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The Good Friend

By Mottsnave



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The Good Friend ✨ **By Mottsnave**

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Art by Mottsnave

THE GOOD FRIEND

by Mottsnave

THE VISIT

I'm not asking on behalf of the Ministry. I'm not here as Minister. I'm here as a private individual, as a friend."

I looked down at the cups in the sink and tried to quash the urge to smash them. Of course, he wasn't mentioning the fact that he had blatantly used his

Chapter 1 of **THE GOOD FRIEND**
BY MOTTSSNAVE

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position as Minister to force me to meet with him in *my* home. If he weren't Minister, he wouldn't even know that I was alive. It was unbearable that he should corner me in my *private* home, the one place where I was safe.

I threw down the teaspoon I had been washing and headed out the back door. I'd had enough.

It was dry for a change, though the breeze was knocking drops of last-night's rain off the tree branches. It was coming in from the west; I could smell the ocean on it.

Shacklebolt followed me out into the garden, but at least I had more space here. I didn't feel cornered anymore.

"You've got an orchard?"

Did he think he could play me around by changing the subject?

"If you call eight trees an orchard."

"What are they?"

"Apple and pear."

"That's... nice."

"It wasn't my doing. It was here when I found the place." I could feel my resentment growing again. None of it was any of his business.

I kicked my way through the dead stalks of last-year's thorn-apple and made my way down the yard. It was getting ridiculous; I really had to talk to the neighbors about getting their goats over to eat the grass down. Somehow it kept slipping my mind.

The trees had a haze of new growth on the ends of the branches. Shacklebolt fell back as I descended the slope past the greenhouse. He was trying not to crowd me, giving me space. The thought of him appeasing and manipulating me irritated me almost as much as his prying questions. I noticed with satisfaction that he flinched a bit at the small tangle of garter snakes that always sunned themselves on the flags in front of the greenhouse.

"They're perfectly harmless," I sneered at him.

He looked at me blandly, without offense. "Of course."

Was that his tack then? Not to take offense at anything I said and be doggedly agreeable? Sod him.

I turned and picked my way half down the bank to the stream

that marked my property boundary. There was my log, the one dry place to sit. I sat. If Shackbolt was going to follow me about, he could stand or shift for himself. He ducked under the ash branches and joined me on the bank, looking down at the water.

I wasn't going to look at him again. I watched the shifting light on the stream. It usually calmed me, but now it all felt like a mistake. Why the hell had I led him down to this place? It was bad enough that he knew about one of my refuges.

I tried to pinpoint what was eating at me with this request. Shackbolt had always been one of the few acceptable members of the Order in my eyes. None of Moody's mutterings about my 'loyalties.' None of the reckless and symbolic acts of resistance that some of the others favored. He always carefully weighed the strategic benefits and costs of any action proposed. I held a reserved judgment of him until the day that I *happened* to overhear him in conversation with Arthur Weasley calling Moody a 'raging cunt.' That was... *satisfying*.

But now he was coming to me, going far out of his way, to propose just the sort of empty symbolic gesture he had never approved before. There must be a motive behind it.

"We have to thank you, you know. The Order. Or at least they would if they knew you were alive. That's quite a gift you gave us, having Emmeline Vance come back to us, alive and well. It's the kind of thing that gives you a little hope that something positive could come out of such a bloody awful war."

I didn't look up. It didn't feel like much of a positive at the moment. I had known that Amy, or rather Emmeline, was going to come forward, change her name back to Vance, and announce her survival. She had warned me that if it were publicized, my name would necessarily be mentioned as the agent of her escape during the war. She had also done her best, in the story I had read in the VANCOUVER SCRYER, to gloss over the details of her escape and the fate of the woman I had found to take her place. Still, even those vague allusions, "at great risk Snape managed to hide me and produce a substitute body," had made me drop the paper back onto

the rack at the library and hurry away, sweating. The stories and the memories that came with them hadn't helped my dreams at all. And here was Kingsley Shackbolt, dredging everything up again, pushing onto my property, into my *home* — *no!*

I focused on the stream and tried to distinguish the shapes of the rocks below the water, obscured by reflections.

"She's one of the reasons I'm here. She came to me for help, and now I'm coming to you. I'm not here to bother you or to drive you out of your home. What she's trying to do is important. It's important to all of us if we're going to move ahead and rebuild after the war. Merlin knows, I'm trying. It's a bloody hard road."

He paused and shifted. A fat rough-skinned newt was plodding towards his feet. I picked it up by its middle and turned it over in my hands.

"Another dangerous beast?" he joked.

I flipped the newt onto its back to display the bright-orange belly. "Yes. Extremely toxic, actually. Deadly to anything except those garter snakes. It's quite the mystery, how they can withstand the poison." I set the newt down on the bank and it went off into the reeds in a huffy waddle.

"You're not going to use it in a potion?"

"It's better to wait until after the breeding season to harvest. More poison for everyone."

He chuckled. "You have a good place here. It suits you. I would be happy to leave you in peace if I could."

"Ah yes, you're *compelled* to push appointments on me and come in here and ask me for favors."

"*You* know where the bodies are." His comment sank like a stone. "We can repair the buildings and build monuments and hold trials and pass legal reforms, but we can't do anything for the mourners, not really. This is one thing I can do. It won't fix anything, but it's one more tiny step towards real peace. We need to take it. We need your help."

I could feel his gaze on me. I wasn't about to look up. I skimmed a pebble at the water. It skipped off the surface and thunked into the mud of the opposite bank.

"I haven't spread your name to anyone. If you want to stay 'dead,' so be it. That's your decision. There's no reason to reveal your identity. It can all be done completely anonymously and safely."

Did he think that was it? "You think you can come in here, into my home, and ask me this as if it didn't cost me anything?" I was breathing hard. I might have gotten up and walked out if there was any 'out' left to walk.

"All right. I'm not trying to say it would be easy for you."

"Fine. What's your proposal?"

"Proposal?"

"What will you pay me?"

"Goddamn it, Snape! I'm not asking this for myself. There are families who don't know where their loved ones are; there are missing people –"

"Are they asking? Are they standing on my property, telling me what to do? They're not here. You are."

"Oh, for god's sake."

One always had to spell things out for Gryffindors. "You're asking me a favor. A favor that will cost me. What do I get in return?"

"I suppose 'the satisfaction of helping those in need' would be too much to ask."

"Too much? Not enough, not nearly enough. Try again."

He stared at me. "Let's not play a bloody guessing game. You obviously have something in mind. So, since you always have a price, let's hear it. How do I buy you?"

I threw another rock at the water. It hit the surface with a splash. The Minister was asking me my price; the sensation was at once heady and sickening. I would have to be careful.

After all, what I really wanted I couldn't ask for. And at any rate, he had told me last month that he couldn't release me from my unbreakable vow. I wasn't sure what good it would do me, even if he could. My short time in the Prince George Auror Station had brought back all the decades-old crawling memories of my own Ministry interrogation. Would the ability to speak about it help me at all or merely make them clearer? Perhaps it would be nothing more than a useless symbolic gesture. Better to simply work at

burying them again. I had done it for years, and it had served me well. For the most part.

There was a noise across the stream. Voices from beyond the strip of trees above the bank. My neighbors. We both looked up.

"Perhaps we can discuss this inside?" Shacklebolt said.

I sighed and stood. Perhaps a change of venue would help clear the air after all. I took my time coming up from the bank.

The breeze was turning cold now and drawing in dark clouds above. It would be raining by nightfall.

When we arrived back in the kitchen I returned to the washing-up. I had felt crowded and cornered before at being approached in my own house, but I had to see the other side to it. I was on my own ground after all, and he wanted something from me. I could make that count for something. When I was done I leaned against the counter and wiped my hands on the dishtowel. Shacklebolt sat at the table observing me. I had the feeling he was playing along again, trying to manage or appease me. Maybe I did need managing.

"You've been thinking about your payment. Well, let's have it then. What do you want?"

Perhaps it was my thoughts about my Ministry interrogation that were leading me to my old debts. "Why is Lucius Malfoy sentenced to Azkaban?"

"Largely because the Wizengamot gave him that sentence."

I stared at him.

"I'm not being flippant. I may have some influence on individual Wizengamot members, yes, but I can't and I won't dictate their decisions. If you're asking me to spring him as payment, that's not the sort of favor I'm capable of. The simple fact is that he pled guilty to collaboration with Voldemort's reign, under coercion."

"Under coercion."

"It was taken as a mitigating factor and his sentence is less than some others –"

"And longer than some others."

"That too. The Wizengamot determined that while he ended under coercion, he did not begin that way."

“And the other mitigating factors? His cooperation?”

Shacklebolt winced. “His advocate approached me with his claim of aiding the Order by cooperating with you. His *claim*. There was conveniently, no proof, and you were ‘dead’ at the time. I can’t say I believed him. It was too pat. The advocate didn’t introduce it at the trial. She must have known it would be ripped to shreds with nothing to back it. If she brought it up and failed, well, it would have been a bit of a liability for Mr. Malfoy among the other residents of Azkaban.”

God, I had sunk him.

“And now are you telling me it’s true?” he went on.

“Are you telling me there’s no proof?”

“Of course not; he said you and Albus arranged it in secret. He was to confirm information about Voldemort’s plans to you and nothing else.”

“There was a contract. Albus made a contract to protect him after the war.”

“Well, where is it?”

I stood there gripping the counter behind me. I didn’t want to admit that I didn’t know. It was a basic safety precaution to keep all the dominoes from toppling. If I had fallen before the Dark Lord, Albus would have needed Lucius more than ever. He was the only one who knew the location of the contract. Only... at the end of the war, his portrait was to pass all information to the Order. As a portrait, he couldn’t do much, but talk he certainly could, as I knew all too well. He should have given the contract location to the Order straight away, along with all the information I had given him. He was certainly adept at dumping out loads of information after a crisis was over. Was he deliberately withholding it for some reason? I didn’t like the thought; whenever I didn’t know his plans, it meant trouble.

