sigh, the birds began to scramble over each other as they hopped and flapped out of his way. With their absence, he felt the cold bite at him once more.

Following his friends, he saw what had caused the birds' outcry: a patch of blue in the sky. It wasn't very big and wouldn't have inspired much in the other place, but here, it was like gazing upon the portal to heaven. Stepping clumsily out of his cave, he stumbled through the gorse, as if he could get a better look at it if he walked that bit closer. The ravens flocked to the bushes and roosted on the spiky tops, their heads turning from Snape to sky and back again, as if gauging his response to the strange thing.

Snape was utterly amazed. He had no idea what it meant, but he hoped that it was some sign that the harsh conditions were abating. Perhaps the sun would break through the clouds and warm the land. His skin suddenly tingled, and he inhaled sharply. The patch of sky seemed to offer more than just illumination for the land. *Maybe this is the far north?* The idea started as the small clatter of shifting pebbles, but it gathered momentum. Soon, it was the thundering terror of a rockslide...one capable of changing a landscape.

"Yes! Maybe this place is somewhere in the arctic and not some purgatory...it would explain the lack of night and the unchanging scenery!" He paced between the bushes, ignoring the sharp sting of the thorns as his mind worked through the idea. "The days can last for months." He silently berated himself for his chronic stupidity. Why hadn't he thought of it earlier?

The ravens looked up at the sky and then back at him; they seemed unconvinced.

"No, it just may be," he persisted, nodding and lifting a hand to plead his case. "I know such places can be so harsh that very few potion ingredients flourish, and look at it...it is barren here." He paused and looked around; it was so similar to the pictures he'd seen in books and the odd snippets he'd caught on his father's television. "I must have Disapparated and misjudged the location."

Slowly, the ramifications of his reassessment sank home.

"Bugger," he muttered. He was no better off than when he had thought himself in some form of hell! In fact, he was slightly worse off; here, he could die! *How on earth can I get back to civilisation...Muggle or wizard?*

"Don't suppose you lot know the way to nearest pub?"

But it did instil a sense of hope. If he was displaced, then maybe someone was looking for him? Armed with the wonder of magic, locating an errant wizard who wanted to be found should be an easy enough task. His heart picked up the pace, and he felt a thrill deep in his guts. At this point in time, he'd relish seeing Aurors on the horizon. But what to do? Would it be wiser to stay put and wait, or should he find a direction and walk?

He knew hunger would raise its ugly head before long, and he doubted that his friends would be that generous as to fling themselves at his feet. If only the patch of blue would widen and give him a clue as to which direction to travel. He stared hopefully at it, but it didn't change.

Feeling some of his enthusiasm wither, he folded his arms across his chest and watched the gorse ripple in the wind. It was just a patch of blue...it meant nothing! He was still stuck here. A few of the ravens were wading in the shallow stream; the wind ruffled their black feathers. At least they were enjoying themselves. Adding to his misery and sense of isolation, the gap in the clouds was shrinking.

"That's it," he yelled out, pointing an angry finger at the diminishing blue. "You run away too; you're just like the rest!"

He couldn't quite understand his sudden fury. The disappearing patch of clear sky seemed offensive, almost as if it had come out just to torment him, promising things that it had no intention of giving. How many in his life had promised so much only to rip out his heart or leave him black and blue. It was just another taunt; just another slap in the face! Nothing sought to care for him. If he couldn't offer something, then they weren't interested. Even Lucius had been close to him solely for selfish reasons.

That's not true. whispered the wind.

"It is!" Snape snarled out. "He assured me that his days with the Dark Lord were done, yet he was one of the first at *His* side when he called us all together." Breathing hard, he wiped the wind-swept hair from his eyes and glared at everything. "He used me to gain favour with our master; he saw me as a means to an end."

No. He begged to help you; don't you recall how he cleaved to you and wept on your shoulder?

"He was always a fine actor," he snapped out while marching back and forth, crushing the furze beneath his vengeful feet.

Even when his daughter died in Narcissa's womb?

Snape staggered to a halt; his stomach dropped and bile burnt a path to his mouth. The wind increased in strength and snatched tears from his eyes before the sudden grief made him slam them closed. He felt bits of grit and wind-borne debris strike his face and hands. It tugged at his clothes, as if drilling home its point.

"No," Snape conceded to the wind. "He was a broken man; no one could have feigned such despair."

Such was the sudden strength of the wind that Snape was pushed back, and he had to lift his arm to shield his face. Through his squint, he saw the clouds roiling in the

sky; it looked as though a war raged up there. Dark clouds were gathering for some huge offensive, and the pale, sickly yellow clouds were resisting as they tried to engulf the aggressors. It was to no avail. The black, heavy clouds were relentless.

Lucius asked you to help; he trusted you in a way that no other has Despite the raging wind, the soft voice was still audible.

"Means to an end," Snape countered as he tried to walk back to the cave. The wind was phenomenal, and it pressed against him as a crowd would. The cave mouth was mere feet away, but he was being pushed sideways and deeper into the gorse.

"Lucius knew that I needed an ally; he knew that I would agree." The words were snatched from his throat, but he knew that he had been heard. Gritting his teeth, he used the hem of his coat to cover his hands and gripped the furze, using it to pull himself closer to the sanctuary of the cave. "He trusted the situation and not me."

His clothes flapped around, and his eyes and skin stung from the projectiles the wind was hurling at him. It was a nightmare. The spikes speared through the material and into his fingers and palms. He felt as though he was holding hot irons. Hauling himself through the plants and against the wind was exhausting. With his hands burning and his mind shutting down from the cold, he wondered if his raven friends would eat him when he died. He glanced across at them, and through tear-filled eyes, he saw them perched on the offending bushes.

"How?" he exclaimed weakly, his mouth dropping open and his feet slipping on the dirt. They barely moved. Their feathers were no more ruffled than if a breeze was caressing them! They watched him with something akin to pity. He quickly snapped his mouth closed: the wind had tried to plunge down his throat.

While pondering the mystery, he felt something hard hit him on the back. At first, he thought that it was one of the birds, but then he felt it again and again. The birds scattered and dived under the gorse. Hail was hurtling down to punish the earth. From the warring clouds, hail thundered down, striking everything with brutal force. Moaning, Snape worked harder while the hail battered at him.

Finally, he fell into the cave. Heart pounding and lungs burning, he crawled further in and collapsed. His clothes were wet and sapped what little heat he had; shivering and miserable, he curled up into a tight ball. His body ached and trembled. Outside, the hail was like a dragon's roar, and the dark clouds had ousted the weaker ones, turning the perpetual overcast day into night.

Yet Lucius trusted you with his future.

"L... leave m... me be," he stammered out through chattering teeth. "L... Lucius knew that I c... couldn't s... say no."

And if he trusted you because he valued you?

Snape ignored the question. He had neither the energy nor the wit to respond. He just wanted to be left alone. He hurt and was exhausted. The voice either heard him or realised that its efforts would be fruitless because it fell silent. But Snape would have no peace.

Light exploded in the cave, blinding him and making him gasp at the intensity of it. Within seconds, the thunder introduced itself. Merlin! It hurt his ears. He not only heard it but felt it. Nothing he could think of was louder than Nature venting her wrath. The thunder seemed to resonate in his bones. Clutching at ears he was sure should be bleeding, he squeezed his eyes shut and tightened into a terrified ball. No storm had ever been like this! Whimpering, all he could do was wait until Nature needed to take a breath. *Merlin!* he thought as a bout of hysterical laughter burst from his numb lips. *If she's anything like Molly, she'll bring the cave down upon my head.*

oooXooo

"You're no fun, Meadows," she said grumpily, dropping the piece of chocolate in disgust. "Your taste buds just aren't as good as they should be."

Meadowes had been quiet for several hours. In the hours since she had occupied him, he had ranted and railed deep inside. She had felt him scurrying around like a mouse behind a wall, but since her threat, he had been quiet and ever so still. Somehow, that made her feel lonely; she wanted to share in his anguish. The Healer had been very accommodating and shared everything with her. Granted, Meadows knew what she was, whereas the Healer had thought her a boost of self-esteem, but that didn't really excuse his bad manners. Perhaps if she delved a little deeper...No! That's what drove the Healer mad. She couldn't risk that with Meadows; the man knew too much.

The room was a temporary measure. It had been a hidey-hole in the Death Eater's heyday: a place to recover from the night's excesses before rejoining so-called normal society. Many revelling wizards had been dumped by their amused colleagues and left to sleep it off within these dingy walls. When things had started to go wrong, they had used it as a means to hide away for a while, or a place to store incriminating items. It had been an ideal place. Who would have thought that Death Eaters would have hidden away in the heart of a Muggle city?

Bella had no intention of spending more time than necessary in this place. She had planned quite a bit while trapped in her body, and now that she had the means to put her plans into action, she didn't want to waste anymore time. First, she had to use Meadows and find another more suitable host. The murder and escape had not been mentioned in the *Daily Prophet*, which was hardly surprising given the secrecy surrounding the ward, but they'd not yet contrived some story to warn the public about him. It was almost perfect! She should have a few days at least while the matter was being dealt with internally.

Movement from outside the window caught her eye, and she leant forwards to get a better look. To her surprise, an owl landed on her windowsill. That got Meadows' attention too. *So, the owls still see me as Meadows...this should be fun.*

Forcing her stiff joints to work, she stood and opened the window. Smokey, city-polluted air blasted in, bringing the owl with it. The dark bird extended its leg, and she hastily snatched up the disappointing chocolate and offered it to the delivery owl. Pecking at it dubiously, the owl finally took it, and Bella snatched up the letter.

Inside, she felt Meadows stir. *Oh, this is just yummy!*

Unfurling the letter, she eagerly read the note, her grin widening and Meadows' disquiet growing with every line. By the end of it, she was laughing and Meadows was screaming.

Dear Meadows,

Our plans have changed slightly, but for the better, so don't worry. Lucius and I have found a way to help Professor Snape, so with your blessing, we'll start work straight away.

To carry on, however, we'll need your help, so I'd like to meet up with you tomorrow or Sunday to discuss what we need. I can tell you about it and show you the progress we've made so far.

Hermione

"Well, we don't want to hold them up, do we?" she said with malicious glee.

She smoothed the paper flat and Conjured a quill. Meadows was really battering at her grip, and she gloried in his futile efforts... She now knew how to bend him to her will, and if he didn't, then she had Hermione, who seemed quite wonderfully willing to help. She wrote a time and place on the letter and sealed it.

The owl gulped down the last bit of the sickly treat and waited patiently while she inserted the letter into the pouch. With the scrape of talons against table, the bird turned and glided out the window.

It was all working out very nicely.

Wrapping Gifts

Chapter 23 of 26

Draco is reunited with his parents, and Hermione keeps her date with Meadows.

Author's Notes: This chapter is much darker than previous ones. Although not particularly graphic, the text does convey several unpleasant themes. I am highlighting the warning of 'horror' in this note. If Bella's actions and plans to date have disturbed you, then please read this with a friend and all the lights on.

Someone spying on him standing by the window would think him intent on something of great interest beyond the frame; in truth, he was lost in thoughts so confusing and defiant of definition that they were almost alien. Understanding them was like grasping smoke.

He was in a state of despair as he trudged through the mental fog, seeking his way home. He felt as though Hinkypunks were luring him ever further into danger, and he had grown to distrust his own sense of direction to the point where he now feared moving. Even when someone had emerged from the grey mist with a lantern and a guiding hand, he still feared making a step. It was an agony of indecision.

"Draco?"

He heard something, but his mind brushed it away like a hand would brush away a fly. Nothing was more important than his current dilemma.

"Draco?"

The annoying little fly was persistent! He turned away, hugging himself, isolating himself from the superfluous. They'd leave him alone, if he left them alone.

"Draco!"

Ah! The fly was a wasp! It stung him on his forearm, making him jolt. He twisted round, and his eyes focused on a thin and pale face. Hermione was looking at him as though she actually worried over him. The notion that someone seemed to care for him had him hovering back on the dreadful precipice of indecision: was she really concerned for him, or was it just some tactic to make him lose a little more of himself? She had been one of so few to extend a hand out to him, and whereas Hardwicke was an unknown, Hermione had been a part of his life for nearly seven years... and he so *desperately* wanted to reach out to someone.

"Are you alright?" she asked urgently.

No! I'm lost... no idea where I am. I need help... anything! Help me, Hermione, please. Help me find...

"Of course I'm alright," he said softly, frowning down at her, as if the question had been ridiculous. He may be lost, but he wouldn't be weak. His father had asked him to help her, and he had sworn to his distant father that he would help to the best of his abilities. He couldn't do that if he was weak. In a way, it helped; it gave him some long-sought strength. Working for someone else had been his motivation and purpose for so long that giving his energy and thoughts to serving someone was almost second nature. At least this time, it really was for a greater good.

"You seemed so... focused on something," she said, her tone conveying her concern and her scepticism about his assurance.

"I was just thinking about things," he said with a forced smile. She still held his arm, and the touch was both needed and bothersome; he wanted to yank his arm away, yet craved the warmth she gifted. Perhaps thankfully, she let go, but held him with her gaze.

"I've been thinking a lot too," she said in a whisper. "And I need your help."

Draco stiffened and glanced along the dim corridor; it was deserted, but you could never trust your eyes when magic was at the ready. Hermione belatedly realised her possible indiscretion and blushed. Tucking a strand of hair behind her ear, she backed away and studied the shadows between the pillars and plinths.