Shacklebolt was going on. “He claimed that there was, but again, he couldn’t produce it or even tell us where it was. I didn’t believe him. Is that what you want as a favor? I *might* be able to arrange a sentencing hearing for him if we could present new evidence. A physical contract would help, but even without that, what about your memories? We might be able to arrange something. I could accidentally ‘discover’ an extracted memory that you left behind for the Order in

some secret location, for example.”

I sighed. It would be impossible to show the memory to outsiders and have them understand. No one who hadn’t served the Dark Lord would ever understand; it would probably bury Lucius even further. I had a hard enough time to make Albus understand.

It had been a hard time for me on many fronts. My position with the Dark Lord had been very shaky after his second rise. My reception at the graveyard... I still didn’t like to think about it. I knew that I couldn’t trust any information *He* gave me. It was possible, even likely for him to test me by feeding me false information and seeing if it would leak to the Order. I was of no use at all if I couldn’t deliver information, and it was vitally important that I had some method of verifying my information. I chose Lucius.

I knew that I would have to force Lucius to cooperate. The stakes were far too high for him to agree otherwise. He couldn’t in good conscience put his family at risk of the Dark Lord’s wrath unless I gave him absolutely no choice and solid assurance of his safety. No choice, in that Albus bound him to a chair while I explained exactly how I would set him up as a traitor to the Dark Lord if he refused to join us. Solid assurance in the form of a contract between Albus and Lucius to be presented after the Dark Lord’s fall and bring the Malfoy family intact through the aftermath of the war. He would have signed anything to keep Draco from the Kiss.

I knew that all the coercion was merely the leverage by which Lucius could free himself from the Dark Lord, but Albus couldn’t quite understand the *no choice* was the only way he could take that step. Of course the Wizengamot wouldn’t understand it either. If they saw my memory, well, the sight of Lucius Malfoy spitting at me from his captivity and calling me a ‘stupid little hybrid’ prob-



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ably wouldn't aid his cause.

I couldn't even dredge up a large supply of memories of his cooperation with me. His own favor with the Dark Lord ended too quickly after the battle at the Ministry, just as my own rose with Emmeline's capture. His help with that matter... well, it held its own complications of criminal liability. His greatest service to me was probably simply in my knowledge that he was there and my information was accurate. If I appeared before the Dark Lord in that delicate time just that degree more confident and assured, could it have been the difference between the Dark Lord growing to trust me or trying to trap me? Of course it was impossible to know, and it would be ridiculous to try to convince the Wizengamot without proof.

I shook my head at Shackbolt. *Impossible.*

"Well, no contract and no memories. You could appear before the Wizengamot and testify."

I stared at him.

"I would be happy to arrange a special session if I could count on your help."

"You're sodding loony."

"No," he said calmly. "If you're worried about security, we'll arrange security. And I've had plenty of practice fending off reporters."

"You think I'm going to walk into a Ministry hearing room, surrounded by Aurors and Ministry officials, and testify?"

"I would hope that you would consider it."

"Sod off. I'm not going to walk into a Ministry trap."

He sighed. "We've been through this already, but fine, let's go over it again. I've seen your record. I understand why you would distrust the Ministry. I've already explained that I'm not here as Minister and I'm not here to coerce you. I'm here as a private individual because I feel that I *personally* owe you. I'm here as a private individual to ask you a personal favor because I believe you are the only one who can help. I expect that you have a certain resistance to trusting me because of your experiences with the Ministry, and I'll happily disregard any rubbish you spew about the Ministry on that basis. Fine. But if you can't look past the office and the title

and see the man in front of you, then we have a problem. In all my dealings with you, I have never betrayed you, I have never broken a promise to you, and I have never done anything to harm you. I have helped you and I want to continue to help you. Even when you talk rubbish at me, I'll give you some allowance because you've been to hell and back, and anyone who's been through that is bound to say some rubbish once in a while. I'll forget all the rubbish because of what I owe you and what you've done, but if you keep treating me as your enemy, someday I'll start remembering. Now, I would appreciate it if we could just take it as read that I'm not plotting to have you tossed into an oubliette somewhere!"

I felt the blood drain from my face at the last words.

"Dammit, Snape, I didn't come here to dress you down in your own kitchen. Is there any more tea?"

It was a peace offering of sorts. "No, no more bloody tea." I grudgingly took a seat at the table.

"Well then, let's take a look at this stupid situation. No contract."

"No."

"No memories."

"No."

"Is there anything I can do, in my power, to make you feel secure about testifying?"

"Not bloody likely."

"Not *likely*?"

"I can't," I admitted.

"It looks like we're stuck on that. And even with everything in place, if I arranged a new hearing based on the discovery of new evidence, that's not a guarantee of anything. I won't say that I've been successful in all of my reforms so far, but I have managed to separate the Wizengamot from the office of Minister at least. I can feel them out ahead of time and discuss it with them, but that's as far as my influence goes.

"Now, is there anything else I can do so that you would feel secure enough to come back and show us where the bodies are?"

"I can't."

He was silent for a moment. "You may not believe me, but if you had given me that answer from the beginning, I would have taken it." He rose. "Well, it's time for me to leave you in peace. You know how to contact me if you need anything."

I reset the door wards and alerts after he left. All my security back in place, I turned and surveyed my room. Everything was all in order again, undisturbed except for the small black box he had left behind, my posthumous Order of Merlin first class.

RUMOR

Three in the morning in the bowels of the Ministry, the worst place to be. They had me in *that* chair.

"If you don't help us, if you won't speak..." Longbottom looked over at Moody, who nodded. He went on, reasonably,

"what's the point? If you're no use to us, we might as well forget about you. I have a terrible memory." The door clicked behind him with awful finality. I twisted against the bindings. Of course it was useless. There was nothing I could do to keep from falling into the pit where they were all forgotten. There were so many of them. I kept slipping in the dark as I struggled to climb them, all the bodies. The pile kept shifting. An Auror, petrified, looking at me, slid away under my hands. I hauled myself up and a young woman in a track suit tumbled sideways. *He* was sitting in the space she left behind, white face bright in the darkness.

"Ah, Severus, my dear friend. I knew you would come back to me."

I jerked awake, the afterimage of his white face floating before my eyes. I sat up in bed, grinding the palms of my hands into my eye sockets until the aching explosions of color drove away his face. Damn Shackbolt and his favors! I could handle the Ministry

Chapter 2 of **THE GOOD FRIEND**
BY MOTTSSNAVE

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dreams or the Dark Lord dreams, but both at once was a bit much. It had been almost a month since his visit, and I was still getting them.

No use sitting around in the dark where the images could find me. I pulled on my dressing gown and made myself tea in the kitchen. Three in the morning. It probably wasn't worthwhile trying to sleep again. Well, my variant was only a few hours of work away from being sent in to the lab for testing. Probably another dead-end, but still... I had to keep trying.

I'd had some triumphs with the variants, after all. One was the successful delay process I developed by which a potion could be taken and lie dormant until it was triggered by an illness or transformation. A breakthrough in itself, as Dick, the head of the lab, had told me. And it did net us the Paracelsus Prize in potions. But a mechanism by which I could engineer a repeating potion eluded me. I would develop potential variants and send them in for testing knowing that they would fail again. And I knew why. I was coming up against the hard edge of Frazier's second principle of dark magic: all energy must have a source.* And every potion ever made had a source, certainly.

A SHORT TECHNICAL DISCUSSION OF MAGICAL ALIGNMENT FOLLOWS:

Dark Magic is not a subjective value judgment. Dark Magic is a technical designation for any magic spell or process that meets two or more of Frazier's three principles. The first: the part may affect the whole, and the whole the part. (With the corollary: a symbol may stand for an object, and an object for a symbol.) The second principle: all energy must have a source, and finally the third principle: the caster may affect the spell, as well as the spell the caster.

All potions abide by the second principle, since the material ingredients and heat applied to the potion are the source of energy. Some potions, such as Polyjuice, which abide by the first principle as well (the hair is the part which stands for the whole) are classified as Dark.

Spells which require a certain intent, mood, or determination on the part of the caster (such as the three Unforgivables) abide by the third principle. The Unforgivables also abide by the second principle, in that their energy comes from the body of their target, so they are also Dark spells.

This is all in contrast to the many light spells, such as *lumos*, which seemingly could be cast in your sleep as long as you got the words and wand movement right. Light spells don't take any special intent or use up energy. No one seems to get tired from casting light spells.

On the other hand, Dark spells are much harder to block or counteract, since they have their own energy and intent behind them. A simple finite won't cut it. They are also more flexible, since the mood or intent of the caster can change the outcome of the spell.

The physical mass and properties of the ingredients, the heat of the brewing, and the reactions between created the energy... for a single iteration. And here I was trying to draw more energy out of nothing, to twist the very patterns of the world onto a new course. *Ridiculous.*

So I and the lab had concentrated on developing the delay process in the context of existing potions. Wolfsbane first, then Blood Replenisher, Pepper-up, and other healing potions. The licensing fees from the variants were all well and good, and the Paracelsus was highly satisfying, but I was frustrated by my inability to move *forward*. The ability to take a potion once and then depend on its effects at every illness or transformation would be hugely significant. I supposed I ought to give it up as a bad job, but I had always been one to chase after lost causes.

By ten I had my vials of doomed variants double-packed and my charts organized and topped with a cover letter to Dick. Would he be able to make sense of my charts? No matter, if the research assistants couldn't replicate it, he'd contact me for instructions. I headed into the city to post it to the lab in Brazil.