Hermione felt her cheeks burning...*honestly, I can be so dense sometimes*...and she hoped that she hadn't made herself look foolish. Despite Draco's demure aspect these days, she still knew that beneath the downcast expression, his mind was skilled in stealth and politics to a level that she could never hope to master. She disliked the way he inspired her to feel incapable...not that he intended too, she was sure, but she felt so... lacking in his presence. Draco was a puzzle to her... just like his father. Her blush deepened... *Oh my!* she thought, and a giggle escaped her parted lips. *Have I got a thing for Malfoys?*

She was lost in her flight of fancy; so lost that she had failed to observe Draco bending closer. Her mind was so busy pondering the Malfoy *thing* that Draco's sudden whisper into her ear actually made her yelp... and shudder.

"Follow me," he had breathed into her ear.

Hermione had to jog to catch Draco up, but she kept a step behind so he couldn't see her slowly fading flush. From the corner of her eye, she watched him walk. Each step was careful and precise, so unlike Ron's gait where he seemed to lumber from one foot to the other. He also walked straight, as though his pains and the world could never wear him down; she had once seen that as arrogance, but now, she saw it as strength. His face had also changed. He had been furtive and condescending, his expression radiating every negative and vile emotion that a boy could express, but now, there was a serene quality smoothing his features.

She was surprised by the wave of loneliness that suddenly broke over her. It almost snatched her breath. Being so busy with Legilimency and the potion...all that training and reading...had distracted her from the fact she had lost touch with so many people: people who were important to her. Lucius had spent more time with her than any of her peers. They had crammed in sessions and discussions, even talking about the struggles that she was facing and dealing with the dark thoughts that plagued her. She fell out of step with Draco. She and Lucius had spent most evenings together in the Room of Requirement, and now that Lucius was planning to leave... Who was it that she was missing? Ron? Harry? Or Lucius?

Draco led her towards his special retreat. Part of him quailed...did she have to know about his one and only sanctum?...while another part was thrilled that he could share his hidey-hole. It somehow made him feel less alone. He knew Granger wouldn't tell anyone about the room...she was far too noble...and he knew she deemed their project too important to risk it through tittle-tattle about his sanctum. He settled on relaxing into the feelings of comradeship; what was the worst that could happen?

"What is this place?" she asked while stepping inside the oddly-shaped room. Her eyes glanced towards the narrow windows and the collection of pillows on the stone floor

before moving up to study the glorious wooden beams holding up the turreted roof. On the left, in the far corner, there was a single-burner cooking stove and a collection of small boxes and tins.

"Just my little sanctuary," he said rather too glibly.

Hermione was keen enough to pick up on what she perceived as a hint. "I guess that we all need a secret place to help get away from it all."

She saw him nod slowly before he stepped past and over to the stove.

"Tea?" he asked.

"What?" she asked unthinkingly; his accommodating attitude had taken her by surprise. Were manners from Draco such an oddity? She sagged in light of her own prejudices and smiled sheepishly. "Sorry. I'd love some, thank you."

"Grab a cushion. I'm afraid that I couldn't get anything else." He struck a match as he spoke and lit the hissing gas. His nose wrinkled at the harsh smell of the sulphur, and he held his hand out cautiously...he felt the stove had singed enough of him already. "I had my eye on a lovely chaise-longue," he added while straightening, "but the delivery company were ridiculously demanding; they expected me to stay in for them. Can you believe the impertinence?"

Hermione giggled at his manner, and she was gratified to see him smirk. "You just can't get the staff these days," she replied with an equally snobbish air as she sat on a plump, purple cushion. "I trust you told them who they had just offended."

Draco laughed as he placed the saucepan on the ring to boil. *This isn't so terrible*, he mused. *At least she's treating me as a person.*

"Indeed! The Malfoy family will no longer patronise that particular owner."

Hermione blinked. "Surely you mean store, not owner?"

Draco turned to her with an innocent expression. "I'm sure that you're right," he sighed, "but patronising the owner was more fun."

Draco laughed when he saw her bemused and slightly pained expression. Her sense of fair play and generosity meant she felt awkward about appreciating darker forms of humour, but he knew...absolutely...that she was so eager to let those reins of appropriateness slip so she could let her sense of humour gallop. There was nothing inherently wrong in it; it just limited the audience who would appreciate the joke.

"Go on, Granger," he said kindly. "Just the two of us in here, and I won't mind if you relax and say all those things that you keep hidden from Potter and Weasley."

Her gaze slipped from his, and he felt both a flutter of excitement and a twinge of remorse. He selfishly saw an opportunity to deepen their relationship, and he also saw how much she had kept herself in check to keep her friends. He knew how destructive it could be to live solely to appeal to someone else. He spooned out some tea into a teapot he had 'borrowed' from the kitchens and wondered how much of Hermione Granger had been buried so she could 'fit in'. He recalled her desperate efforts to do well in class, and he had seen it as arrogance, but now, he wondered if her efforts had been fuelled more through fear than pride.

"I know what it's like to keep things hidden," Draco said softly. "I know what it's like to mould yourself to suit other people." He paused until she raised her head and looked at him. "Never feeling free; always monitoring what you say and do."

"Psychoanalysis must be a family trait," she mumbled.

"Sorry?" Draco asked with a frown.

"Oh, nothing," she said sweetly.

Shrugging, Draco finished preparing the tea and sat down on a red cushion next to hers. "It will take a while to boil." He suddenly snorted. "No wonder Muggles are so inventive; waiting for something as simple as a cup of tea must have been the prompt to discover electricity."

Hermione was surprised into a laugh. "I guess so. They do say that necessity is the mother of invention."

"Speaking of necessity; you said that you needed my help."

Hermione sobered and sat up straighter on her cushion. "To be honest, there are a few things that I need help with."

"I told my father that I would help you, and I will," he stated simply and sincerely.

"Firstly, thank you for your help. We couldn't do this without you." She licked her lips and frowned as she gathered her thoughts together. "You know that I've been meeting up with your father," she said carefully, fearful that her admission would stir up some bad feeling, but the face before her was as smooth and unruffled as it had been before she mentioned it. "He's come up with a few plans during our discussions." She fidgeted into a more comfortable position. "One plan is to leave the Wizarding world." That got a reaction; Draco's eyebrows nearly disappeared into his hairline.

"Leave?" Draco croaked out.

"I know that it seems too extreme, but he thinks that it's the best for the family," she pleaded.

"Go on," he said tonelessly; his face schooled to hide his emotions.

"Well," she continued uncertainly. "I've agreed to help, and I think I can get them into a Muggle home by Wednesday of next week." At Draco's lack of reaction, her awkwardness increased. "Your mother and father will be staying in the Room of Requirement until then." Draco stiffened and blinked several times, but remained silent. "Once they move into the Muggle house, you'll find it... difficult to send them messages because... of the... uhm... the Unplottable nature of the property."

She had thought that the news would be welcome, but the more she talked and the more she listened to herself, the worse the news actually seemed. Once Lucius and Narcissa left, Draco would not be able to send or receive mail from them.

"They're going to live in the Muggle world?"

"Yes, Draco." She studied him carefully. "How do you feel about that?" she asked tentatively.

A manic laugh erupted from his mouth. "I never thought that he'd do it!" he exclaimed passionately.

"It may seem harsh, Draco, but..."

"Oh no! You misunderstand me, Hermione," he said with frantic delight. "I never thought they'd find a way to get out from that cesspit they make us live in. I never thought we'd ever escape."

Hermione squealed out as Draco lunged forwards to pull her into a tight hug. He mumbled into her ear; the words incomprehensible as they tumbled from his lips. Unsure what to do, she raised her arms and patted his back gently.

The muted roar of the boiling pan pulled them apart. Draco grinned awkwardly and moved to finish making the tea. His arms felt empty; she had felt so good. But he knew that it was useless. Hermione was out of his reach.

The tea was rather good, and they sipped in companionable silence. Birds chattered outside, and the evening sun was beginning to flood into the room, coating the pale walls in an amber glow. It was such a remarkably relaxing place, and Hermione almost envied Draco having it. It was so quiet and snug.

"So, what can I do for you, Hermione?" Draco asked animatedly. He placed his mug on the floor and leant forwards, as though her words were something that he craved.

Hermione smiled across at him and tapped a fingernail against the mug. "You know that we intend to cure Professor Snape," she said, "and to do that, Lucius and I have had help from a porter at St Mungo's: Fulton Meadows. I plan to meet up with him tomorrow to bring him up to date and to arrange getting some money to sort out your mum and dad's move. I was hoping that you'd come with me."

"To meet with Meadows?"

"Yes, and also to help me find the right house for you."

"Do you trust Meadows?"

Do I trust him? She couldn't fault the wizard's dedication to helping Snape, but his methods of motivation were questionable; she would never forget or forgive the way he had tried to teach her Legilimency. No matter now if she said that she did, she knew that she had hesitated for too long; Draco would never be convinced.

"I trust that he wants Snape cured and will do nothing to endanger that goal."

She felt exposed under Draco's gaze, but she knew that he wasn't trying to pierce her mind; Meadows' terrible assault on her had actually worked to increase her Occlumency skill. However, it was no real assurance; she believed that Draco could read her like a book even without Legilimency.

"Sometimes, that can be enough," he finally said.

oooXooo

The room was rather lavish, but not gaudy; sometimes, he thought that Malfoy Manor had been an extravagant monument to avarice. A fire popped and crackled in a grate surrounded by a rather austere hearth topped with a thick, dark wood mantel. Above it was a rectangular mirror with a simple and elegant gilt frame. It reflected the rich tapestry hanging on the wall behind him. On the walls to the left and right there were towering bookcases, each shelf crammed with thick tomes. Four leather chairs curved around the fire, and a circular occasional table had been placed between them and the fire. It was comfortable. It was homey.

But the décor was not his main focus. Hermione had passed on a message that his mother and father were coming to the Room later, and he had spent what felt an age, waiting for them. The thought of seeing them enhanced his joy at knowing that his family was on its way to leave the dire life they had been enduring. There were no doors out of the room, but beneath the tapestry behind him, he could make out the edges of some passageway. Turning his back on the chairs, he stepped over towards the tapestry; he smiled when he saw that the tapestry depicted Ariadne giving Theseus her thread. So apt!

The heavy material twitched, and Draco stopped, his heart stuttering and his chest tight. His eyes widened when he saw a pale hand emerge past the edge to pull the tapestry out of the way. Taking a deep breath, he lunged forward to help and nearly hurtled slap bang into his mother.

"Draco!" she gasped. Her blue eyes widened and drank him in. Her lips trembled as a thousand words died on them, and she resorted to the truest thing she could say. Narcissa darted forward and held her son in a tight embrace. The force of the hug belied her slight frame; her desperate need granted her preternatural strength.

They wept on each others' shoulders. While they cried, Lucius entered the room and brought his arms around both of them. He felt complete for the first time in a very long time. Held together, they mumbled words that only scratched the surface of their thoughts and feelings. The soft touches and smiles and the holding of hands conveyed all they really needed to share with each other.

How long they held each other, they couldn't say...not long enough, they would argue...but they eventually moved away from each other and slipped into the chairs. Draco almost purred as he sank into the soft leather; it seemed an age since he'd sat on anything so comfortable. It was with some wry amusement that he wondered why he had never thought of ensconcing himself in the Room of Requirement. He'd missed out on some luxury.

"You look pale, Draco," Narcissa said after they'd settled. "Are you eating enough?"

Lucius smirked at the strained expression on his son's face; mothers were always mothers.

"Yes, mother," he replied firmly. "I've just spent a lot of time indoors, studying."

And that prompted a barrage of questions. Draco was almost overwhelmed by his mother's arsenal of queries and observations; the NEWTs couldn't be as exhausting! He could tell by his father's smirk he would be getting no help from that quarter: where was a nosy know-it-all when you needed one?

"I think that you've quite worn the poor boy out, Narcissa," Lucius said after observing Draco's sixth yawn of the evening. "We have days and days ahead of us."

"Oh, I'm sorry, Draco," Narcissa said.

"It's quite alright, mother," he soothed, reaching out to grasp her hand.

"Any plans for the weekend, Draco?" Lucius asked. He was still overwhelmed by his family being together. In such a room, it was easy to think that nothing bad had ever happened. It was easy to smother the knowledge of the damage the Ministry had done to his son in a perverse bid to exact revenge upon him... so easy!

"Granger asked me to meet with Meadows and then help her with securing our new home."

And how easily his delusions were shattered! Lucius choked on his coffee. Draco had been dragged into this with alarming alacrity. It was quite sickening, and made all the worse by the fact that Draco was needed and that he had asked his son to be party to this. Lucius wiped his lips and smiled across at Narcissa, who had asked him if he needed assistance. Too late to have doubts now.

"Meadows has... unusual methodologies, but he is determined to see us cure Severus."

"That's what Her... Granger said," Draco added doubtfully, "but she doesn't trust him."

"She has her reasons," Lucius said darkly. "I would advise that you pay attention to Meadows' ramblings; he dissembles, but always gives you something relevant. Other than that, he is a rather harmless old man."

Narcissa felt her smile freeze. She had never felt happy to be left on the edge of things, and her son and husband were discussing things in the same format that they had when they had existed in Voldemort's shadow. It felt like a knife in her gut. She glanced across at her husband and was startled to find herself locked in Lucius' azure gaze. He knew what she was thinking; she could tell by the way he smiled sadly. A flicker of guilt twisted her insides. Why should she doubt him now after everything that he had done and arranged? They were almost free. It came down to power; Narcissa despised feeling powerless, and being excluded from something that was within her family was the ultimate in feeling powerless.

When Draco excused himself, Narcissa had kissed him goodnight. Lucius had walked him to the door, which had appeared within the flaming hearth. Draco had found the exit quite dramatic, almost romantic, and he had grinned as he strode through the flames and into the corridor beyond. Narcissa and Lucius had watched him until the door closed and the fireplace was whole again.

"He still looks pale," Narcissa said to the flickering flames before turning on her heel and pacing back to her chair.

"He does," he agreed, "but this situation is enough to weaken the strongest of people."

He watched her trace patterns on the leather chair arm with her fingertip. He knew that she would ask questions again, and he wished he could answer the ones that she needed answering. Magic was a fine thing until it was aimed at you... Until it was used against you.

"What is it that you and *Hermione* have been doing?"

My word! Lucius thought with some surprise; his wife's comment had distracted his mind from its dark musings and presented a far more enticing scenario. *Is she jealous?*

He licked his lips and let his gaze wander down her slender form sitting primly on the chair. Time and circumstance had not been kind, and she was far too thin for his liking, but he could remember all too vividly how she had felt. His palms itched when he recalled the soft curves they had cupped and the smooth skin they had caressed. If his wife were jealous, then that suggested passion. It suggested a proprietary need.

"We have been planning Severus' rescue and healing."

He could tell that Narcissa's pride had been wounded; he knew he should have involved her in his plans, but he had wanted one place where he could forget about all these plans and machinations. Narcissa had become his grounding force, his sanctuary in a world going slowly mad.

"And I couldn't have helped?" she asked bitterly.

At her words, he fell from his chair to her feet. Grasping her hands and kissing her knuckles, he looked at her intently.

"You have helped in ways that I can't begin to define, let alone thank." He turned her hand over and kissed her work-roughened palm. "I could not have worked this hard or travelled this far without you." He caught her soft sigh and ran his tongue along the underside of her forefinger; her breath stuttered. "The fact that we can complete our plans is because I have had you to support me through this ordeal." He closed his eyes and gently sucked her fingertip into his mouth; Narcissa squirmed beneath him.

He paused. It had been a while. He would have to go gently; Narcissa wasn't as strong as she had once been, and he knew he wouldn't be able to... restrain himself. Letting the finger fall from his mouth, he resumed kissing her fingers and hand. When her thighs parted, he slowly eased forwards, careful for any sign that Narcissa was becoming reticent. He had been truthful when he had encouraged patience: they had days and days ahead of them.

Her free hand moved to cup his cheek, and he moaned into her fingers when she caressed his face. This was glorious. Still maintaining restraint, Lucius stopped tormenting her hand and looked up towards his beloved's face. Her eyes were dark and... *oh Merlin!*... so needy. Had he entertained the idea of taking his time? How foolish! Obviously, Narcissa was very impatient! He barely had time to draw a breath before her mouth was on his, her fingers tugging on his hair and her hand roughly pulling his hand to cup her breast.

The Room of Requirement, as obliging as ever, morphed the chair into a bed, which Lucius scrambled onto, lured by the siren that was his wife. Her soft sighs were the most intoxicating sounds, and her warmth was something he craved. While the lights dimmed, they frantically pulled off the unnecessary clothes and slithered under the sheets. On some level, Lucius was aware that they were silk, but what did that matter? What did that matter when he would soon be slipping into warm satin?

"Lucius," she called out, her tone indicating some distress.

He stopped and looked down upon her, his brow furrowed in concern. "What? Are you alright?"

"I'm sorry, Lucius, but... I..."

"Oh Merlin! Have I hurt you?"

"No," she sobbed out. "It's just that I wanted... wanted this to be gentle... and I can't!"

"Oh," he responded in feigned disappointment after his brain had processed her words and sent a fresh surge of blood to the appropriate area. "I suppose that I could cope with a lack of proper etiquette."

"Good!" she snapped out before flipping him onto his back.

In the gloom, he grinned, but not for long. He'd forgotten when they had last enjoyed each other, but Narcissa had not forgotten any of her tricks. All too soon, he was begging for her to be gentle, but hoping that she wouldn't be.

oooXooo

"Meadowes said to meet him here?" Draco said in disgust.

Draco felt rather disappointed. He had sneaked down to the Room of Requirement, dealt with his frustration of his parents not being there, scurried down the tunnel after Hermione, crawled out into a room in the Hog's Head, and spent an interesting hour, strolling through Muggle London to end up outside a cheap, Muggle pub.

"Err... yes," said Hermione with the same level of disappointment.

"Wouldn't it have been easier to have just met at the Hog's Head?" Draco groused.

"Oh, come on," Hermione snapped impatiently. "He must have had his reasons."

Bella had seen them walking down the small path towards the pub. She had gone through a range of emotions, not all of them hers, when she had seen Draco.

"That treacherous brat!" she snarled out. "After all that I did for him, and he's the one who has been helping you?"

She drummed her fingers on the rotten sill and studied the pair through the dirty pane. Her lips curled up; they seemed so... chummy, chatting there. It was disgusting. To think that a pureblood had sunk low enough to consort with Mudbloods... It was appalling. Such anger coursed through her. Draco was family! How dare he abuse the noble names of Malfoy and Black! How she would make Draco suffer for his defection! Her thoughts delved into what she would do, what curses she would use and what she would do with his corpse: he'd make a sweet inferi.

They disappeared from view as they approached the entrance, and she shifted away from the window. She'd kill them both...No! She'd make one of them kill the other... that'd be fun! Such ideas blossomed in her head, and she tittered as she crossed the room to the door, but as she moved to take up her post, her eyes latched upon the drawer holding her precious parcels.

The next thought to bloom made her stop dead. It was staggering! It was beautiful! It would satisfy her need for vengeance, and it would help her complete her aims. The knock on the door made her heart pound, and almost breathless with the thrill of her idea, she moved to answer.

Meadowes ranted and raved; he threw every ounce of his remaining strength into escaping his terrible prison. Thoughtless with horror and grief, he flung himself against the mental barriers... again and again. All around him, he could hear her vicious laughter; he could see her gloating face, and through her eyes, he could see her hand turning the knob. He screamed, and she mocked him, her own high-pitched screams drowning out his own cries. His mind stretched to snapping point as he stared out, knowing that there was nothing he could do. And when the door opened to reveal a smiling Hermione and a dour Draco, his mind shattered.

oooXooo

What was happening? How had it all gone wrong? Hermione was still screaming, or was it him? He couldn't tell anymore. All he knew was that he was lying on the floor, staring up at the mottled and cracked ceiling with movement flickering in the corner of his eye. The screams must be coming from Hermione, he reasoned; he couldn't move.

"Hush now," crooned Meadowes, which was followed by a flash of light. "I'm just about to start. Now, don't you worry, dear; I'll heal you up nice and neat. You'll never know what happened."

Draco gagged and wished that he could close his eyes and stop listening. Hermione had stopped screaming, but was whimpering in a way that made him wish she screaming again. He couldn't see what was going on, but he had just felt something warm and wet hit his cheek, and Meadowes' words incited terrible images. He managed to swallow the bitter bile: vomiting while under a full Body-Bind was not a good idea.

"It's quite an art, you know," Meadowes said conversationally. "You'd think that cutting into flesh was a simple and unscientific act, but there's skill to it. I could cut you and slash open any number of useful veins and arteries; that wouldn't do, would it?"

Draco's vision blurred as tears flooded his immobile eyes. The voice was unfamiliar, but the words were chillingly recognisable: it was Bella! He was sure...how, he had no idea, but Bella had possessed Meadowes...just as he was sure that they were both dead. How unfair! Just when he thought he'd found a way to live again. Knowing Bella, their deaths wouldn't be short or simple either; she had once bragged that she had taken hours to kill a man, that she had killed him by degrees. If he could, he would have screamed.

"Such a thing as this can't be rushed. You have to pause to admire what you've done. And I do admire this; it pleases me immensely," Bella sighed. "You have such a flawless canvas, Hermione. It's so soft and smooth; quite beautiful. And it's a delight to cut. You may have noted that I'm using the lesser variant of the Cutting Hex. The stronger form would go too deeply, and I want shallow cuts; that way, I can peel you open almost one layer at a time."

Bella gasped and Hermione groaned.

"Ah," breathed Bella, almost ecstatically. "Did you feel that?" she asked breathlessly. "Did you feel that last cut? It pierced the fascia. Did you feel your insides shift? Oh, Hermione," Bella rasped out. "I can touch your heart!"

oooXooo

He must have passed out. The room was darker than he remembered. Over Bella's humming, he could hear the wet gurgles of Hermione breathing through a damaged windpipe. He tried to blink, but he was still held fast by the spell.

"Back with us, Draco?"

Draco felt his heart hammer away. This was some nightmare; that was it. He was asleep, and this was some nightmare from the blackest parts of his mind.

"It'll be your turn soon, Draco," she said consolingly. "I'm sorry that you've been neglected for so long, but Hermione was such a delight that I was loathe to hurry with her."

There came a soft organic sound, one that Draco had heard once before when Severus had healed his torso after Potter's *sectumsempra*. His mind had gone through fear to land on the shores of delusional peace, and Draco idly wondered just how deeply and extensively Bella had cut Hermione.

"There we go, my dear," Bella said again after a long and significant pause. "All healed. That wasn't that bad, was it?"

Draco heard the soft smack of a kiss, and his head began to spin once again. *This is no nightmare; it's real! Oh Merlin, help me!*

"Thank you, Hermione," Bella whispered almost lovingly. "You sleep now; you've earned it."

The rustle of heavy material heralded Draco's impending torture, and when Bella's shadow fell across him, he felt his throat burn from the effort of trying to scream with frozen vocal cords. Tears ran from his eyes, and as the blurred outline of his torturer came closer, he saw it lift something white: something small and slender, wrapped in white linen.

"This one," she said, showing him the wrapped finger, "is yours, my little avatar."

House Hunting

Chapter 24 of 26

Snape suffers a huge setback, but something in the macabre world is striving to protect him. Draco is forced to endure for his family's future.

The ravens closest to the melancholic wizard turned their black heads towards their ward. Others, who had not heard, played amongst branches, and the remaining few, those sitting furthest away, were intently focused on something in the sky.

"They all said I would go to hell," Snape continued softly.

The wind was now rather sedate after venting its fury; it didn't pummel and batter. It still whipped his hair around his face and tugged at his coat, but not near as ferociously as it had just before yesterday's storm. Bah! Yesterday! Had it really been yesterday? It could have been last week, or this morning; he had no way of tracking time in this place.

He surveyed the battered landscape. Gorse bushes had been ripped up, leaving raw holes in the ground, and were strewn haphazardly over the landscape. A spindly tree had nose-dived from the swirling heavens, impaling itself into the streambed. Even with the roots in the air, it looked no different to those that had passed through the storm

unscathed. It did, however, prove to be a useful roosting site for some of the ravens.

Sitting on the bank, Snape held his shins, pressing his chin into his knees, and stared out across the ravaged alien landscape. He knew this wasn't some distant land; this was out of regular time...the lack of new facial hair had been a big clue... That and the fact that he hadn't felt any particular need to nip behind a bush, and he recalled feeling a rather pressing need before his... *death?*

This really was a form of purgatory. Or was this one of the levels of hell? *Which one?* he mused. *There was one for murderers, one for blasphemers, one for liars and cheats... One for all the sins. Where would the Good Lord have put him? In the devil's mouth? Or would it be the one where you were chased by leopards and torn to shreds, never dying, so it could happen over and over again? And wasn't there one about carrying a weight and being forced to march for eternity?*

"I would have liked to have had the option to plead my case. It may not have been worth a damn, but I'd have enjoyed the rant," he said wryly. "Maybe someone would have come to my defence." He snorted. "Knowing my luck, I'd have only managed to secure a character reference from the Dark Lord."

He picked up a small stone and hurled it into the stream, watching as it caught the surface and skipped once before disappearing into the flowing water.

"The ironic thing is that *He* still considers me to be his most loyal servant," he said bitterly. "The ones I worked with...not intentionally, I admit...still think me a murderer and a traitor. I, who died for the benefit of the Order, will never have a grave or plaque; my name will not appear on any list, or be whispered from any mourning mouth. My name will be a curse, and it will be spat out onto the mud."

Another, larger stone broke the water's surface, and a few more ravens turned their beaks towards Snape.

"Not that that means anything. I never did it for fame."

Why did you do it?

"Ah! You again," Snape said with a smile. "I thought that you'd be lurking around somewhere."

There was a chuckle on the wind. *I'm never far away. But tell me, friend. Why did you do it?*

"You'll have to define 'it'?"

Always the Slytherin, eh? Okay, Slytherin, why did you serve the Order?

"You make it sound as though I had a choice."

*Choice **was** a luxury you had at the time. You could have refused.*

Snape frowned and picked up a flat stone. It was black, flecked with grey and highly polished from the gallons upon gallons of water that had once rushed daily over its surface. He sometimes felt like the stone he held: worn down and moulded by the impact of others until he was something that someone else could use. Nothing but a smooth and featureless item, waiting for the moment when it was deemed useful. He had wanted to skim the perfect stone held between thumb and forefinger, but now, he had no inclination to discard it.

"It never occurred to me to decline," he said after a long and thoughtful pause.

It was true. He had been driven by undeniable needs and motives. The flight to Dumbledore's office after hearing of Lily's murder had occurred almost unconsciously: one minute he was hearing of her death, and the next, he was on his knees at the old wizard's feet.