It was brighter on the mainland than out on the island; the Pacific clouds were separated by the skyscrapers and a generous broad swath of sunlight glinted off windows and drew steam off the wet pavement. After I dropped off my package at the long-distance albatross post, I bought a copy of the SEATTLE DIVINER at a newsstand in the Undercity, then apparated back to the spot just outside my wards, below the greenhouse. Perhaps I would be able to go back to sleep now. I turned on the wireless in the kitchen to keep myself awake while I made breakfast. Some mindless talk show, perfect. There were only a couple of wizarding broadcast stations in the Seattle area and they were generally filled with drivel.

"Occult, in the original meaning –"

"Of the word."

"Of the *technical* term, just means 'hidden,' as in 'hidden or secret knowledge.'"

"Yes."

"That's why these stories crop up and catch on. It's so incredibly

appealing –"

"Like knowing a secret."

Why did Americans have a horror of allowing anyone to finish a sentence?

"Exactly. You think you've discovered this hidden knowledge kept secret from the rest of the world. So of course you –"

"Have to let everybody know."

"Yes. And it's also part of why these stories attach to this figure, who's almost synonymous with secrets and hidden identities –"

"Yes, we are always fascinated with a character like that, even if the rumors are ridiculous."

"Well, it's almost beside the point whether it's true or not. It has exactly the features that attract our imagination. And when there's this element of doubt –"

"The body which was never recovered –"

"And that the story is supposedly coming from a position of authority, a Canadian Auror station, so we overlook the weaknesses in the story; the anonymous tip that can't be verified."

Wait, what?

"And the coincidence of this story coming out on the heels of the Vance revelation, and almost at the third anniversary of the end of the war –"

My stomach dropped. They *couldn't*, it wasn't possible. I felt like I was trapped in my nightmare of the previous night.

"You ignore all this because it doesn't fit with what you want to believe, however unlikely."

"Well," said the host, "I'm afraid we're out of time, but I hope you can join us next week when we find Jimmy Hoffa."

The guest laughed. It wasn't sodding funny!

"We've been talking to Doug Noguchi, professor of media and communications at Undercity University. Thank you for joining us."

"My pleasure, thank you for having me."

"On the second half of today's show I'll be talking to Vera Starcevic about the Seattle City Council's hearings on increasing flying restrictions in urban areas in light of the fatal streetcar line

accident last fall. I'm sure that many of you will want to weigh in on this issue and our lines are open – ”

No! Who cared about the Seattle City Council, bunch of useless nitwits, I needed to hear about the 'anonymous tip'! I wanted to shake the wireless and shout at it to go back, but of course it was useless. It was impossible! But the references to Vance, the war, Canadian Aurors and a missing body, it all added up to me. There had to be some way to check. I attacked my copy of the SEATTLE DIVINER. It was a small story on the second page of the local section: **SEVERUS SNAPE ALIVE? RUMORS SPREAD ACROSS BC.**

As more details emerge in the shocking house elf trafficking case, an unusual rumor has begun to circulate that the anonymous tip that alerted the Prince George Aurors was none other than Severus Snape, the presumed dead hero of England's recent war. The rumor cites 'an Auror with inside knowledge of the case,' though the Prince George Auror Station has denied all knowledge. Lack of proof has done little to stop the story's spread; it has been reported in —

Dear lord, it was worse than I thought. It was *spreading*.

But how could someone at the Prince George Auror Station reveal my name? Shackbolt had assured me that he had secret-kept my name and he was the only keeper. That son of a bitch, he had forced me into a situation where I had to trust him, and then he betrayed me! He had assured me again and again that he wouldn't coerce me, and now this. I could only imagine that it was a warning, that he would reveal my alias and location if I didn't cooperate with his request. Sod him, he couldn't threaten me. I pulled out the Protean note that he had given me to contact him.

'How dare you,' I scrawled across it.

His answer came only a minute later; he must have been waiting for my response to his handiwork: *'if you're at home, stay there, will portkey to you, one hour.'*

And now he wanted to dictate my movements? As insufferable as it was, I had to meet him, and I didn't want to leave the house, not now.

The pot I had put on to cook an egg was spitting and boiling over. I dumped it in the sink; I couldn't stomach breakfast now. I

could barely sit still. *Ruined.*

The changes I had made in my appearance over the past few years may have been superficial, but combined with my very distinctive appearance before, my comparative isolation, and my supposed death, I considered them sufficient to keep me hidden. My hair was cropped short and dyed brown, and I wore muggle clothing, as so many American wizards did. I was aided by the care I had taken over the years to never be photographed. I knew that there were a very few old ones which had been taken prior to the war. They weren't of very good quality, but they had been reproduced after my supposed death. And now if someone looked at me with an idea of my survival in mind...

The phone rang in my office off the kitchen. Shackbolt. I made sure I wasn't carrying any active spells and stepped across the salt wards to the one room where muggle technology would work. The phone was a concession to the lack of any floo network on the west coast, much less any international connections. I was heartily regretting it now.

"What?"

"Ah, Cyril?" Dick said tentatively.

I made an effort to get my tone back under control. "Yes, Dick?"

"Well, Grossman and I were just discussing the RAs' schedule for the next two weeks, so I thought I'd check in and see if you have anything for them to work on."

"I just sent you some variants for testing. There's a protocol enclosed. They told me there's a tailwind, so it should be at the lab in four days."

"Good, good! And, ah, how are you, Cyril?"

"Fine."

"Good," he said dubiously. "Everything's going well, then?"

"Fine, I'm fine, everything's *fine*."

"Glad to hear it. Say, why don't you stop by for a few days and get us started on your variant?"

"Perhaps because I don't care to be questioned at the moment?"

He laughed. "All right, I won't badger you. Well, whatever it is, take care of it. Just stay in touch, yes?"

"I have to go."

"Take care, Cyril."

I rang off. If there was any way at all to 'take care of' a spreading rumor, I wouldn't have such a problem.

Shacklebolt arrived almost half an hour late. Finally. I stopped pacing and wrenched open the front door. He was standing with his arms slightly out to his sides, showing me that he wasn't armed.

What did that matter? The damage was done, wasn't it?

"How dare you?"

"It wasn't me."

"Who the hell else? You're the bloody secret keeper!"

"Are we going to talk about this out here?"

I gripped the doorknob. I didn't want him in my house again, but I wanted the chance of someone overhearing still less. I dropped the wards and stood back from the door.

"Thank you," he said evenly.

I didn't look at him, but set myself to resetting the wards. When I turned he was looking down at the small black box that held the medal, still in the center of the side table where he had left it. He turned to me.

"It's a logical thought, but if you look at it carefully, you'll see I'm not the only possibility."

"You're the one who insisted on giving my name to the inspector and the commissioner –"

"Who wouldn't have released you otherwise."

"You betrayed me!"

"No, I did not! I have never released that secret and I have never broken a promise to you. And don't be so dramatic."

"They know I'm alive! It's in the papers!"

"Let me see."

He followed me into the kitchen and waded across the scattered pages to the article in question.

"Snape, they are clearly treating it as an unverified rumor –"

"That's spreading. You knew before I wrote," I declared.

He sighed. "You know how the *Prophet* is; nobody believes what

they print."

Oh, so it was in the PROPHEET now too?

"As much as they believe you?" I asked.

"Look at me; I did not spread this rumor. I have no reason to want to hurt you!"

"Leverage."

"What?"

"You could have started the rumor as a warning of what you could do if I don't cooperate with you."

He stared at me. "Oh my god." He sat without invitation at the kitchen table. "Is that how your mind works?" He gave a grim smile. "I shouldn't be surprised; I suppose that's something Crouch might have done. Fine, let's assume the worst, as always. If I was really spreading rumors as a warning to cooperate, then why the hell would I deny it? Shouldn't I want the warning to be as clear as possible?"

I didn't answer, but I took a seat at the table.

"Why don't we look at another possibility? Now, the inspector and the commissioner can't reveal your name, but there were several other people who saw you in Prince George. If I recall correctly, you weren't exactly going out of your way to befriend them. In fact, I think I had to give you a warning about making enemies. If one of the others noticed a resemblance and decided to do some digging –"

"Sergeant Preston, that bastard."

"There's absolutely no proof it was him, and there never will be. If he ever stepped forward or did anything to confirm the rumor, it would cost him his job, so it'll stay an unfounded rumor. I think you're overestimating the impact some rumor will have on your life. Do you know how well you've done for yourself? You're alive, well, and safe. You're the 1999 Paracelsus prize winner in Potions, so you've made a tidy sum. Yes, I know about 'Dr. Cyril Ramson,' it was pretty clear once we intercepted that letter of yours to your friend in the lab in Brazil. Oh yes, and you have friends, a house, an orchard, and a private supply of poisonous newts. I would think you would be over the moon. You've come out of the war in very good shape, much better than some of the other survivors. That's

why I came to you, you know. I see the people who lost family and still don't know what happened to their loved ones."

I glared at him. Did he think I hadn't lost anyone? Hadn't I had to lose my friends one by one, for years? And my own students – and I could never show any of it.

"I'm not trying to diminish what you went through, but you are in very good shape now. I can't tell you how many times I've wished that I could change my name, disappear, and live however I please. Particularly whenever I have to talk to the sodding Restoration Committee."

"So you recognize exactly what I have to lose if I come forward or if this rumor is believed."

He shrugged. "It's a risk. Only you can decide how much you'll risk for the good of others. I've seen you make that decision, and I don't mean when you were answering to Albus. I mean only a couple of months ago. And that call you had with your 'eye', Miss Bulstrode. I know you mean to do right by yours. That's why I won't coerce you, and I would never threaten or betray you. It's not my decision to make. Look at me. Do you believe me?"

He held my gaze. I didn't answer.

"Fine, don't admit it; it's as good as an answer."