He could imagine her screams, her panic and her frantic efforts to save her son. He closed his eyes. Killing her must have been easy; just as easy as it had been for him to tell the Dark Lord of Trelawney's prophecy. *And probably just as satisfying*, he thought, as a wave of anguish crashed down on him...how he had rejoiced in being able to pass that snippet on! He had glowed with pride at being able to serve. Bitter bile burnt his mouth, and he spat it out. He could not loathe himself enough, and a vow forced upon him by Dumbledore meant that he could not end his own disgusting life. Dumbledore had been merciless.

Even now, he thought ironically, *I am forced to exist with my regrets and pains. Death was meant to be an end to it!* It was grossly unfair, and all he could hope for now was insanity to smooth the edges of his pitiful and painful afterlife.

Your acceptance was due to passion rather than sense? the voice asked slowly.

"You mean, was I hasty?" Snape inhaled and rubbed his temple. "My response was quick and certainly passionate, but it was one that had been at the ready for quite some time. The circumstances surrounding my choice were emotive and... more than enough of an incentive to declare my loyalty without hesitation."

To the Order? came the unrelenting voice.

The laugh which erupted from his lips was dark and bitter. "Never to the Order. Only a fool would consider me willing to do that." His black humour fled as quickly as it came. "I swore loyalty to Dumbledore."

Dumbledore had not been surprised about his reticence to join the Order...despite the far more lenient terms of membership: a handshake rather than a brand...but he had certainly revelled in having his own personal spy. Snape had become Dumbledore's secret killer and saboteur; even using him to scupper the Order, when their hotheadedness risked other, more sensitive plans.

Snape benefitted from the arrangement. If it all went wrong, if all the plans and efforts failed, then he'd have his way out. Not that he intended to flee. He was no coward, no matter what Potter thought of him. He would have played the role of devoted Death Eater to the death... Voldemort's!

It had all changed when Dumbledore had thought Potter a Horcrux. Snape had been brought into the fold, and his role as double-agent exposed, but he had maintained his distance...he had to remain... ambiguous. He knew where it had all been heading; he knew that he'd have to kill Order members. It was simpler if they despised him from the outset. Besides, Dumbledore had only forbidden him from killing himself, not from cultivating those who would be eager to do it for him.

The wizard who allowed you to be blamed for so much through your school life? The wizard who declared his disgust for you? The same wizard who made you kill in...

"Enough!" Snape shouted.

The voice quietened, or was smothered by the sound of flapping wings as the startled birds took to the skies. The switch from melancholic mutterer to maniac had been sudden and violent. Pebbles still clattered from where he had angrily scooped up handfuls from the bank and hurled the stones.

Slowly, Snape settled and daintily brushed off the grit from his palms. His cheeks were flushed, and his eyes glittered disturbingly.

"I know what Dumbledore was and did: what he asked me to do," Snape continued more softly; his sudden fury held in check. "But I swore I'd never be at the beck and call of an organisation again; joining the Death Eaters was more than enough." His lips pulled back into a vicious scowl. "Everyone expecting and wanting something from you just because you shared the same so-called glorious agenda. It is far better to serve one man than be forced to serve many."

The silence dragged. Despite the voice's annoying habit to pry, it had been a welcome companion in such a quiet place, and Snape found the silence to be more than just uncomfortable. Looking up, he saw the disturbed ravens circling high up, gliding on the wind while the others either played or watched the sky.

Needing a distraction, Snape followed the direction of their gaze and peered up into the sickly-yellow clouds. Some of the clouds seemed to converge, spiralling down to a shadowed core. The black heart seemed to be in the same place as the patch of blue from yesterday... or whenever!

Did that actually mean anything? Did *anything* in this place mean anything? The birds seemed to think that it was something of great importance, judging by the way they stared at it. Knowing that this place wasn't a geographical location as such had altered his perceptions of the ravens considerably, and he felt hairs prickle on his nape. What had caught their attention?

Interesting, isn't it?

He was relieved that the voice was back, but his curiosity outweighed it. "What do you know of it?" he snapped out.

No more and no less than you, Slytherin.

"Perfect!" Snape muttered. "The only one talking to me has no bloody clue about anything either."

There was another chuckle, and Snape wished that the voice had a body, just so he could punch the infuriating thing in the mouth.

We have more of an idea than you think, but you're too obsessed about being suitably punished to consider it.

Snape harrumphed and focused intently on the dark spot in the sky.

You're doing it again! You're dismissing the obvious in favour of wallowing.

"I do not wallow," Snape replied tartly.

*Oh, forgive me, the voice sneered. You **endure!***

Snape felt the muscle under his left eye begin to twitch, but he wouldn't rise to such puerile tactics. He and he alone knew what his life had been like; some irritating voice wasn't about to belittle all that pain and misery.

Was teaching really that bad, Slytherin?

There was a moment, one terrible moment where he could have easily slipped into the anger that had once too often grabbed hold of him; an anger that had vented its fury upon his own body. He could have pummelled the earth until his knuckles bled and his bones shattered. The gorse bushes could have provided him with sharp edges to slash at his skin, and the pebbles could have smashed out his teeth. The rage could have reared up and consumed him, as it had several times in the past before Dumbledore had discovered his problem and helped him.

"You have no idea," Snape said with a shudder, letting the anger slip away.

The voice gave a quiet laugh, but nervously, as though it had sensed the looming horror and was relieved that it had passed.

Look at the sky, the voice suddenly whispered.

Snape looked and gasped. The black circle was expanding rapidly, and the clouds were spinning violently around it. It looked as though the heavens were being devoured by a giant vortex.

The ravens still perched quietly, but it seemed they were now bored by the savage onslaught. In fact, every pair of black eyes were on him! Confused and fearful, Snape backed off towards the cave. This was beyond him; he couldn't fathom what this was, and that terrified him. Crawling away was something he rarely did, but this was like nothing he'd had to face before. He had no foe to defend against, no target to strike out at. He was lost.

The vortex was stealing more than just the sky; it was taking the light with it. Snape scurried into the cave. Was it stealing the very air too? His lungs burned with the effort of drawing in scraps of air. His eyes ached from trying to catch the remaining light. Outside, he heard the cawing of the birds and saw patches of black shoot across the cave mouth, and then... nothing!

~X~

"How many more?" he griped as Hermione shut the door behind her.

"None, if you could make up your mind!" she snapped back. "Honestly, Draco, one of these houses must have appealed to you." She sighed and glanced down at the collection of house details held in her hand. "I thought that we'd have done by now," she muttered tiredly. "But it's gone...Oh my!...six. We've been at this for hours!"

"It can't be," Draco said with a frown. "We arrived at that pub to meet Meadows around twelve, and he didn't seem to go on for that long."

Hermione giggled. "He was certainly more direct than he usually is."

"Oh well," he said. "Don't they say that time flies when you're having fun?"

She knew that he hadn't had fun, and she hadn't had enough to make five hours pass by so quickly. Hermione studied him. He genuinely seemed overwhelmed, and she'd caught his eyes glazing over at some of the things she'd discussed, but there again, central heating and condensing boilers were alien concepts to someone who had just had to yell at a house-elf if they were cold or wanted a bath.

"Okay," she said, rubbing her stomach...*must have eaten something that doesn't agree with me.*"Let's think about this logically, considering that we've lost most the afternoon. What don't you like about the ones you've seen?"

His face twisted, as though the question pained him. "Nothing," he finally mumbled. "I just don't know what I'm supposed to be looking for." He bowed his head and hugged himself.

Something about his manner made Hermione oust her frustrations so she could focus entirely on him. She knew that Lucius had some nagging fear about Draco...with increased Occlumency came a corresponding skill with Legilimency...he worried almost unrelentingly over his son. What was going on with Draco? What had happened to him during his trial and subsequent punishment? She shuddered; she wondered what it had been like. It was obvious that the experience had damaged him. How many would be sympathetic though? The Malfoys had done terrible things... *and paid for them!* she reminded herself.

"I would have inherited Malfoy Manor," he said quietly, "just like my father and his fathers. My life was pretty much set from birth; house waiting, job set up by my father and his cohorts; my political affiliations determined for me." He grimaced and laughed bitterly. "I had a wife lined up, did you know that? I didn't even have to look for that."

Hermione remained silent...what could she have said anyway? Her concerned gaze followed him as he turned away, and she felt cold to the core. Beneath the cool exterior, she caught a glimpse of an uncertain and lost boy struggling to cope with the rules of the game suddenly changing.

"What am I supposed to be looking for, Hermione?" he asked plaintively.

Hermione felt tears sting her eyes, and she bit down hard on her lower lip. "I don't know, Draco. But I know that this is whole new start. You can make your own life now."

Draco nodded and smiled. "Maybe Professor Hardwicke is right; maybe I do need a better map." He thrust his hands in his pockets and turned to look at the house they'd just left. "I don't like this one, solely for the reason that it has those fake plastic bits on it to give it a Tudor feel. I don't want anything fake; I've already had a life of it!"

Glad to see him thinking positively, she pulled out the relevant house details and held them up to him. "Say goodbye to house number six." Casting a quick glance along the road, she banished the offending paperwork. "Next!"

Draco chuckled. "It'd be easier if I told which one I liked."

"You actually liked one?" she teased.

"I liked house number three." He shrugged at her questioning look. "It was the only one with a big enough lounge for three chaise-longues; you can't expect us to share just the one," he said with a smirk.

Hermione smiled and linked her arm with Draco's. She led him down the garden path and onto the pavement. That particular house had been her favourite from the start. It was a corner plot on the very edge of a small housing estate. The back garden was only overlooked by one neighbour, and the side and back gardens backed onto rolling fields. A footpath led down from the house to an arcade of small shops: butcher, hairdresser, newsagent and convenience store. Not the cheapest of shops, but the easiest option. The same footpath branched off and led to a local common, and although Hermione would prefer them to stay indoors, they would no doubt enjoy the secluded woodland.

The house was also a new-build, which meant that they shouldn't have to call out any engineers or workmen to fix any problems, and luckily, the houses around were empty, awaiting buyers. They could settle in without causing any neighbourly suspicion. And when neighbours did start moving in, the Malfoys would be firmly established.

She had already determined how she could go about securing the property; it was a case of signatures and money, and when you were a witch, those were easily obtained. The lack of chain meant that the exchange could happen almost immediately. It was inherently dishonest, but they desperately needed their escape. She would spend time focusing on how to get the Malfoys financially independent and self-supporting, but she fervently hoped that living in the Muggle world would be a temporary measure.

Buoyed up by Draco settling on the best house of the bunch, she sauntered happily down the road. Another excellent feature of the house was that it was a four-bedroomed goliath of a house; easily big enough for two guests and a potions lab.

Draco walked into his new home. It was rather elegant. A square hallway, about the size of their current living space, led to some under-stair storage, the kitchen, a dining room and a lounge. Two small windows either side of the door meant that the hallway was light and welcoming. The walls were slightly off-white, and the carpet was a soft apricot colour. All very neutral and very neat. The staircase was along the right-hand wall, leading up to a galleried landing; it was painted white and well-crafted.

The lounge was a long room, which went straight from one end of the house to the other: a large bay window at the front and patio doors at the back. Surprisingly, there was a fire, but no chimneybreast...made the chimney pots on the roof rather redundant. The hearth and mantelpiece were made from pale stone with what looked like leaves carved into it. The fire inside was actually a gas fire; although it looked enough like an open fire. Again the colour scheme was the same.

The dining room led directly into the kitchen, and the two rooms, like the lounge, went from one end of the house to the other. Draco had never spent much time in a kitchen...save to sneak the odd biscuit or cake...so he was rather reticent to think about using the sink. He felt rather proud of himself that he recognised the refrigerator and the freezer, but that was effectively stomped on when Hermione spoke about hard and soft water; personally, water only seemed hard when you hit it at great speed. Hermione continued with her confusing Muggle babble and told him that the washing machine and tumble drier were simple to use, but he hadn't quite decided which of the white boxes she'd indicated were which. He hoped Mother would solve the riddle...and he certainly hoped she wouldn't 'boil his smalls' in there... whatever that meant!

The upstairs had six rooms in total: four bedrooms, one study and the family bathroom. He felt on safer ground; there was only so much you could do to those rooms, and he was fairly sure that he had a sufficient grasp on Muggle plumbing.

The master bedroom had an en-suite with a toilet, sink and shower. He had to admit it; Muggles knew how to indulge. The view from the bedroom was another stunning feature. There was no house directly opposite, as with the other properties along this street, and it afforded him a lovely view of gently curving hills, groupings of trees and verdant fields. It was so different from the grounds in Wiltshire, yet it plucked at his heart; he'd never really admired the land before.

The study was a much smaller room, and he wondered what they would use it for...they had no books, no desk... nothing. In fact, how would they furnish this place? They had no money, no property, and no chance of acquiring either. Suddenly, the empty rooms seemed to mock him.

The other bedrooms were pretty much the same, apart from the one sited over the kitchen. It was more of an L-shape than a square, and the roof over the smaller leg of the L sloped downwards slightly. It was this unique and quirky feature which appealed to him; that and the view. It seemed to go on forever with no house or building in the way. He guessed that the sun would set behind the distant green belt of trees, and it would be glorious. This would be his room. And that settled it. This was home.

"I can cast the Unplottable spells before you move in and the anti-Muggle charms after." Hermione spoke as she descended the last few steps into the hallway. "I'll need to refresh those about twice a month, but I hope that you'll be somewhere better before then."

"Better?" Draco queried softly. As far as he was concerned, there could be nothing better than this Muggle haven.

"I think your father is trying to restore what you had," she said simply. "And for what it's worth, I hope he does."

Draco blinked. "You're a Mudb...Muggleborn, and yet you want to help us? The very family who worked against you!" He waved his arms emphatically. "If I recall correctly, my father cast the Cruciatius on you."

Hermione paled at the memory and sank down to sit on the bull-nose. She knew all that, and she had questioned her ability to seemingly forgive what was essentially unforgivable. Somehow, and strangely, it just didn't seem that important. Not when the man who had hurt her had also been the one to save her from her own darkness. She nibbled her lip and rested her head against the newel post. Had she been manipulated into letting this go? Had Lucius twisted this situation to suit his own purposes? She closed her eyes, battling the sudden surge of suspicions and insecurity. There was no way of satisfactorily answering those questions, but she had some bizarre faith that Lucius was indeed a friend... of sorts.

"It does seem odd," she said slowly. Opening her eyes, she focused on Draco's impassive features. *Just like his father*, she mused fondly, *hiding his feelings behind nonchalance*.

"I don't want to discuss it further," she continued equally as indifferently, "but your father helped me through a bad patch."

Draco nodded; he knew about 'bad patches'. It just seemed so remarkably unlikely that two people such as Lucius Malfoy and Hermione Granger should become... acquaintances. His scalp tingled with a new and sudden realisation; were he and Hermione friends?

"Now," she continued brightly, and with a hint of impish glee, "you need to go shopping."

"Shopping?" he croaked out. Just when he thought all this wandering around was at an end, she thrust the very worst thing upon him; it made his insides roll.

"Don't worry," she said. "It won't be all that bad; Muggles have mail-order."

~X~

The darkness was complete. It stole his breath, his senses, and whatever control he thought he had. Curled up and whimpering, Severus Snape was lost in mind-numbing fear. If it wasn't for the cold pressure of the cave floor against his side and the fingernails that scratched at his face, he would swear that he no longer existed. Any delusions that he was still alive had been snuffed out with the light; he was dead. He was some petty shadow waiting to fade away.

Slytherin?

He jolted at the sound, but dared not reply.

I know you can hear me, and I can feel your fear.

The voice sighed, and Snape thought he heard...yes...footsteps!

Listen to me, Slytherin, the voice pleaded. You are not dead. Neither are you truly alive.

"Then what am I?" Snape whispered.

You are Severus Snape.

"You're no help," Snape muttered bitterly.

You're trapped. They're trying to help you, but you need to meet them half way, I think, added the voice with a degree of uncertainty.

"They?" Snape snarled out. "Who the hell are they?" The rising anger helped defeat the fear, and Snape used every ounce of it.

I don't know; I just hear voices.

"Great!" he sneered. "My delusion is having delusions!"

Why are you always so crabby?

"I'm not crabby; I'm complicated."

There came the sound of cloth dragging over stone, and Snape stiffened...delusions shouldn't be real! Licking his lips, he slowly unfurled from his foetal position and strained to catch any more sounds.

I don't hear them anymore. But I heard a woman's voice... so full of pain and anguish. She vowed to help you. And there was a man; he used to beg and rant, but now, when he comes, he tells you of his wife and son.

Snape remained silent. The sound of footfalls was getting closer. A few more steps and the owner of that damned voice would be his. He lunged into the darkness, but instead of the fleshy target he had expected, he crashed into the cave wall. Dazed by the impact, he slid down the smooth wall and crumpled into a woeful heap.

Snape grimaced and fingered his swollen lip. Perhaps he was going insane; hearing things was certainly a sign of impending madness, as was talking to oneself. To be honest, he was too tired to really care. It had been emotionally and mentally exhausting to handle such high levels of stress for so long, and his body was shutting down as a definite reminder that he needed rest. His head felt light, and blue spots danced in the darkness.

Don't fall asleep! the voice demanded fearfully.

Perhaps the voice was the same as the leopards; something to slowly tear him to pieces. His eyelids drifted closed, and he felt the exhaustion smother him. He couldn't help but ponder the delusion's words. The only man with a wife and son who would visit him was Lucius, but what would he beg from him? The answer tormented his mind while he teetered on the cusp of sleep, and although he strived to examine the answer, fatigue won. His last thought before his mind shut down was that he was Lucius' Secret Keeper.

Onto Greener Grass

Chapter 25 of 26

It's time to move on, but only Bella seems to be the one to find that the grass is truly greener. Lucius hears some news that could destroy everything, and Severus wakes up almost a new man.

It seemed that age had its ways of making it easier on its victim: senses became deadened to all pleasures to the point that you no longer really craved. For someone hitting their waning years, this may be a tolerated trade-off... a balm, but to Bella, it was a form of tyranny. As she sat at the table in her room, dissatisfied and in no position to rectify such a state, her eyes greedily followed the woman in the garden opposite her window. She longed to be free from this arthritic and weakened prison. She wanted to feel the passions and strength she had shared when inside the Healer's skull. How long had it been since she'd been caressed and experienced pleasure? Even the simple pleasures of life weren't hers to enjoy.

Meadowes thwarted her move. In his passivity, he held some power over her. He knew, had guessed, or it was down to sheer dumb luck, that the information he had trapped in his skull was valuable enough to keep her under his skin. Until he broke or let slip some delicious snippet, she was no better than a dog at her master's table, waiting for scraps. It wasn't an ideal situation for her; it crimped her development as the next Dark Lord. But Bella knew about waiting... she knew about patience.

Starlings chattered and writhed in the grey sky, heralding the evening, and in the small courtyard below her window, she caught sight of the early drinkers catching a few puffs on their cigarettes in the fresh air before returning to their pints in the stuffy bar. Her memory stretched back, and she guessed her fingers would be in the Great Hall now, while their hosts waited for dinner. She felt a flicker of envy...

While she idled, waiting for Meadowes to buckle, she considered her plan. Putting fingers in Draco and Hermione had been inspired, but also rash. As her mind unwound from its giddy delight of their skin and her cuts, she realised that two of her precious anchors were now roaming free and beyond her direct control. It had worried her at

first, but it didn't seem beyond her to move further north, leaving anchors at key locations en route... in case they were needed. Of course, she had no real idea how her travelling and possession skills were working, but it seemed reasonable to her, after her experiments in sub rosa, that should she be ousted from a host, she would snap back to the closest anchor.

She would work her way north, to Hogwarts, to despatch Potter, Weasley and all those who had worked against her...and if she couldn't get them directly, then their children would be the next best target. There was also something undeniable about the possibility of manipulating the minds of the students as they developed. So many eager minds ready to be fed, and she'd nourish them, fattening them up with her philosophies and dreams. She'd have them lapping up her words, craving her sweet tones, doing anything for one more mouthful. Within a generation, she could have a devoted cadre. The possibilities were endless. And the beauty was that no one would seek her out; they'd never even think to look for her.

Where to put her anchors, though? Those in the brats would only be useful for a short time...a very short time. One had to be secreted within Hogwarts... or maybe two; it depended on how far she could travel from an anchor. And they would have to be close to potential hosts: wizards. And where else? The Ministry? Where couldn't she have an influence?! A dark laugh rumbled in her chest. She'd have so many thumbs in so many pies!

Something else niggled at her: Snape's punishment and ruination. Her foray into his skull had showed that in some way he could cope with the strain and the torment of his environment; he could defend himself against his conscience... but he crumbled at the thought of Lily. But even that wasn't enough! If only he'd seen Lily's death... her dread, her terror... heard her screams and watched her fall. If he'd been there and known he was impotent: if only his hand in her demise had been more evident. There was little his mind could do to protect him from that.

It was an interesting idea, and from it, a scenario unfurled in her mind like a Dark Mark in the clouds. It would be fun, and if it didn't quite work, well, enough damage would have been done to make it worthwhile. Hermione was going to willingly enter Snape's mind to cure him... what if she could manipulate Snape into seeing Hermione as something more than just an irritating know-it-all? His mind was already fracturing...the split in those ravens of his had indicated as much...and she knew she had the skill to create more fractures in his psyche... in his personality, for want of a better term. Yes, in Severus Snape was a facet that craved love... and another that killed it: a coping mechanism. A smile curved her lips. She'd let Hermione cure him...while ripening her for the plucking...then connive to have Snape destroy her. When he recovered, he'd see the ruin he had fathered, and it would be another weapon in her arsenal. Perhaps death was too good for him: sometimes, living with yourself could be hell.

A doubt meekly raised its head, and Bella sighed...there was always something! She had no direct link to Hermione... how would she be in a position to play with his head? To cure Snape, Hermione would have to be in close contact with Snape... lying beside him, in fact... but how to get to Hermione to get close enough to Snape? Suddenly, a wave of exquisite realisation broke over her mind, causing her scalp to tingle and her heart to leap in her chest.

She didn't have to worry about Granger or Meadows. How had she been so stupid?! They needed Snape, and whereas she had no idea where Granger would be or how to get to her, Bella knew *exactly* where Snape would be. She laughed out, slightly disappointed that it was more a wheeze, and rose to her aching feet. She'd entered his head before, and she knew how to lie quietly in someone's mind. It was too delightful! She'd have a front row seat to their destruction, with a free travel pass to anywhere she wanted, courtesy of Hermione or Draco.

Meadows had served his purpose, and from what she could tell, he'd be no threat to her; even if he found some strength to confess what had happened, they'd only consider him a madman. She gathered up her anchors and slipped them into her pocket. Time to let Meadows drift and find a temporary, more suitable, host for the path back to sub rosa.

ooXoo

Hermione stepped through the flickering fires into the Room of Requirement, unease twisting her insides. She knew it had been looming...there was no way to avoid it...and now, she realised just how much she'd been dreading this encounter. After the firelight, it was quite dim, and she struggled for a moment to focus on the two people standing side-by-side before her. When her vision improved, she found it impossible not to feel sympathy lance through her chest at the sight of the couple.

"Hello, Miss Granger," Lucius drawled.

Next to him, Narcissa's eyes narrowed slightly and her frame stiffened. It wasn't as if Hermione had expected a warm welcome, but Narcissa's frosty countenance gave her the chills and withered what was left of her confidence.

"Good evening, Mr Malfoy," she replied tightly. "And Mrs Malfoy."

The tall, painfully thin witch sneered. "Oh please don't stick to formality on my account," she hissed. "I've heard nothing but 'Hermione' from your mouth, Lucius, and I daresay that *she* is as free with your name as you are with hers."

It was petty and bitter, but meeting Hermione was almost unbearable; it brought out the worst of her emotions. She rallied behind the arrogance and dislike that had fuelled her through much of her young life, and it helped to smother the despair and uncertainty the situation engendered.

"Narcissa, dear," Lucius soothed, flashing Hermione a cautionary glance, "how about we settle and talk about our next move? I'm sure we could all do with a drink."

There was a pause, and Hermione felt as though the rest of their relationship balanced on this moment... that Narcissa's response was the fulcrum to either her rise or fall. She swallowed a hard lump; Narcissa had the power to destroy what she and Lucius had cultivated... what she and Draco had nurtured. Narcissa had never seemed so powerful or dangerous.

For her part, Narcissa saw a threat; Hermione had come between her and her family. Lucius and Draco had come to rely on the Muggle-born in a way...and she couldn't understand why...they couldn't rely on her. It pained her in so many ways that Hermione was doing something she hadn't even been given the chance to do. Why should a child have more influence on the family than the mother?! She knew it came down to feelings of power... and Hermione made her feel weak. She despised it.

As if pre-empting some disaster, Lucius withdrew a small bottle from his breast pocket and strode to the small table, where he poured three measures of a honey-coloured liquid into tumblers. Narcissa backed down enough to indicate one of the chairs, and her lips curved up into an empty smile.

"Where are my manners? Do sit, Hermione," she uttered crisply.

Lucius returned and offered a drink to each of the ladies, noticing with interest that Narcissa had chosen to sit between himself and Hermione. He claimed the remaining seat and lifted his glass.

"To new beginnings," Lucius offered.

Hermione smiled and a flicker of pain danced across Narcissa's pale face as they joined in his toast. They quietly took a sip. Narcissa felt somewhat better at Hermione's gasp and stuttering cough: Lucius had secured some potent Firewhiskey from somewhere. It warmed a way to her stomach while juniper played on her tongue.

After a few more gentle coughs, Hermione sat forward and placed her glass on her table. As she did so, she withdrew a small package from her pocket. Muttering the counter-spell, the package enlarged to the size of a shoe-box.

Lucius eyed it hungrily; it was almost as delicious as the key held in the Azkaban gaoler's hand had been. They were so close to their escape, to their Utopia, that he found himself hovering on the same precipice he had when he'd heard of Voldemort's last and final demise: he hovered on the edge of action, looking down on absolute failure and devastation, while a gentle wind of hope for the future kept him upright and balanced. Why when the deed was almost done did he harbour the greatest fear for its success? Why did he feel as though the cliff edge would crumble beneath his feet?

The lid slid off, and Hermione pulled out three small, slender, burgundy books and a wallet file. "These are your passports; you'll need a photo ID to..." the idea of them

learning to drive flashed through her mind, and she had to bite down on the looming laugh "...join the local library, or if anyone needs to see your identification." She hesitated then handed them out to Narcissa, who plucked them from her fingers expressionlessly. "In here," she said, while lifting the wallet file, "you have birth certificates and a marriage certificate: they're charmed...as are the passports...to convince any Muggle of their authenticity. I'd be surprised if you ever need them, but better safe than sorry."

Narcissa flicked open her passport and studied the strange document. Her date of birth was the same, as was her place of birth, but her name...

"Lucas Malverne?" Lucius barked.

Hermione blushed and cringed. "It was the best I could come up with! It had to be close enough to your own so that it'd reduce the chance of mistakes and suspicion if you went out-and-about, and I couldn't very well use Malfoy."