He took a small box from his pocket and set it on the table. I made no move to pick it up. If he was trying to tempt me with more medals I wanted no part of it.

"I don't want anything except for you to think it over. There's no deadline on this; we will take your help whenever you want to give it. I'm leaving you a Portkey to my secure office. If you decide to help, you can use the Protean note to contact me, then come by Portkey. I'll arrange security and a safe place to stay." He stood to leave. "I didn't want your name to come out, whatever you believe, but now that it has... I think it will give you more freedom than you realize."

I sat at the kitchen table after he had gone, half-heartedly trying to put the paper back together. I couldn't decide if things were better or worse than I thought. Whichever it was, it was impossible for it to be the same, not after my name came out, the thing I had feared for so long.

I reached Dick on the phone from my office.

"Cyril?"

I didn't speak for a moment. He waited.

"I just spoke to Kingsley Shacklebolt. He knows I worked for you in the lab."

"Yes."

"Yes?" I tried to keep my tone even.

"Cyril, he visited me about a month ago. He had a letter you were trying to send me, but it ended up in his hands somehow. He told me that he's known you're alive for some time."

"What did he want? Was he trying to get information on me?"

"Well, at that point, he knew more about your location than I did. It was the other way around, really. He was letting me know that he knew about you."

"Why?"

"He didn't say exactly. I think he wanted to open the possibility of you or I coming to him if you were in a dangerous situation or needed help."

"Would you do that?"

"Well, if I really thought that you were in imminent danger, yes, I think I would. Does that bother you?"

"I don't know. Every time I speak to him he inserts himself more and more into my private business."

"Cyril, I think you have more friends than you realize. That's a good thing."

I tried to reconcile myself to that idea after I rang off, but I couldn't quite see it. Of the very few friends I had left, all I could see was a growing heap of obligations that I couldn't repay.



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GROUNDWORK

It had taken me three apparition points just before dawn to reach my favorite collecting grounds on the green rolling hills and canyons of the Klickitat River. Early spring was the time to collect, when the wildflowers covered the hillsides and the potions-grade plants I was looking for showed their colors.

The wind was setting the grasses rippling like waves across the broad backs of the hills and carried snatches of meadowlark trills back and forth over the canyons. I hunted and dug grass widows and water hemlock, manroot, balsamroot, bitterroot, and biscuit-root, shooting stars, larkspur and death camas. I was clambering over a rock outcrop to reach a stand of scylla-onion when a loud mechanical buzzing to my left stopped me dead. I turned to the noise with my wand out. A small rattlesnake coiled in a cleft in the rocks a couple of meters away was giving me ample warning not to approach. Polite creature. I ought to leave it in peace.

I had no reason to approach, after all. No reason for the light stunner, the cooling charm that left the snake inert. I worked it free of the rock cleft. A young one, freshly emerged from hibernation, scales looking burnished and new. There wasn't any need to collect it, pack it carefully in my sack, and bring it home. But I did.

I sat at my kitchen table, looking at the unconscious snake in front of me. No need for any of this. I could stay peacefully in my refuge. I could change my appearance again and wait for the rumors to die down. Instead, I was finding a box to pack the snake, applying cushioning and cooling charms to keep it dormant. Apparently, I was a fool.

One snake in good condition, a replacement for the ancient

Chapter 3 of **THE GOOD FRIEND**

BY MOTTSSNAVE

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House mascot, Maxwell, who had finally kicked off from old age. Millicent Bulstrode had informed me in the call arranged by Shacklebolt last month that would settle my debt to the House. And it was a very small price to pay for the minimum of honesty and guidance that they had needed from me and I had failed to give them. I owed them. There was so much I could never repay, if I could take this one chance and pay this one debt...

I didn't like to think about the other debt. Lucius' contract. It was the reason I'd brought up his case with Shacklebolt, after all. I *owed* him too. But the thought of being back in *that* place, and perhaps worse, of speaking to his portrait; it had brought back dreams of that last year again, of all the corridors closing in around me, the burning room with the trapped boys in it, all my enemies, friends, and all my friends, enemies.

It wouldn't be like that. A simple errand in an empty building. A delivery of a payment. Retrieve a bloody piece of paper. And then back to my own private peace. But I knew that if I wanted the errand to be simple, I would have to lay the groundwork carefully first. Using Shacklebolt's portkey directly into Ministry offices was out of the question. He would put me under 'security,' which meant my every step would be watched. Completely unacceptable.

My other options weren't much better. Shacklebolt knew of both my aliases, Dr. Cyril Ramson and Mark Anderson. Any legal entry into the country under those names would alert him. No, I would have to find other means, and that meant a visit to the dark market.

I had planned to lay low off the market until any rumors featuring my name had faded, but I had no way of knowing when or if that would ever happen, and I didn't want to wait.

I spent a few minutes putting Mark's Boston accent back on, then dressed as him with hooded jumper, trainers and cap, packed far too much money from my emergency supply, and wandered through the Undercity until I spotted a market regular on the corner near Kosti's.

"Anyone out today?" I asked as I looked at Kosti's playbill.

"A few, a couple. Under the West Seattle Bridge."

I slipped him a folded bill as I went down the block. I apparated out to

the west end of the bridge. That day the market was set among the towering concrete bridge supports and obscured by Notice-me-not charms and the roiling clouds of steam from the nearby wood pulp plant.

The guards, who knew Mark as a regular, let me in without comment. Perhaps Shacklebolt was right and the rumor would die without any effect on me. I couldn't quite shake the feeling of eyes following me as I made my way through the stragglers.

I spotted Chuck at the base of a concrete pillar near a busking fiddler. He was shifting from foot to foot, making the bundles of plastic water bottles tied to his waist sway and rustle. I couldn't quite tell if he was attempting to move with the music. Either he was just trying to keep warm or he had no rhythm. His gaze was fixed somewhere up in the bridge supports.

I watched him. I wasn't looking forward to this. Unauthorized Portkeys were expensive, crossing national boundaries was exorbitant, and reliability on top of that was outrageous. Chuck was the only one in the area who could manage all three. He could name his price, and I was sure he would.

He didn't take notice of me as I approached, his gaze following the billowing steam clouds as he swayed.

"You got a trip for me?"

"All kinds, we've got all kinds."

"England. With a return."

"Got all kinds. Or if I don't got it, we can do a custom job, takes a couple days."

"So, have you got it?"

"Depends where you're going."

"England," I said impatiently.

"Where. In. England?" he said, very patiently. His vague blue eyes finally wandered down from the bridge supports and almost focused on me.

"Anywhere out of the way." Once I was over the border, I had plenty of apparition points in my head to work with. It didn't matter where I set down.

He twisted, muttering, "England, land of kings..." and worked

a cluster of water bottles free from the tail of the plaid blanket he wore over his shoulders. He spun the bottles on their string and chose one with an egg-sized grey rock at the bottom.

"How much?"

"Three-thousand."

"*What?*"

"It crosses all wards, undetectable. Open return from any origin point once activated. Three-thousand."

"Two-thousand."

"No, three-thousand."

Damn, he had no competition and he knew it. He wasn't going to budge. "Fine," I muttered. "Where does it go?"

"Out of the way. Above the way. Llangybi. Lampeter."

Where was that? Somewhere in Wales, by the name. Close enough. "Fine," I said again. I handed over the cash, far too much. Chuck leaned forward to let the sides of his blanket shield the money from view as he counted it, twice. Finally satisfied, the money disappeared into some inner pocket and a clasp knife appeared in his hand. He sawed at the twine around the neck of the bottle until it snapped free.

We took hands for a Good Faith. Over his left shoulder I could see the tall blonde woman known as Janson watching me carefully. I had bought a backup unregistered wand from her a few weeks ago. She didn't seem to have any concerns about me then.

"Three-thousand American dollars, paid in full, for one Portkey, open return, destination Llangybi, undetectable, direct unbroken travel guaranteed, delivered now," he said as he handed me the bottle. We shook to seal the Good Faith. Business done, he went back to cloud-gazing almost immediately.

I hurried off through the sellers' stalls and bridge pilings. I paused in front of a display of scrying glasses. In one of the full-length mirrors, I could see Janson still behind me, leaning forward to talk to one of the other sellers as she kept one eye on me. Shit. Harmless rumor my arse.

The scrying-glass stall butted up against one of the concrete pillars; I couldn't edge around. I walked as quickly as I could without hurrying around the side of the pillar towards the side of the market.

Two more rows and I could apparate. As I passed the pillar a hand took me very firmly by the elbow and pulled me almost off balance.

"Talk to me for a minute, Mark."

I held up my right hand to show I wasn't holding my wand. It was Sam, head of the market guards.

"Sure, Sam. What is it?"

He wasn't rough, but his grip didn't loosen. He placed me with my back against the pillar and removed my wand from my sleeve and the bottle with my extremely expensive portkey.

"Janson says she knows you."

"Uh, well, I've bought from her a couple of times."

"Not like that."

Janson came around the side of the pillar at a jog. "You got him!"

"We're going to talk this through, Janson."

"You can *see* it's him."

"Well..."

"See what?" I put in.

"He was one of Skeez's last clients before he split," said Janson.

"How do you know?" asked Sam

"Skeez's having me work his base while he's out."

Sam looked at me.

"Yeah, I did a little business with Skeez. Come on, Sam, that's nothing new. You know I've bought from him before. What's the trouble with that? I've been in plenty of times since then."

Sam looked at Janson.

"You know why Skeez went. *Raids*. And you know who the papers say turned them in. *Snape*."

Sam looked at me.

"Look at him," said Janson.

I sighed and let my arm relax.

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"It's my fucking nose, isn't it? Like I haven't heard that before."

"It's *him*," said Janson.

"I can't believe you're holding me up because of some stupid tabloids! You believe that crap?"