"I think I can endure Marissa Malverne," Narcissa stated smoothly, her lips twitching. "And Jayden isn't terrible for little Draco."

"You did all this in a few days?" asked Lucius, shaking his head at what seemed impossible.

"The passports and certificates for you and Mrs Malfoy are the ones I used for my parents...just changed the names and details...and the set for Draco came from using the Protego Charm," she replied simply. "I can connect you up to the utilities when I get there, so you won't have to contact any utility companies. You will only need money for the local shops, so bank accounts aren't needed."

"But how did you obtain the house?"

"When Draco picked the house, I went back and... convinced the estate agents to give us the keys. He'll be Confunded until tomorrow evening at the earliest."

"So, it's ours?" breathed Narcissa.

Hermione smiled and pulled out a shimmering bunch of keys. Lucius let out a choked gasp and Narcissa swayed in her seat as though close to collapse.

"I've created a Portkey to take you to a secluded spot a few minutes walk away. All you have to do is wait until the Unplottable wards are complete, and then you can move straight in. Once they're complete, no one will bother you. For the owners...the builders...and the estate agents, neighbours...travelling salesmen, the house will seemingly never have existed." She licked her lips and glanced between them. "Once you use the Portkey, you won't be able to use magic at all... for anything."

"We understand," Lucius confirmed without hesitation.

"What about Draco?" Narcissa asked, feeling light-headed at the speed of it all.

"This weekend is a Hogsmeade weekend," she supplied. "We discussed that he'll 'slip away' with the other students and make it look as though he just went out with his friends. By the time, they realise he's gone, it'll be too late to track him."

Was it really that simple? Lucius frowned and glanced at the box of wonder on Hermione's lap. It was ridiculously easy. Suddenly he was gripped with terrible anxiety.

"You're quite sure that you can do this?" he demanded brusquely.

Hermione blinked and reared up. "I sent my parents away to live on a different continent, managed to hide with every Death Eater and Snatcher hunting us, dealt with a fragment of Voldemort's soul, held it together to lie when under the Cruciatius, and you think I'm going to struggle with this?"

"The Ministry has ways of tracking wizards," he implored, trying to make her see the danger the Ministry posed.

"I can make the house Unplottable," she responded icily. "They will never find you."

"Don't we need a Secret-Keeper for this to work?" Narcissa asked.

"Yes, and..." she inhaled and nervously drummed her fingers on her thighs "... we could use Professor Snape."

Lucius emitted a mirthless laugh. "As much as I have faith in Severus and trust in your abilities, I'd rather not place all my secrets in one basket."

Narcissa glanced across at her husband, her brow puckering. Just what secrets did Severus hold in his soul? All this had come about as a result of trying to help Severus. Something cold and hard solidified in her belly; Severus held something crucial, something vital. It was so... immense that Lucius had made even himself unable to divulge it. It explained his evasiveness and frustration when she questioned him. Her heart twisted in sympathy at his plight, but anger swirled beneath it; he didn't have to bear such weight alone, and he could...should...have trusted her!

"What about you?" Hermione asked, looking into Lucius' blue eyes.

"I... do not have the strength to be a Keeper."

"I do," Narcissa declared, her voice flowing with passion.

"Excellent," Hermione said with a smile. "We can do the Fidelius now."

Narcissa crumpled in her seat. She had felt as though Hermione had stepped on her toes, but the truth of it was that without the young woman, they'd have rotted away. She couldn't have conceived or put into action any of this. Hermione hadn't supplanted or undermined her... she had created a new role within this relationship, one that Narcissa could never have filled. It didn't alleviate her feelings of powerlessness, but it did highlight that Hermione had taken nothing from her. Tears prickled her eyes. Hermione had given them everything.

"I must apologise, Hermione" she uttered thickly. "I saw you as an interloper, as a wedge between Lu...well, I can see now that I was foolish. We wouldn't be free to live a decent life without you, and for that you have my undying gratitude." She reached out and grasped Hermione's hand. "Lucius tells me that you will use our house to cure Severus; be assured that you shall always have a warm welcome in our home."

Hermione smiled and squeezed the thin hand. "You're welcome, Mrs Malfoy."

Narcissa smiled wryly. "Oh, please, Hermione, call me Marissa."

ooXoo

The ravens watched as a figure emerged from the cave. It wasn't quite the pained wizard they'd followed. The figure was shorter, ganglier and younger. They knew who he was, so they continued to revel in the warm air and the water. Above them, a sun blazed pleasantly in a glorious blue sky. The bushes had swollen into beautiful low hedges, and the pebbles on the riverbank stretched out to merge with lush grass. Above the wind and the babbling water came the sound of creaking swings.

It still wasn't perfect. Something was missing, and the boy knew what it was...he just didn't have the knowledge to fully appreciate the sense of loss. He felt an echo of it when his gaze landed on the empty playground, and a cloud slipped past the sun, draining the warmth and making him shiver.

Somewhere, he knew the other part of him was asleep...if you could it sleep...and so for the first time since they'd been here, he had control. He walked over to the stream

and sank to his haunches, idly tossing pebbles into the water. Trying to get himself to realise what was going on had been hard work. It was almost as if wallowing and sulking were the only things he'd grown up to be any good at...he still thought it crabbiness. It wasn't made easier by the fact that he didn't actually know what was going on; he couldn't formalise it from vague impressions and instincts into something accessible.

He knew this wasn't a place as such, and he knew that deep down neither did the older Severus. He also knew it reacted to how he was feeling; watching his other self had been very educational. Sitting back, he let his palms caress the soft grass. It was strange being the only one awake. He was aware of things that he knew hadn't yet happened to him, but they were so vague now, like trying to grasp a dream. He had tried to get a rise out of...he chose to call that other part Severus...Severus, but the man was obstinate. Now, he was only dimly aware of the events, horrors and emotions he'd tasted, and the words he'd used now seemed bland and tasteless.

It was peculiar that he was alone. He'd expected to have Severus curled up at his feet, but when the light returned, the cave had been empty. In a way, it made sense, and he hoped Severus would figure out how to communicate. He'd enjoyed the short talks, and this loneliness was disconcerting.

Inhaling deeply and falling back to watch a few wispy clouds drift across the sky, he rested his hands behind his head and thought about the people he'd heard speaking. He knew someone somewhere was desperately trying to help him, and he had to have faith that they'd succeed. An instinct warned him that survival here was impossible.

ooXoo

It was Friday and Muggle Studies. Draco had waited patiently for his wand, letting the sniggers and murmurs wash over him, and settled in his corner, listening to Hardwicke discuss romantic poetry, while going over and over Hermione's plan. He had expected excitement or anxiety, but once she'd left the room last night, he'd gone cold. It was almost as if he didn't dare to feel anything until the deed was done. In a way, it was a blessing. He still recalled the tormenting and terrifying emotions he'd suffered while serving Voldemort.

Hardwicke had given them their task: to read and critique Ozymandias by P B Shelley. Draco flipped to the sonnet and started to read. He'd never heard of Shelley, but the poem filtered into his brain, stirring his mind. One phrase caught his attention: 'nothing beside remains'. He glanced up from the poem and caught Hardwicke watching him, but the man languidly looked away, as if their eyes had met quite unremarkably. Frustrated by the professor's ambiguity, Draco glared down at the poem. Was he teasing him with a poem that could so easily reflect his family's misfortune? *Well*, he thought with a smirk, *their future was more than decay and desolation*

When the class ended, he stood and dawdled to the front, caressing his wand... perhaps saying goodbye to it. Hardwicke was focused on some papers on his desk, and it wasn't until the last student left that he looked up. Draco found himself staring at the man's eyebrows, stomping down on his rising discomfort.

"Professor Slughorn tells me he wishes to petition for your wand to be returned to you on a permanent basis while at school," Hardwicke stated gruffly. "He's asked all your teachers to sign it."

Something squirmed pleurably in his gut. After the news of his impending escape, he would have thought that nothing could offer more joy, but this news made his skin tingle. He hadn't realised how much his lack of wand had affected his self-esteem.

"That's... very generous."

"It's very belated," the man snapped back. "Left to me, you'd keep that wand of yours...I'm damned sick of the sight of it...but I have to take it until they come to their senses and approve the petition." When he finished, he held out his hand and harrumphed.

Draco felt a grin tug his lips and slid the wand into the gnarled hand. How ironic that when he was on the cusp of flight, they were working to make him feel more welcome. It made no difference; denying the Wizarding world and having his family together in peace far outweighed the chance to be a complete wizard in a spiteful one.

"I daresay you will survive the weekend without it," Hardwicke muttered while slipping Draco's wand into his pocket. "As an aside," he continued conversationally as he shuffled papers into order, "Mr Filch intends to use the students in detention this evening to clean the seventh-floor corridor--near the staircase to the Astronomy Tower. Apparently there was an impromptu duel there earlier this afternoon, and a few wayward curses have affected the décor."

Draco's grin died, and his eyes darted to meet Hardwicke's; his mouth dried and his throat constricted. His special room was on the seventh-floor, nestled between the staircase leading up to the Astronomy Tower and the disused bathroom. He'd figured out that the curved wall formed part of the tower's base.

There was nothing in Hardwicke's expression to suggest anything other than the sharing of some basic news that may be helpful should Draco decide to do some extra-curricular stargazing. Had Hardwicke seen him in the corridor, or was he using Legilimency?

The uncertainty was crippling. Everything was screaming that Hardwicke knew about the room, his meetings with Hermione and his plan to flee... but what could he do? But... was Hardwicke trying to threaten or aid him? After all, if he was seen skulking around later on the way to his sanctum, it would make his movements more difficult in the morning: Slughorn may invoke his threat of tagging him due to his jaunts away from approved areas.

"How did you like the poem, Mr Malfoy?"

The question jarred him from his chaotic thoughts. "It was interesting," he replied neutrally.

Hardwicke flashed him a grin, his beard and moustache twitching. "I like poetry," he added. "I always think that to the open mind, it can convey so much in so few lines, while the closed-minded just see confusing metaphors."

Draco merely nodded and glanced at the door. He had no idea where this was going, but he knew Hardwicke had picked the poem for a purpose; what that was, he had no idea, and the failure to grasp it was teasing him.

"It's a warning to all others who seek to aspire that nothing remains forever." He stopped and drummed his fingers on the desk. "And maybe it's a warning to consider what you leave behind to evidence your existence."

"A trunkless leg of stone?"

Hardwicke chuckled. "Maybe... but is that what Ozymandias wanted the world to remember of his reign... of his glory?"

"I don't know," he responded, genuinely baffled.

"Consider this then, Mr Malfoy," he said, standing and leaning closer. "Stop being the legs of stone and be the poet." After a quick scrutiny of the boy's face, he eased back. "If you can't, you'll never escape the ruined past. Now, toddle along and enjoy your weekend."

ooXoo

"Hey! Mione... wait up!"

Buffeted by her peers pouring out of the Astronomy class, she turned, and in the torchlight, caught sight of a mop of red hair battling the flow. A thrill went through her belly, and she suddenly wished she'd put her hair up.

"Hi," Ron said awkwardly when he'd escaped the flow to reach her side. "... me and Harry haven't really seen much of you over the last few weeks or so, so..." he trailed off, hoping that she wouldn't see this as an accusation.

To his relief she smiled. "I've been so busy with my lessons, and I've been... been doing some tutoring for the OWLs. I heard that Gryffindor won their match against

Ravenclaw. You made some spectacular saves."

His face split into a grin, and he shrugged humbly. "The whole team played well... shame that you couldn't watch it."

He scuffed his foot, and she shifted her satchel. Around them, the students thinned out until only the crackling torches and an expectant and hungry silence kept them company. She wasn't sure what she wanted or expected. It came as a surprise to realise how much she had missed Ron and yet hadn't found it difficult to divert time and energies from him. The selfishness of it made her sag and hang her head.

Ron, on the other hand, knew exactly what he wanted: he wanted her to stop disappearing and spend time with him and Harry... mainly him. He just didn't know how to communicate it.

"Harry and Ginny are going to Hogsmeade tomorrow," he began clumsily. "Apparently, a new shop has opened up and is offering a discount on..." he said, gaining confidence, only for his brain to catch up with his mouth. "Well, okay, it's a Quidditch store, so not your sort of thing... but we could, you know, go to Madam Puddifoot's for... er... tea, or something?"

As Hermione watched him shuffle and blush an idea slithered through her mind. She'd been wondering how to secure some time to complete the wards around the Malverne residence while maintaining a good alibi, should anyone come asking her about Draco. Her first plan had been to go to Hogsmeade and then slip away from the throng of students, but now, Ron, Harry and Ginny could be her alibi. The wards would take about twenty minutes... easily enough time for them to lose themselves in the new Quidditch store, and they'd be adamant that Hermione had waited for them outside, because that's what Hermione had always done.

She forced her lips into a shy smile and nodded. "That'll actually be very nice, Ron." She felt uneasy as his shadowed face lit up, but this was an ideal opportunity for her. "What time are you going down?"

"Just after lunch," he shot back happily. "We can go down straight from the Great Hall."

"Perfect," she said brightly.

Ron straightened and grinned back. "I should go and get some rest for the match tomo..." he began before pausing to lean in awkwardly and kiss her cheek. His lips brushed her skin, and then he was stepping away, gifting her with a small wave. "See you at lunch."

Hermione watched him skip down the corridor. Her cheek tingled and felt damp, and she wiped her hand over it. Not so long ago, they'd kissed... really kissed. It had been crazy and heady, and in that time while they'd healed and got their lives back in order, they'd shared moments that had snatched her breath. But now, back at Hogwarts, and it was somehow diminished. It had been as soon as they'd climbed aboard the Hogwarts Express. She felt as though they'd reverted back to students, and her mind drifted to those first few weeks... where she'd helped them with their homework and reminded them of their timetables. While she accepted it would be nigh on impossible to develop the relationship further at Hogwarts, she hadn't expected it to regress to what it had been before their hasty and magnificent first kiss.

Feeling bitter, she hoisted her bag on her shoulder and stormed off. She'd barely reached the top of the staircase when movement caught her eye. Instinct told her it was Draco, and for some reason, she blushed. Even without spells he could make himself practically invisible. Instead of continuing, she changed direction and headed for the camouflaged door by the staircase.

She felt him at her side, and then his hand was on her elbow, guiding her into the pitch black room. When the door clicked closed, a torch flickered into life, providing enough light to see without hurting the eyes. His fingers still cupped her elbow, and her skin tingled. Disappointingly, he released her to step over to the stove.

His appearance could only be described as haggard. "What's wrong?"

Draco shook his head and shivered. "I need a warm drink first; I've been waiting for you in that corridor since half past midnight. I'm freezing."

Hermione frowned, but settled quietly on a cushion to hug her shins. While he prepared the tea, she studied his outline. Silhouetted in the starry window and his face partly illuminated by the burner, he looked quite... alluring. She inwardly groaned and dropped her forehead to her knees. Her quandary was snuffed out when he slumped next to her.

"Damned burner will take ages."

"Here," she uttered softly and pulled out her wand to cast a warming charm. She saw something flicker across his face and realised that for a fraction of second, he'd been alarmed, but as the warmth seeped through his limbs, he relaxed.

"Thank you."

"Not a problem; now what's wrong?" she said with feigned exasperation.

"Hardwicke knows."

"Knows?" she repeated incredulously. "Knows what?"

He dragged his fingers through his hair, and for the first time since they'd worked together, looked vulnerable. "I'm not sure. He shared a poem with us in Muggle Studies, and..." he paused and licked his lips. "I think he was dropping a hint that he knows I'm leaving... he may be helping me."

"Wait," Hermione warned. "You can't be sure he knows just because you shared a poem."

"Every Friday I hand him my wand and he tells me that he can't wait to waste time handing it back to me on Monday morning... Today, he didn't."

"He could just be bored with it," she argued.

"No... if you'd been there... read the poem."

"What was the poem?"

"Ozymandias."

"I don't know it," she admitted.

Not that her ignorance was a problem, as Draco rummaged in his shirt pocket and withdrew a slip of a paper with the poem written on it. While he made the tea, she read Shelley's sonnet.

The mug warmed her hands, but the tea itself settled uneasily in her stomach. The poem was beautiful, but its use in class and the ensuing talk with Draco made her scalp prickle. She half expected a teacher...or Auror...to batter down the door and drag them away.

"He can't have warned the teachers," she said soothingly, more for her own benefit. "If he had, then we'd be both in the Headmistress' office by now."

"I considered that," he replied dolefully. "I wonder if he isn't using this to his own advantage."

"What do you mean?"

Draco sighed and fell back against the cushions, resting his forearm across his eyes. "Earlier this term, someone sent a snake to kill me," he said bluntly. Ignoring her startled gasp, he continued. "I couldn't find out who'd sent it on account of... a clumsy rescuer. Hardwicke found the snake and asked me if I knew the creature. Since then, he's given me some rather excellent advice and I've been left pretty much alone."

Hermione bit her tongue and squeezed her eyes shut. She'd heard rumours that Draco had been on the receiving end of some unpleasant curses, but she'd never seen any evidence for it or thought it prudent to ask. The way he shared it with her so matter-of-factly made her shiver at what he'd had to learn to accept.

"I've had the impression for a while now that on some level he's helping me: he immolated the snake, you see... destroyed all trace of it. And he hasn't informed my father or the other teachers." He let out a short dry laugh. "If he had, you can be sure I'd never be let out of anyone's sight."

"But, Draco," she implored, "we can't afford to trust him, and he could have been covering his own tracks."

"Maybe," he demurred as he lifted up onto his elbow. "However, I doubt very much that Hardwicke is trying to kill me... drive me insane with cryptic advice, yes; kill me, no."

"All we need to do is to hold on until tomorrow afternoon," Hermione muttered.

ooXoo

Breaking with habit would arouse suspicion, so as was his tradition on every other Saturday, Lucius walked into the bustling foyer of St Mungo's and strode over to the guard on the door to the lower levels of the hospital. Usually, the guard just sneered, but today, he held out his hand and planted it firmly on Lucius' chest.

Stepping back and flashing a disgusted look at the guard, Lucius snarled, "What is the meaning of this?"

"This part of the hospital is closed to visitors," the burly guard replied.

"Why?"

"I can't say, sir," he answered, clearly enjoying being the bane of Lucius' morning.

Panic flared, making his skin crawl and his breath snatch: this was a disastrous turn of events. "When will it be open to visitors?"

"Can't say for sure, sir."

He wanted to ask after Meadows, but that would be imbecilic. Instead, he summoned a polite nod and stalked away. He had only one place to check, and that was the room they'd used on previous occasions. He knew how to get there; he just didn't relish using Muggle public transport.

Muggle London was busy and hard work at the best of times, but in the rain on a bitter, windy December day, it was sheer hell. Soggy newspapers had disintegrated into slippery pockets of mush, and plastic bags skittered along the pavement, intent on tripping unwary walkers. People, all eager to get out the rain, jostled and knocked into him, and cars drove past as if determined to hit puddles at speed to drench pedestrians. The cold, damp air bit into his lungs, drawing out painful coughs, and the incessant roar of traffic, beeping of horns and the screech of air brakes made his head throb. The bus shelter offered no peace. It seemed to entice and trap the cold wind and had been designed to trickle fat droplets of rain onto those who waited within.

He hugged himself to stop heat being leeches into the air and watched three buses go past. He wasn't sure how long he had left to wait, but from past experience, the number sixty-three came shortly before his bus. Breathing into his freezing, cupped hands, he silently joined in the litany of public transport passengers everywhere and urged his bus to hurry up.

By the time the sixty-three came, he sat alone, and it suited him. He didn't have anything against the Muggles, per se; it was just that he preferred to be alone. He found that Muggles generally felt the same way. His solitude was disturbed when an old lady with a trolley sat down opposite him. When she looked across, he nodded respectfully.

Soon afterwards, their bus chugged down the bus lane and pulled up with a puff of smoke and an ear-splitting screech. He helped the lady with her trolley and gladly stepped into the stuffy but warm bus. He paid the fare and sat down mid-way down the length of the rather busy bus behind his companion in the shelter.

He closed his eyes and let the rumble of the engine ease his discomfort and the warmth ease his chills. The ride had taken twenty minutes last time, but the traffic was so much heavier today; either way, it would take too long. There was nothing for it but to settle back and enjoy the ride.

"Terrible what happened in that 'ospital."

The words drifted to him from in front.

"Yeah!" chimed in another feminine voice. "They should 'ave them sort locked up, not put in places with us."

"Says that it were a worker, though," countered the other voice.

"Bet when they catch 'im, 'e'll say that 'e were overworked."

"Can't believe that it's 'round here," someone else added. "I mean ye 'ear o' these things 'appenin', but it's always somewhere else, innit? It's really got my Bernard worried."

Lucius cracked open an eye and lazily listened to the three chatting women.

"'E's been on the run for two days now," a plump woman declared hotly. "And they say 'e could be anywhere. Ye tell that Bernard o' yers not to fret; the bugger is probably well away by now."

"No, Doris, the papers said that 'e's most likely still in the area...somethin' about 'im not 'aving resources to go anywhere. My Malcolm works down at the local police station, and 'e' says that protocol is to watch 'is 'ouse and see if 'e comes back."

"But 'e'd be daft to do that!"

"No no! 'pparently a lot o' 'em go back 'ome."

"Well, they ain't given out an address... just an area."

"Hmm... 'e's from down near Baxter Place, from what I've 'eard."

Lucius opened his eyes and eased forward. Baxter Place was his goal. A very nasty sensation was crawling up his spine. *But it couldn't be!* he mused.

"'E can't 'ide forever," stated Doris firmly. "They been sayin' that 'e's close to seventy. 'Ow many of us at that age can keep anythin' up for long. Mark my words, ladies; this Meadows' bloke is as good as caught."

When One Door Closes

Chapter 26 of 26

It seems that Severus is the only one not ready to move on.

He couldn't settle. Either the desire to go to his sanctum bullied him or he felt dread inching along his spine. He'd been so sure when talking it over with Hermione that Hardwicke was an ally, but in the chilly room, listening to the wind whistle past the window and watching shadows creep across the walls, he wasn't so certain. One thing he knew without doubt was that at half past two tomorrow afternoon, he would be leaving Hogsmeade and the Wizarding world.

Perhaps the thought lulled him to sleep, because he woke late morning to the sun in his eyes and a throbbing headache. Groaning, he staggered out of bed and across to his desk, where he slipped into a dressing gown. Grabbing his wash bag, he padded off to the Prefect's bathroom, where he hoped a warm shower would help dissolve the hammer in his skull.

As usual, there was no one in the corridor, and he allowed himself a moment of luxury and relaxed, pretending that all was well and as it had been when he was a small boy first venturing into Hogwarts. It didn't last.

He could feel eyes on him. They'd been watching him since he'd returned to school. Of course, should you look, there'd be nothing there: house-elves prided themselves on their ability to work completely unseen. His lip curled up and he shuddered, wondering if they'd always watched the students: what secrets they knew... what they shared and who with? He was glad when the bathroom door clicked shut behind him.

In a few hours, he'd be away from all this. No more spies, no more fists in the dark, no more powerlessness, and no more snickers and pity. It would be him and his family... in a Muggle house in the middle of nowhere. As water pummelled him, he contemplated life without magic. He snickered at the thought of cooking: maybe Potions would be of help there. Muggle Studies had no doubt been a help; after all, he did now know the basics of Muggle life. While towelling dry, he wondered what he would actually miss. What hadn't he already lost and pined for? What had he already given up and forgotten?

What about defence... power?

It was true that magic had granted him the ability to protect himself, but long gone were the days where he actually could. In the Muggle world, they only had fists and... weapons; he knew how to deal with them, knew how they hurt. In the Muggle world, no one had such a gross advantage as curses. He smirked as he slipped on his trousers: he knew how to use his fists.

And power? He'd never really had any. His name had carried some gravitas within the Ministry and in high society, but it had never been *his* power... or his father's, if he thought about it. It had been in a name, wrapped around history and wealth. When history no longer mattered and the wealth dried up, the illusion evaporated. All they had left was reputation, and that was a dubious gift.

In the Muggle world, he could slough off his wizarding heritage and emerge a cleaner and better man. The thought was incredibly alluring... almost intoxicating. It kept his spirits soaring even as he walked through the cloying bog of glares and vicious whispers. Soon, all this would be a memory... and then forgotten.

oOo

Hermione pushed her mashed potato around the plate. Her appetite had fluttered weakly on the way down to lunch, only to collapse in a nauseous faint once the food appeared. Her stomach was growling and grumbling from missing breakfast, pummelling her to greater discomfort and anxiety, but the thought of food in her mouth was distasteful. Feigning some enthusiasm, she chatted with her peers as she did most mealtimes...politely, yet distantly.

Around her, people frenetically discussed the Hogsmeade trip; the first-years were bursting at the seams with excitement, and the older years were cataloguing their past purchases and creating new, extravagant shopping lists.

Part of her thrummed along with the building thrill, but another was screaming at the sheer...almost painful...intensity of it. A thousand eyes seemed to watch her, a thousand voices seemed to pull on her mind, and a thousand ears seemed to strain to hear her impending deception. She'd never felt so scrutinised and vulnerable. Her stomach roiled; this time she was working against her friends: betrayal sat heavily in her guts.

She grimaced as gravy-sodden potato slipped from her fork and hit the plate with a glutinous splash. What she was planning was right. She knew it implicitly, but she imagined Ron's face, expressing hurt and disgust. Harry and Ginny's voices coalesced in her mind into one long litany of disappointment and bitterness. But this was *right!* It still didn't stop anxiety gripping her throat when she caught sight of a flash of red hair amongst the milling throng.

"Hi, 'Mione," Ron blurted happily, before sitting and pulling the potatoes closer. "Oh wow! Sausages."

She flashed a smile, trying to ignore how he slopped the food onto his plate. "Hi, Ron."

"Harry and Ginny will be here soon," he explained around a mouthful of mash.

All she could do was nod and push her plate away.

"What's up?" Ron asked, eyeing her plate.

The question tugged on her unease, stretching it taut over her guilt until she thought she'd snap. Inhaling slowly, she fought against her panic. "I'm just not hungry."

Ron hesitated and hastily swallowed his mouthful. "Are you feeling okay?"

"Yes."

"You look a little off-colour," he pestered.

"I'm fine, thanks."

"We can always stay here," he offered gallantly, but she could see how the words weren't agreeing with his pained expression.

"No, I'll be fine. The fresh air will do me good."

He sagged with relief, and despite herself, Hermione smiled at the irony: he was actually acknowledging her feelings, and she was batting them aside for her own selfish gains.

"Well, okay then."