The seller Janson had been talking to before and a couple of customers were watching from a few feet away. "Get back to your stalls," said Sam. They drifted back a few feet but didn't disappear altogether.

"When I read about it in the papers, I looked up his picture. You can see it's him," said Janson. *Those damn photos.*

"Oh, bullshit. If it was, wouldn't I hide my face? I'm not wearing a glamour and I'm not juiced up. You can test me."

"That doesn't help anything," said Sam, "if it's your real face that looks like him."

"What the hell, Janson?" I said, "I've paid you on all my orders!"

"This isn't about your orders, this is about someone *flipping*."

"All right, that's it," said Sam, "you're both coming with me." Janson's voice had been a bit loud, and talk about flipping on the dark market could cause real trouble. If Sam was convinced that I had led authorities to raid sellers, he would bloody well beat my skull in right there in the center of the market and no one would lift a finger to stop him.

Sam pulled me by my elbow to the edge of the market and up against the chain-link fence around the factory grounds, Janson sticking close to us.

"No one says I flip," I hissed at her.

"You're *him*," she said. Sam waved over a couple of the guards on the market perimeter.

"So that's it? Her word against mine?"

"Test him," said Janson. *Yes, test me.*

"Kevin, keep the rubber-neckers off us," said Sam.

"Minh's got some Veritaserum. Use that on him," said Janson.

Veritaserum, perfect, I had trained on that for years. Veritaserum was powerful, but it could be tricked. It was simply a matter of mental discipline, practice, and building up a resistance to the calming elements of the potion. Of course, I hadn't been practic-

ing regularly since my supposed death... I would need to get my thoughts in order, quickly.

"You consent to a Veritaserum test?" asked Sam.

"Hell no! She set all this up! She wants my personal information!"

"Kevin, hold him," said Sam. Consent wasn't so important after all, it seemed.

Sam's grip on my elbow was replaced by Kevin's forearm across my collarbone, pushing me back against the fence, where he held me at wandpoint. Sam, Janson, and the seller who had followed us – that must be Minh – entered into a brief negotiation out of my earshot.

"This is bullshit," I told Kevin. Kevin kept his opinion to himself, and his arm on my chest.

What were they going to ask me? About my name and identity. I ran some sentences in my head; it wouldn't do to have the pauses show.

Sam was back holding a small paper cup and a vial. He cast Aguamenti to fill the cup and added three drops from the vial.

"Mark, you're taking this."

"No! That Minh is her friend. Who knows what they've put in that!"

"Mark, it's my product," said Minh calmly, "you know my products are good."

"They're good, Mark," said Sam.

"Bullshit."

"Nose, Kevin," said Sam.

Kevin made a face and pinched my nose closed. I twisted, but Sam got the dose down me and held my jaw until I swallowed. Perfect.

"Bitch," I spluttered, "see if I ever buy from you again!" Janson didn't look particularly heartbroken.

Sam leaned in to check my pupils. "All right, we're set. What's your name?"

Severus Snape, I thought, but now I'm known as, "Mark," I said.

"What's your last name?" asked Sam.

Snape, but now I use, "Anderson," I said.

Sam sighed. "Well?" He turned to Janson.

"Names can change," she said stubbornly.

Sam turned back to me. "Have you *ever* been known as Severus Snape?"

Yes, but I want to tell you, "No," I said.

"It's not the name that matters if he's flipped," said Janson.

Sam looked at me closely. "Have you given any information to the authorities that's led to arrests or raids?"

Yes, but if I want to get out of here alive, my answer better be, "No!" I said.

"Right, that settles it," said Sam. Janson didn't look mollified. "Janson, Minh, you say one word about this and I'll double your seller fees." The sellers pooled together to pay for the market guards and the fees were stiff. No one wanted underpaid guards who might be tempted to sell information to the authorities.

The two women moved off without another word, but Janson was giving me a very long look. Sam leaned in close to my ear as he handed back my wand and the portkey. "And *you*, you better find another market or another face, whatever your name is." He shoved his hand hard against my chest for a moment before he and Kevin turned and left.

It was a warning, and it was a good one. Even if Janson and Minh kept their mouths shut about their suspicions, several people must have seen me being pulled aside and questioned by Sam. The guards might not blacklist me, but the sellers probably would. After the Canadian raids, no one on the market was in the mood to take chances.

I apparated to three intermediary points and then home. Mark was dead to me now, at least as far as the Dark Market was concerned. Any rumor about my real identity was probably enough, but worse, any connection the 'Mark' might have to an anonymous tip that led Aurors to bust dealers and put go-betweens at risk of arrest – that was unforgivable on the market. I would be worse than blacklisted; I would be in real danger if I went back. Damn, it had taken Mark more than a year to build up contacts and become an accepted regular. The thought of starting all over with a new face and name was exhausting.

I had set this up and now it was coming back to me with interest. I wanted access to a dark market! Vancouver's was off limits to me, Spokane's was sub-par, and Portland's prices were too high because of the Russian mob. The next decent dark market was Oakland, and

that was a two or three day broom trip, depending on the weather.

I had intended to save some time and buy a few doses of polyjuice to have on hand as back-up, but now I would need to brew my own. Not so difficult, as I had all the ingredients, but now I would be delayed by a month. At least I could use the time to brew several batches and make my preparations.

In a month, I had my store of emergency potions, maps, a spare set of clothes and my broom, shrunken, and the brumating snake. And money. The sodding Ministry and their currency controls made galleons out of the question; one could only get galleons changed at Gringotts. Pounds were easy enough, however, so I tucked away an emergency supply, along with my little store of protean notes and the small box with Shaklebolt's portkey. None of it would be needed; it was just a simple errand. I left Shacklebolt's other box, still untouched on the table.

In the back garden, I sawed through Chuck's plastic bottle with my cheapest kitchen knife, pried it open and touched the stone.

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Art by Mottsnave

ERRAND

I set down hard, knocking my breath out against a stone *something*. I crouched in chilly darkness, trying to get my breath and my bearings. It was too dark; I had left at ten in the morning, so it should only be early evening here. As my eyes adjusted, I saw a cool grey light somewhere above me. I cast Lumos.

I was in a filthy place, a landing on a narrow winding stone staircase, littered with bird droppings, feathers, bones, and trash. Well, Chuck certainly had chosen someplace out of the way; it looked

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BY MOTTSSNAVE

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as though no one had been here in years. I followed the stairs up a couple of turns to the source of the light, a crumbling narrow slot window choked with loose masonry and broken birds'-nests. I was in some sort of stone tower, I saw. I looked out on rolling green fields from far above, lit briefly by the setting sun. The raking light picked out each tree in their scattered rows bordering the fields and gave each distant sheep a long-legged shadow.

The look of those fields... I was hit by a sort of gutting nostalgia. *Ridiculous*, I might as well start belting out *and did those feet, in ancient time, walk upon England's mountains green?* The answer was no, in all probability. Imagining the past as a paradise was a fools' game. I knew exactly where that sort of thinking could lead. There never was any paradise.

As I tried to make out houses or towns, the sun sank behind a tall bank of clouds and the rosy light slid up and was gone, leaving the valley in a cool blue dimness. Nothing around, I was well out of the way indeed. It was an early dusk by the time I had picked my way down the half-ruined stairs and out through the broken barricade over the door. As I suspected, the tower stood alone, not attached to any building, looking absurdly like a gigantic Greek column which had wandered away from its temple. Some rich idiot's folly, no doubt. There was no other evidence of rich idiots in the vicinity; nothing but pastures dotted with stands of trees and sheep bleating somewhere below in the valley. A fine entry point, except that I was much further south than I needed.

I disillusioned myself, dug into my memories for my points, and began the long and sickening job of apparating north. At my fifth point, an abandoned woolen mill outside Bradford, I stopped to let my stomach settle. I took the time to reseal the plastic bottle around the portkey and hide it in a pile of rubble.

I had to stop several more times on the way north to let the effects of the long-distance apparitions wear off. I finally landed in the forest outside Hogsmede at half ten. I had a little time to kill before last call.

I had thought about my course over my month of preparations. I didn't have any desire to let anyone know of my presence, but I had to

approach Aberforth. It was a calculated risk. As the agent of my escape from England in the first place, he already knew of my survival. And he had already passed along certain documents that Albus had hidden for me including my identity papers. There was a chance, however slim, that Albus could have given him the contract as well. And if it would save me having to address the portrait, all the better.

I tried sitting with my back against a tree and waiting in the blue quiet of the woods. I was restless. The smell of the forest was bothering me. Or rather the familiarity of the smell. I used to come out to the woods at night sometimes as a refuge, but now the smell was bringing me back to everything I had taken refuge from. It smelled like June, the end of term, the final, all-night crunch of reviewing exam results and grading, of students and staff on the edge of breakdowns, of horrible House-cup switches, and the distinct air of impending battles. It made my guts clench worse than the apparitions. I strode aimlessly through the trees to try to unknot myself. It shouldn't bother me; I was past all that now. No more grades, no more battles.

The fifteenth time I cast Tempus it was finally late enough, half twelve, more than an hour after last call: all of the last of the weeknight sots should have given up nursing their pints and staggered away.

I took the narrow deer track that wound through the trees to the outskirts of town. I was still under my disillusionment, but it hardly mattered; the alley that led to the back of the Hog's Head was deserted. The Hog's Head still showed light at the back. The front was shut and dark, and worse, the wards were up. Damn, I shouldn't have waited so long. Aberforth laid a hell of a ward after all the break-ins he'd had over the years. I crossed back to the rear fence. What now, start throwing pebbles at the windows like some love-sodden teen?

Luckily, it didn't come to that. Aberforth was coming out the back, hauling a sack of rubbish to the bins. Sure enough, he dropped the wards to step out into the alley. I ducked through the gate while he was busy with the bins and waited until he was back through. I let him reset his wards before I dropped my disillusionment.

"You alone?"

"Bloody hell!" He stepped back against the gate, hard. The wards

hummed in protest.

“Not so loud. You alone?”

He paused, peering at my face where the light from the rear window caught it.

“Bloody hell, Snape, haven’t you heard of floo-calling ahead?” He was at least speaking more quietly.

“And give you a chance to go running to Shackbolt? Are you alone?”

“Yeah. Why, d’ye want to curse me?” He stomped towards the back door.

“Obviously. I always stand around talking to people before I curse them.”

“Whatever you want, just get on with it. I’m late enough closing as it is. Get in if you’re coming.”

I caught the door just before it slammed in my face. I could feel the locking charm catch as it closed behind me. Aberforth was already halfway down the hall.

“Is this about your estate? It’s still there, most of it.”

“*Most of it?*” I hurried to catch up.

“Thought I was going to executor it for nothing, did you? Bloody great pile of paperwork. Hell, I get something for my time.”

He went through the kitchen’s rear door. It was still cluttered from that night’s service. I saw *that bird* settled on a perch in a corner near the sink.

“Isn’t that unsanitary?” I said nodding at it in distaste.

“Dead handy is what that is. Anyone gets a grease burn on the chips or gets sloppy with a knife, the bird gets moist over it and everything’s right as rain.”

“That can’t be up to code.”

He laughed. “Where the hell do you think you are, Snape? If a sodding health inspector ever showed his nose in here, and not likely, someone gives a whistle and the bird gets chucked out a window. No problem. But you ought to show a bit more gratitude, the beast saved your life. Not that I ever expected you to show up and *thank* us.”

He was putting a tub of fish batter into the cold cabinet and shoving a pile of potatoes into a bin. “Well, what should I think

when you burned my letters and the transfer box? I thought you were washing your hands of the whole bleeding mess, cutting your ties and starting a new life for yourself. Not a bad idea for you, considering. Didn’t think I would see your face round here again.”

He was right, it had been exactly what I was doing, at the time. “Some of those ties haven’t been so easy to cut. I wouldn’t be here by choice, but I had to come back to finish the job.”

He stared at me over the cutting boards he was piling in the sink. “That some kind of threat? Want to wipe my brain clean to tie up loose ends? You’ve got some sodding nerve.”

“What? No!” I certainly wasn’t about to Obliviate him when he might have information for me.

He snorted. “So long as we understand each other. Well, what is it, then?”

“I’m looking for a paper – a contract.”

“Oh, Merlin, I had enough of that with your estate. You want contracts, use a solicitor.”

Was he being intentionally dense? “Your brother’s papers. He was to have left behind a contract.”

“You had a contract with him?”

“Did he leave any papers at all?” I asked to skirt the question.

“Not a contract with you? Who, then?” He could be a canny bastard when he wanted.

“*Did* he leave any papers?”

“Don’t you ever get sick of this cloak-and-dagger bollocks? I would have thought you’d’ve sworn off it by now. Well, there’s no changing some people. No, he didn’t leave me any bloody papers, he knew I hate paperwork. Only papers I ever heard of were the ones you left with those – what do you call ‘em? – ‘eyes’ of yours.”

“How do you know about them?”

“They, well, some of them anyway, went to the Minister with your papers right after the battle. On your instructions, I thought. Miss Bulstrode, she’s working up at the school now, and I saw that the Nott kid was in with her. That’s how I thought to bring him along as binder and witness when I went to talk to Shackbolt about you.

I reckoned he was loyal to you and you already trusted him.”

“And just how did you *reckon* the same of Shacklebolt? He’s been in my business ever since you decided to out me to him.”

“Oh, come off it. You needed to know if your pardon was genuine, right? And it was, wasn’t it? I’ll be damned if Shacklebolt has done anything to harm you.”

“It’s not so much what he’s done as what he *could* do.”

Aberforth snorted. He pulled a couple of chipped mugs out of a cabinet and set them on the table, along with an unlabeled bottle. He poured us both a generous measure of amber liquid.

“No, it’s not what he *could* do, it’s what he actually *will* do, which is bugger-all, unless you make him. He has plenty of business of his own, without getting into yours. You think the Ministry wants to open that can of worms? It’s dead simple, Snape. You don’t want any trouble, just go back to wherever you’re hiding and keep your head down and he won’t bother you.”

The drink was some kind of scotch, and very smooth.

“You can tell *him* that. Your brother didn’t leave you any papers?”

“Not a one. Not a bloody bank draft, which I wouldn’t have turned up my nose at. Some useless knick-knacks.”

“Did he tell you anything? He must have told you enough to have that box ready, and the portkey that got me out. Did he give you instructions about me?”

Aberforth looked at Fawkes over the rim of his mug, as if the bird could advise him on what to say. “That was years ago, when he set up that room for you. All he said was that you might need it someday, nothing else. When the old bird came to get me and brought me to you after the battle, well, I thought I’d better help you. In my experience, animals know what they’re about. More than people, half the time. I only spoke to the portrait once after the battle, just to tell him you’d pulled through. He pointed me to your false papers and the money you had stashed. I don’t know if you consider him your friend, after everything is said and done, but if you hadn’t made it, I think he would have regretted it.”

I grimaced. I had heard “I regret it,” from the Dark Lord, just as

he tried to do me in, and it wasn’t exactly a stellar endorsement of friendship.

“Anyway,” Aberforth went on after a long drink, “I only went to talk with him the once. I’m not like those posh families with a hall of portraits. I don’t hold with that, talking to them over every little thing. It just makes you think you’ve got something you haven’t. Well, anything else?”

I looked down at the remains of my drink. “I’ll have to go talk to him.”

“Place is all locked up now. Everyone’s gone home for the summer except for Minerva and a couple of the support staff.”

Minerva, was it now? The last time I remembered Minerva mention Aberforth, it was as ‘*that man*’ with a look on her face as if she’d just stepped into the boy’s locker room and got a good whiff. Minerva must have let her standards slip since the war.

“You going up now?”

I didn’t answer.

“Suit yourself. What about your estate? You’re more than welcome to the paperwork. You want the house?”

“God, no. The place is a tip.”

“What, then, sell it? That’s a job, you’d have to get rid of all the BNP graffiti for a start.”

I sighed. It sounded like my old neighborhood hadn’t improved any, and I hadn’t come back to deal with house sales and property. Hell, I probably couldn’t go near the place without Shacklebolt getting word.

“I have other matters to deal with first. I’ll handle that later. I’ll arrange everything with you when I’m done.”

“Of course you will.” He didn’t sound convinced.

I stood, leaving my mug on the table. He stood also and groaned at the rest of the kitchen mess.

“Let yourself out, will you? Keyword’s *bunghole*.”

I stared at him. He was giving me his ward keyword?

“Go on, then. I want my bed.”

Apparently, he was. I downed the rest of my drink. I had a feeling I would need it.

NOBODY

I could change my looks, my name, and be dead to the world, but the Hogwarts' wards still knew me. At least the service gate near Hogsmeade Station swung open at my touch without protest. It was a relief not to have to circumvent the wards, especially by means of the Shack.

Still, I couldn't help feeling a bit apprehensive at the welcome the school was extending to me. I was glad I had the cover of my disillusionment as I stepped through to the dark grounds.

There was less than half a moon and some clouds, but I had made my way across the grounds many times before without a Lumos. It should have been no problem. I had the echoing croaks of the frogs in the shallows of the lake to my right, and the dim bulk of the castle in the distance. Still, somehow I went astray, wandering down a track to a swampy gully with the feeding stream to the lake. How was that possible? I back-tracked up the muddy slope and tried to get my bearings. I couldn't have gone so far left off the path; I should have been stopped by the small grove of trees next to the trail. But there were no trees now. I shifted uncomfortably. Everything at once seemed strange. *I used to study under those trees once...*

There was some pale object further up the slope towards the castle. If there was something there, there was probably a path to it. I aimed for it and trudged. As I approached, the shape slowly became discernible: some sort of stone marker on a plinth, set into a small depression with benches. *A monument...* No, I decided quickly, I didn't need a path; I could simply cut across the grounds to the castle walls, that was much more direct.

The frogsong faded as I climbed, replaced by the occasional

Chapter 5 of **THE GOOD FRIEND**

BY MOTTSSNAVE

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screech or hoot from the owls. Finally I could smell it too, the years of guano and pellets caking the ground below the entrance window far above. My feet crunched on mouse bones. I must be at the west tower side, about halfway around. I trailed my fingers along the stone as I followed the wall to the corner and around to the side door in the courtyard. Finally, back on course. I tripped the locking charm and slipped in.

I came to the first charmed light halfway down the corridor. By then the familiarity was almost overwhelming. The smell of wet cloaks and muddy boots, of parchment, ink, and the pine solution used for scrubbing down the halls. I had started to sweat almost at once, though the old stone passageway was cool. *Ridiculous, it was all over now.* Besides, I didn't want *him* to see me like this. I needed to present a calm and determined front. I couldn't let him try to deflect or mislead me, though I didn't know why he should. Let him try. I set off again with renewed purpose.

I would need a way to get into the Headmaster's office without rousing Minerva. I did have two advantages; the Headmaster's quarters were behind a heavy door and past a short corridor from the office, and Minerva snored. I could probably be in and out without her ever knowing, if she was asleep. If she was awake... perhaps I could goad Peeves into setting off some sort of distraction.

Right through the middle, that was the quickest way. I entered the Great Hall from the side door. Quiet for a change, all the benches stacked on the long tables with their legs in the air, the staff table shrouded with a dropcloth. I couldn't remember the last time I had seen it so quiet. It was probably best not to try to bring up any memories at the moment.