Harry and Ginny joined them just as Ron attacked his rice pudding, and it dawned on her how much she'd missed and how things had changed. Ron had lost some of his gangliness, his shoulders filling out with all the extra work on the broom; Harry had swapped his cheap NHS glasses for sleek, stylish ones that accentuated his eyes. Ginny had changed her hair, cutting it shorter, which left it light enough to begin to curl naturally. They were the same, yet different, and it left Hermione feeling out of synch and disconnected. Now she knew why her aunt had kept muttering about how tall she'd grown when she was a child: it wasn't stating the obvious; it was struggling to grasp the change.

"I'd almost forgotten what you looked like," Ginny joked.

Hermione bristled slightly: she had been just as busy with Quidditch as she'd been with her project. Ginny had no right to be sarcastic. A returning comment flew to her lips, but she caught sight of Harry's face and the words evaporated. Ginny had spoken for Harry. Her pique morphed into chagrin, and she shrugged her shoulders sheepishly.

"I've let myself get too wrapped in study." Across from her, Harry frowned, and her heart dropped. "I'm sorry," she added, with genuine remorse.

Ginny harrumphed and fixed Harry with an intent glare. "Too many have been busy with things," she uttered crisply. "We're all to blame."

Harry dipped his head and stabbed a piece of sausage, but Hermione caught the blush creeping across his cheeks. Obviously, Harry had been sharing some of his concerns and frustrations with Ginny and had painted a very bleak picture.

For the merest moment, Hermione felt the urge to cancel her plans, to slip back into the warmth and comfort of her friends' company and spend the day with them, just as she'd done years ago. Too much rested on her shoulders, though, and she sagged under the weight. There really was no other choice. She plucked up her goblet and took a fortifying sip to swallow her rising bitterness. It was so unfair! She shouldn't have done this as an excuse to help Draco. Another way should have been found. This was cruel.

"You sure you're okay, 'Mione?" Ron's concerned voice shattered her introspection.

"I... feel a bit queasy."

"You want to go to Pomfrey?" Ginny asked gently, reaching out and placing a warm hand on Hermione's.

Hermione leant greedily into the contact and smiled weakly. "I'll be fine. Honestly."

Ginny didn't look convinced, but she smiled and nodded. "Okay, but let us know if you want to come back."

The walk down started more as a refining of dodging skills than a gentle stroll as students piled past, and it wasn't until they reached the lake that they had enough room to walk side by side. From up head, they caught excited cries and chattering on the crisp wind, and every now and again, a bevy of students would hurtle past, intent on not missing a thing.

On the edge of Hogsmeade, they paused at the Shrieking Shack, taking in the dilapidated house. So much had happened within its walls. Ginny held onto Harry's arm as he stood and stared. Ron's hand snaked its way into Hermione's: some ties bound eternally.

Behind them, children laughed and skipped; some had never seen a magical town before, and others had emerged from a war-torn world, learning to live and love it again. Dark shadows mingled with innocent wonder. Hopefully, in time, the marvel and delight would oust the shadows. Harry tilted his head, temple to temple with Ginny, and closed his eyes, and Hermione squeezed Ron's hand. They spent a few moments reflecting upon what had been, what could have been and what had been done and lost. With a sigh, they silently saluted the shack and turned away from their memories to face their life.

Hogsmeade was madness. Students spilled out of doorways and flowed down the main street to pour into shops. Adults caught up in the current were either battling the tide or going with the flow. Hermione was slightly miffed to see that the bookshops were relatively dry, while Honeydukes and the new Quidditch shop were drowning under a sea of eager kids.

"Oh man!" Ron groaned. "We'll never get in through the door: look at them!"

Ginny studied the mass of bodies critically. "I have a Dungbomb."

Ron inhaled thoughtfully and glanced across at Harry. "Would that have been strong enough to stop us when we were that age?"

Harry laughed, sloughing off the glum that had settled around him. "Come on; I think we'll survive."

Ron grinned and stepped forward, only to pull up short and turn, red-faced, to Hermione, who had folded her arms and had arched an eyebrow.

"Er... sorry, 'Mione," he mumbled.

"Ronald Weasley," she scolded, flashing a wink at Ginny. "I'll meet you in the Three Broomsticks in half an hour."

His forehead creased before his mouth split into a wide grin. "You're sure?"

Yes," she replied softly. "I never could get used to a broom...dragons are more my style."

Ron and Harry looked at each other and then burst out laughing, their minds supplying an image of Hermione leaping onto the Gringott's dragon. "Okay, 'Mione; save us a table, yeah?"

She watched them battle though the heaving tide, using elbows and their status to good effect. Soon, she lost sight of them, and the feeling of camaraderie that had been settling itself got the jitters and fled. Feeling abandoned, she turned on her heel and sought out the sanctuary of the bookshop.

The bell tinkled merrily above the door as she strode in. A wizened man glanced up and studied her, wondering whether she was a customer or a nuisance. Hermione smiled and walked over. Time to leave a lasting impression for her alibi.

"Hello, I'm after a book for a friend of mine," she said conspiratorially. "I understand that it's quite... unusual."

The shopkeeper's eyes assessed her while his lips writhed as though tasting various possible responses. "Go on," he said, indicating through tone of voice that his offer to listen did not imply a desire a help.

"It's called *The Vagaries of Arithmancy*."

The man frowned and rubbed his chin. "We have one copy; oddly, the Muggles have more of 'em... lap the stuff up, do Muggles. You'll find it over in the far aisle, between Myths and Muggle Mysteries. "

She smiled politely and padded over to the required aisle. She felt his eyes on her before the bookshelf blocked the view. Pulling out her wand, she aimed it at herself and whispered a charm. Slowly, a figure appeared in the air: a perfect replica of Hermione. It was an illusion and would copy her movements in a repeated cycle.

Making sure that she was still alone, Hermione reached out and ran her finger over the books; her copy did the same. Satisfied that a cursory glance would convince anyone that she was still perusing the horoscope section, she released the charm and watched as 'she' carried on looking and touching the books.

Shops had anti-Disapparation charms...to prevent shoplifting...so she was left with casting a Disillusionment Charm and distracting the shopkeeper. Luckily for her, a group of students walked in holding chocolate wrappers. The shopkeeper reacted with a vigour that would have put Madam Pince to shame. As the children protested, waving their sticky fingers in the air, she slipped out onto the street and Disapparated.

oOo

Narcissa stood in the small room. Her eyes drifted lazily over the rotten floorboards, the perishing plaster, the torn fabric on the chairs and the general gloom and despair that decorated the shack. When they'd first stepped inside, she'd mentally catalogued each fault and flaw, accepting each one as a lash across her skin. It had been excruciating. There was the mouse-hole that had made her skin crawl; there was the crumbling wooden floorboard that had made her shove all the furniture to another corner; there was the damp plaster that she was convinced had given Draco his nasty cough; and there were the chairs that she'd had to beat the bugs out of. But, and she laughed, she'd gotten used to it.

There wasn't a mouse; a neighbour's cat had dealt with. The floorboard had creaked and groaned, but it had never moved beyond a gentle dip when a foot rested upon it. The plaster may have caused the cough, but they'd gotten used to the smell and Draco had gone to Hogwarts. The chairs probably still had bugs scuttling through the weave, but after cleaning and washing clothes all day, she didn't care when her weary bones wanted nothing more than to settle down.

She tugged her shawl tighter. Lucius' extravagance meant that she'd not been able to buy fuel; not that it mattered, as they'd crept away to the Room of Requirement as often as was not suspicious. She'd forgotten how bitterly cold the house could get. The bailiff was due soon for the rent, and she had to keep up appearances and go beg for washing for the few coins it would garner.

Today, she could actually wish guilt-free not to get any laundry. Today, it wouldn't matter if another woman was quicker with her elbows, bustling to the front to get the sacks. Today, she wouldn't have to sink her arms into the large wooden tubs and scrub until her back ached and her hands cramped. At the thought she flexed her fingers. The heat and lye were ruining her hands. It wasn't vanity...she'd long since got past that...it was pain. Her skin was rough and red and split across her knuckles. They constantly itched and throbbed. Today, she could stand back; her toes wouldn't be trampled, and she wouldn't have to fight. She smiled and inhaled deeply.

A knock at the door brought her out of her dream. She walked over and opened it. The bailiff smiled lewdly, as he always did when she was on her own.

"Ye got yer rent, Mrs Malfoy?"

She stiffened and sneered at him. "I've never defaulted; even when you raised it without notice."

His smile slipped. "Ye will," he said darkly, dragging his gaze over her frame. "The likes of ye always do."

Beneath her shawl, she shivered. He knew what he meant by the 'likes of ye'. Despite her status and trial, she'd received some kindnesses from her neighbours. Underneath, they were all women, and in the face of certain trials, they banded together. She'd been told what happened when you couldn't pay the rent. Those slightly higher up on the food chain took other sorts of payment. She'd haughtily assured them that she wouldn't miss a collection, but one of them had smiled sadly and caught her hair between their fingers, twisting it around her work-roughened fingers.

"You don't get it, love," she'd whispered softly. "You're pretty. They put the rent up, make surprise collections... even rob you. Anything so that you stand there with no money and no option."

Narcissa still gagged at the memory.

"Ye got it, then?"

She pulled out her purse, and she was gratified to see the smallest flicker of annoyance cross his features. When she'd finished, he grunted and span on his heel, and Narcissa was grateful to slam the door on his retreating back. That was the last time she'd see his pock-marked, greasy, sneering face. The relief was almost a physical pleasure, snatching her breath and making her knees go weak. No more! It was almost over.

The sobs came. They started as small whimpers, then they grew in strength until they became keening wails. Finally, she was bent double, using a chair for support, as tears poured down her face and her breath came in deep, desperate gulps.

She purged herself, vile words and bitter tears. Exhausted, she sank into the chair and curled up. However, time wasn't a luxury she owned. Soon, she'd have to go and pretend that today was just like the thousand Saturdays before it. Regaining control, she stood and staggered into the bathroom. The faucet screeched under her hand and then water chugged out. Cupping the freezing water, she splashed her slick face. The cold snatched her breath, but it calmed her. She summoned the ice and the determination that had given her the power to stand before a Dark Lord. For a few more hours, she had to be the wretched Narcissa Malfoy.

oOo

It was quite amazing! Despite Meadows' face being plastered on the local news and his description spewing from every radio, she was strolling along the streets as though she were invisible. How apathetic and self-absorbed these Muggles were! Police cars drove past, and all they did to bother her was throw up dirty puddles. People strode past her, giving her nothing but nudges and bumps and disgusted glances. And to think that Wizards had spent decades, centuries, creating charms to keep the Muggles oblivious! What a waste of time and energy.

But the anonymity was granting her something she'd thought impossible to have: choice. So close to St Mungo's, she could see the witches and wizards walking past, their minds focused on their business rather than their surroundings. It gave her the opportunity to select a more suitable host.

A fine drizzle tickled her skin, and she could feel the cold nibbling away at her fingers and toes. She'd have to pick someone soon. If only her...his...eyes were better. Damn old age! Too close and they blurred into obscure blobs of colour; too far and they seemed to smudge into the background. Grumbling under her breath, she continued to scan for that someone special in the small window of visibility.

Stomach growling and patience wearing thin, she caught sight of a likely candidate. It was one of the nurses that she'd seen following her sweet Healer around. Obviously his death had affected her: frame bowed under the weight of grief, tears about to fall for all the 'what ifs' and her lips tight, holding back all the words she'd never uttered. Oh well! Soon, it wouldn't matter at all for her. It would all be a distant memory.

Her joints protested, but she straightened in a series of cracks and groans. It was so easy to enter into the stream of people babbling along and sidle through to reach her. It was even easier to slip into her confused and numb mind. They stood face-to-face for the merest moment; long enough for the fingers to be transferred and Bella to leave her dry and wasted husk and slip into the warm and passionate nurse.

She straightened her spine...Gods that felt good!...span on her heel and strutted away. Behind her she caught the sound of a meaty thud and the staccato of heels against pavement as pedestrians bypassed a sudden, immovable obstacle. Then came the gasps and the frustrated mutterings of busy people suddenly having to deal with something. By the time the ambulance arrived, she'd be in St Mungo's. By the time the Aurors got involved, she'd be... well anywhere!

oOo

Now this is strange! he thought as he emerged from the cave. The sky was blue and endless; nothing blemished it. In the distance, the horizon was tinged copper where a sun was either saying goodbye or hello. Over the rolling hills, a gentle warm breeze carried the smell of lavender and pine. The stream was now a full-bodied river where dragonflies and kingfishers darted, and the ravens played in the boughs of trees heavy with fruit.

"Slytherin!" he yelled excitedly as he backed into the cool darkness. "Come look at this."

He could see Snape lying in a tight ball on the floor, but despite his prodding and tugging, the man wouldn't wake. It didn't come as a complete surprise; he'd been thinking while Snape had brooded. With a snort, he stood and left Snape to his peace and quiet... he did need it, after all.

Oh, the warmth was glorious, and the grass was lush and cool beneath his fingers. With a laugh, he skipped over to the babbling river, plonking himself down on the soft earth. He tugged off his boots and socks and plunged his feet into the deliciously cool water. After running around in shoes too small for him, he'd often wished he could have done this near the old playground, but the canal had been very uninviting. With a contented murmur, he collapsed back, wiggling his toes and inhaling deeply. Heaven!

The sounds of wings attracted his attention, and he cracked open an eye. Several ravens had landed next to him, curious.

"Hi," he uttered casually. "You can call me Sev."

Author's Notes: Thanks for your patience. I'm sorry to say that due to some pesky issues with my hands, the updates for this (and other stories) will be very slow. I can only apologise and hope that you can bear with me. Thanks to you all for reading... I feel very blessed.