My first steps echoed in the hall and I quickly made an effort to quiet them. Not that there was anyone to hear me. Silent now, I made my way around the end of two of the long tables to cross the hall. The voice, welcoming, came from just behind my left ear. "Ah, Severus, my friend, I knew you would return to me."

I must have turned around. My hand hit the edge of the table, hard.

His white face and hairless head gleamed in the dark hall, not

very far away. He wasn't moving. His bare feet on the stone floor, must be cold.

Perhaps if I could just make my hand work and grip the edge of the table, then I could move.

His lips slid over his teeth as his mouth worked, black hole of a mouth, falling into nothing forever.

"Severus, stand before me."

I was already standing before him, I was obeying. *Good, just obey.* I gripped the edge of the table, the bench on top shifted.

His lips slid and he smiled. Not the good smile, it was the beast smile. He had been told about me, just before he died. *He knows.*

I stumbled backwards. He was just standing there but he would come after me any second, he would –

I went out the main doors at a run and down the first corridor. Panic took me up a stair and down another hall. I chose a door at random and plunged through into an empty classroom.

It was useless, running was the worst possible choice, it *disobeyed* him, and the locking charm I threw on the doors wouldn't stop him and nothing would stop him because he *knew*, he told him about me to his face.

I retched into the rubbish bin next to the lectern. When I was done I sat against the wall and tried to get my breathing under control. I had lost my panic along with my breakfast. I had also lost my disillusionment somewhere along the way. I could see my hands shaking as I gripped my knees.

He might *know*, but he was dead, and he was not here, it was all over. The fact that I had just experienced the worst flashback of my life didn't change the fact that I'd had flashbacks before and this was only different by degree. It was just that I had never seen him so clearly, so close, his bare feet on the floor, dead eyes and black hole mouth. I felt sick again. I had to get out of here. Too many memories.

I vanished the vomit. There was that book the Dick recommended to me, what had it said? *A flashback may be triggered by a familiar sight, sound, or smell, or a stressful or traumatic environment.* Not that most of the book applied to me and most of it was absolute

rubbish, but it had the occasional flicker of useful advice. *A first step to reducing the incidence of flashbacks is to identify and avoid situations and places where triggers may be present...* and of course I had just walked into one. All I had to do was walk out again. I could do that, I had walked myself through flashbacks before.

Still, as I stood in front of the door, I had the distinct mental picture of *Him* standing directly on the other side, waiting for me. He *knew* what I had done and he *knew* I would come back and he was *waiting*.

My little scrap of calm was ebbing away again. Perhaps I could go out the window instead, cast a cushioning charm on the ground and take my chances. *Idiot*, a flashback can't wait, it can't *know* anything, just a jumble of misplaced memories, and what the hell did it matter, a door had never stopped him anyway.

I jerked it open. Nothing, of course. Now, I had to get out.

The main doors were the closest, but I couldn't bring myself to head back towards the Great Hall. I took a back way to a side door, the whole way feeling my apprehension build at each corner and dark doorway. Finally, I stumbled out into the open air.

It was all over, after all. I was free of all that. Except that now I had his voice sitting at the back of my head, "*Severus, my friend...*"

The Hog's Head was dark and silent when I arrived back. I let myself in through the wards with Aberforth's keyword. I didn't have any place else to go at the moment. I might as well take advantage of a warm kitchen. And while I was here, I might as well replace the drink that I hadn't been able to hold down.

I'd heard his voice before. When a certain turn of phrase reminded me of something he might say, or scraps of memory that would come floating up just on falling asleep or on waking. I could usually banish them quickly enough. But all through my walk back across the grounds the words were ringing in my head. I needed something to dissolve them. Perhaps alcohol would help.

I found the chipped mug I had used before and Aberforth's private stash. There was a bit less than a quarter of the bottle left. I poured myself a good measure. I wouldn't be able to sleep unless I could get that voice out of my head, the image of his face...

There was another bottle behind the first when I finished it. The problem was that his face and voice were getting clearer as I drank instead of fading. Sod him, he was dead and gone and I needed him to fade, and I could still see his bare feet on the stones, must be cold.

“Ah, Severus, my friend, I knew you would return to me...”

“My friend, *my friend*, I’m not your bloody friend and I never was. I’m not coming back to you – ”

“Snape?”

My head jerked up. *Not him*. It was Aberforth standing in the doorway in a dressing gown, a bludger bat in his hand. “Are you drinking my good stuff?”

I managed to get my voice working again. “Take it out of my estate.” I poured myself another.

“Bloody hell.” He set the bat down by the door. “*Who* aren’t you going back to?”

“Nobody.”

He peered at me. “Did my brother say something to you?”

I wished he would go away. “No, nobody said anything to anybody,” I said deliberately.

“The old sod. I’ll give him a piece of my mind. Has me put you back together and then he goes and takes you apart again. Bloody typical.”

“Nobody said anything to anybody.”

“The hell you say, you’re shaking. I know him, can’t keep his trap shut. You could be the smartest wizard in the world, I told him, but what good is it if you don’t know how to be good to people?”

I didn’t want to listen to this. I drank.

“Haven’t you had enough?” he said.

“No!” I could still hear that voice. *My friend...* “Since when do you say *enough*? Your whole business – ” I half-stood to make the point, but then thought better of it and sat again. “– is to get people pissed and I want to get *pissed*.”

“Fine, fine, you’re getting pissed, now – ”

“I can get *pissed* if I want, I don’t have to spend every second,” I poked the table top, “*every second* watching what I say and think, and I can get pissed and say that he is not my friend and I am *not* going back.”

“Fine, you’re pissed and you’re not going anywhere.”

“I can go *wherever* I want, I can just walk out.” I half-stood again.

“Are you going?”

“No, I’m going to have another drink.”

“Oh, hell.” He shuffled over to the roasting oven on the far wall and got it lit, then threw in a handful of Floo powder. A Floo connection, where food was prepared?

“Unsanitary,” I muttered.

“Oh, quit moaning, you’re not the bloody health inspector.” He turned back to the flames. “Minerva, *Minerva!*”

“What do you think you’re doing?” I half-stood, then thought better of it and sat again.

“Settle down, she’s known about you for years.”

Sod it, the whole world knew. I drank.

After he yelled a bit more, I could hear Minerva’s voice, very groggy, “It’s three in the morning.”

Of course it was. I kept my eyes on my drink. I was going to ignore them.

“Minerva, I’ve got Snape here, and he’s in a state. He said he was going up the school to talk to *his* portrait, and the next thing I know he’s back here drinking himself blind. I think that brother of mine said something to him.”

“Nobody said — ”

“Yeah, yeah,” he said over me. “Can you find out what he said? Maybe I can get him calmed down.”

“Oh bother. Hold the Floo open.”

I snorted into my drink. Even at three in the morning you couldn’t get Minerva to swear.

Aberforth waited. I drank. Minerva finally came through in a cloud of ash and muttering. She was wrapped in her tartan dressing gown with that ridiculous white cloth bonnet over her bun that looked like some kind of squashed pudding.

“You look like a blancmange,” I said deliberately.

Her lips thinned. “Lovely to see you too. Thank Merlin you finally changed your hair. What on earth do you think you’re doing?”

“I’m getting pissed.”

“How nice for you.”

“What did he say?” asked Aberforth.

“Oh, *him*. I couldn’t get anything out of him. He said he hadn’t seen Severus at all or said anything to him. You know how he gets; he was far too interested in acting innocent and pleased that Severus is here.”

“Nobody said nowt to nobody!”

“Oh dear, he really has had too much, you can always tell when his accent slips. What did he want to speak to Albus about anyway?”

McGonagall always was an insufferable old busybody.

“Something about a contract, but he wouldn’t say anything else about it.”

Minerva looked at me like I had turned up in her class without my coursework. “The two of you with your secrets, I don’t know who’s worse, I really don’t.” She addressed Aberforth over me. “If he wants his old contract, he doesn’t need to go to Albus for it; it’ll be in his file somewhere. I can have the secretaries look it up. But why does he want that? I suppose there might be some severance pay coming to him. . .”

“There’s a special pay, just for him?”

“*Severance*, not *Severus*, Aberforth.”

I felt like my brain cells were dying off just listening to them. Or perhaps it was the scotch. Pity. I poured myself another.

“Did he seem hard up for money?”

Aberforth shrugged. “Wasn’t too interested in claiming his estate.”

I was tired of them speaking over me. “I’m right here!”

“More’s the pity,” muttered Aberforth.

“Obviously we won’t get anything out of him tonight. Is there somewhere you can put him to sleep it off?”

Aberforth sighed. “There’s the spare room upstairs. He’s used it before. Come on, get his other arm.”

“Oi!” I didn’t want to go anywhere; I needed to finish my drink. Aberforth had his shoulder under my left arm and was hoisting me to my feet. Minerva took my other arm and everything spun.

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MEMORIAL

The noise was unbearable. Whistly, fluty, warbling, piercing, and insufferable. It bounced through my head as if my skull were the Great Hall in the middle of dinner. I groaned, but even that was too loud, and it was too bright. I peered into the blurry light. God, it was that awful bird on a perch across the room, *singing* to me.

“Shut up!”

Fawkes took no notice except to take a couple of flaps to the end of the dresser near me.

“If you *drip* on me, I’ll wring your little neck.”

Fawkes puffed his feathers and settled again. At least he wasn’t singing any longer. And what was that next to him? I made an effort to focus on it: a pitcher of water. *Water* – I needed that pitcher. I tried to get it without moving my head. Damn, it was just out of reach. I tried to raise myself but my head immediately started throbbing and my stomach roiled. I groaned and lay back down.

This wouldn’t do. If I had my wand I could get the water. Where was my wand? I risked opening my eyes again. There it was – on the other end of the dresser, past the pitcher. I couldn’t reach that.

“Make yourself useful, you flaming feather-duster. Bring me my wand.”

Fawkes puffed up his feathers and began to sing again. Idiot bird! I pulled the covers over my head and tried to suppress the urge to throttle it.

It wasn’t any use. I couldn’t sleep again with that noise and my throbbing head, and then Aberforth had to come in as well without even a knock and say, much too loudly, “you up yet?”

“Not if I can help it,” I said.

Chapter 6 of **THE GOOD FRIEND**

BY MOTTNAVE

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“Well, get up. Minerva wants to see you up at the school.”

I grunted. I could hear water pouring into a glass and a clink as he sat it down on the dresser. *Water.* I gingerly turned my head. Yes, there it was, a pint glass of water.

“Water,” I said.

“You want it? Get up.”

I was experiencing a distinct feeling of *déjà vu*. I proceeded to sit up with extreme caution so my stomach wouldn’t make any sudden moves. When I managed to be upright enough to hold the glass and the vial of pain reliever that Aberforth was offering, I knocked the vial back quickly and then went at the water in sips until I could feel the potion take effect. Aberforth had stomped off again by the time I was done.

When I had finally washed up and made it down to the kitchen, Aberforth had tea, toast, and eggs waiting. I looked at them dubiously. They didn’t look appealing, but so far everything seemed to be staying in place. The tea was the most welcome part.

“All right, get out. I’ve got to start getting ready for service; I’ve spent too much time on this already.” I was getting the heave. I reapplied my disillusionment. I might not need it; the alley behind the Hog’s Head was on the ragged outskirts of town, but I didn’t want any chance of being seen.

Crossing the grounds, I could see at once how I had gone off course the night before. The path up from the service gates had changed to avoid a sinkhole and several groves of trees were gone. Marks of the battle, no doubt. Then there was the intentional mark of the battle, the monument I had avoided the night before.

I couldn’t avoid it now, I decided. If I couldn’t get past looking at that without a flashback, I had no business trying to visit the school. If I could view that without problems, I should be able to face the school in the daylight, particularly if I didn’t attempt the Great Hall.

It was a simple white stone obelisk engraved on the plinth: IN MEMORY OF THOSE WHO GAVE THEIR LIVES, 2 MAY 1998. The four faces held the names. My name was there. Vincent Crabbe’s was not. And all the rest, useless, all of them.

Why didn’t they get everyone out? They had no plan, no thought

at all except to stay and use children to fight for the sake of a building. No point to any of it. I was seized by the urge to kick at the flowers and notes that had been left around the monument base. What had Minerva been thinking? They hadn’t been thinking at all. If those reinforcements from Hogsmeade hadn’t arrived to throw their lives away too, it would have been a massacre.

I strode off towards the school. Better to kick it, really, than the flowers. I thought better of it by the time I got to the entrance; my foot would not come out the equal in that fight.

Where to begin? The idea of going up to the Headmaster’s office left me feeling ill again. No, Minerva could find me elsewhere. The staff room; perhaps I could find tea there.

The tea wasn’t made, of course, with the school closed for the summer. But the makings were there. Well, no milk. And only the oolong left. Musty, stale oolong. It did not appeal in the slightest. Would Filius still have a flask stashed here? His usual hiding place, in the hollow cornice of the mantel molding, was empty, as was the false back of the dormitory view-glass. Where else could it be? Unless he had taken it home with him for the summer. Filius did tend to be selfish with his tittle.

The water was boiling for tea and I was rooting through the kindling-box when Minerva found me.

“What on earth are you doing, Severus?”

“Making tea,” I snapped.

“I think you’ll find we keep the tea next to the kettle, not in the kindling-box. Hmm, oolong,” she said without enthusiasm.

She unscrewed the head of the bust of Roger Bacon and pulled out Filius’ flask. “If you’re going to get potted again, you can do it on your own time,” she said, pouring a small dram into a teacup, “but I’m not up for that awful oolong.”

I managed to get a few drops in my own cup before she snatched the flask back and secured it in the bust. She took the best armchair and regarded me over her cup. “Well, I can’t say I expected you to come back.”

I found a seat and knocked my cup back. “You *knew*. Who told you, Aberforth?”

She humped. "I share an office with the portrait of an insufferable busy-body who can't help winking and dropping hints and smiling to himself whenever your name comes up. I'd have to be deaf and blind not to know."

"Sod him! Who else?"

"Your House. Or at least they think they do. For a while their favorite game was to get themselves called up to my office so they could drop cryptic remarks around the portraits and smirk as if they were the only ones who could possibly puzzle it out. It got very tiresome, until I started reading the discipline rolls from the high table at dinner. *That* stopped them. And your 'eyes' know, I'm sure of it, whoever they are. Your Miss Bulstrode, their ringleader, she knows. She still won't tell me who the rest are. She says it's up to them to come forward or not."

"You needn't bother looking at me like that. She's quite right not to spread others' secrets and I won't tell you either."

"No, of course you won't," she said with sudden venom. "You couldn't be bothered to spread a crumb of information, not even if it could have saved lives."

"Saved lives? Is that what you were doing? Mounting a defense of a building, nothing but a *building*, with *children*!"

"And what choice did I have? Send them to their deaths?"

"Evacuate them, damn it! You had time, you had a tunnel, you did it with the lower years, you did it with my House – "

"Some of the upper years were marked for death, and I wouldn't send anyone out to that, even if you think you could!"

"No, fine, then they stayed in and got killed instead!"

"And they had a fighting chance at least."

"It could have been a sodding massacre."

"And how in Merlin's name would you have stopped it?"

"If I could have had fifteen minutes with Potter, *fifteen minutes* to explain what he had to do, we could have ended it."

That was too much for her. Minerva stood sharply. "If you had *ever* given me any word or indication that leaving you with Potter for fifteen minutes was any different than sending him to his death,

you could have had it. *No!* You played your part and now you can't blame me for the part you played. If you didn't want me to believe it you could have told me!"

"I *couldn't* tell you!"

"You told your eyes. You told children!"

"That was different, I – "

"No it was – "

"Yes, there were excuses for them, there was no possible excuse for you."

"Excuses!"

I tried to regain some measure of rationality for the argument. "If they were caught watching the resistance, there had to be an excuse. If they were not from my House, I had tricked them into thinking I wanted to help the resistance in order to get information. The ones from my House were helping me track the resistance so I could bring the whole thing down at once and snatch glory from the Carrows. Neither of those excuses would have worked for you. If they had got caught – "

"They were *children* – "

"Nothing more would have happened than a few questionings. If I spoke to you and we had got caught, we both would have been killed, Minerva."

"So you put children at risk instead!"

"Don't you think I *wished* I could have told you? Had some actual *help* from you keeping those idiots from throwing themselves in front of the Carrow's discipline?"

"And you could have had it if you had just *told* me instead of threatening to report *children* at a Death Eater meeting if I didn't keep them under control. Merlin!"

"I *couldn't*, can't you see that? There was nothing left! I couldn't do anything but try to follow the sodding plan!"

"That *plan* – " Minerva sagged like a string had been cut, anger gone in an instant.

My cup was empty but I didn't have the stomach for drink anyway.

"Bloody useless," I muttered, "and a bloody useless monument."

Might as well chip my name off, whole bloody school knows.”

Minerva gave a tired laugh. “Not the whole school... what?”

My cup was rattling on its saucer; I couldn’t hold onto it. I shoved it roughly onto the table. I couldn’t hold on to the anger either.

“What?” Minerva asked again.

“Where’s his name? Vincent’s name?”

Minerva looked stricken.

“Vincent’s name?” I gripped the arm of my chair. Because I had followed *that plan*, I couldn’t stop him, and – “Vince! Nowhere, like he didn’t exist, is that what you want?”

Minerva’s face had gone white. “No, Severus, listen...”

“Just wiped out!”

“No, *listen* to me! That monument is just for those who died in defense of the school. He died, yes, and I’m sorry, but he didn’t die in defense of the school, he *didn’t*. I couldn’t put his name there.”

“Then where is he? Where is his marker?”

“Severus, listen, please. I’m so sorry... they couldn’t find... they don’t think there are any remains,” she said carefully.

I felt cold. “Don’t *think*? What do you mean, *don’t think*?”

She took a deep breath. “We have *tried* and *tried*, but the Room won’t open.”

He was still in there.

I could see the door from my dreams, blistering and smoking from the heat and there were the screams of the trapped boys and it would never come open. Still, trapped, still sealed in.

I almost knocked my chair over as I headed for the door.

“Severus!”

I didn’t stop. Minerva caught up with me again pacing in the seventh floor corridor. “I need the Room of Hidden Things,” but no matter how many passes I made, the wall stayed blank. I hit it with my fist and immediately curled around my bruised knuckles.

Minerva caught me by the shoulder. “I know, *I know*, Severus, he was your student.”

“He was your student too!” I pulled away from her hand and began pacing again. “I need Vince, I need Vincent Crabbe, I need –”



The wall groaned and I could feel the vibrations through the soles of my feet. The wall buckled. Minerva started back. There was a painful grinding and the door forced its way out between the stones.

It was just like my dream, blistered and blackened, smoke-scorched. The glass knob had melted and twisted into a long tarnished bulb, the metal lockplate curling at the edges.

“Wait, Severus.”

I seized the knob and pulled. The door shuddered open, hinges scraping.

The room was nothing more than a blackened rock wall only inches behind the threshold. Well, only inches were needed for what was left of Vincent. Ash and tooth fragments split by the fire were piled in a drift against the back wall.

I held on to the door jamb. “Idiot, little *idiot!*” Some of the ash shifted under my breath.

“Come away from there.”

“Idiot!” *Nothing but a stupid, mean little boy.*

“Come on, get back.” She was using the brisk tone that usually dried up weepy firsties, but her hand on my shoulder was shaking.

She led me out of sight of the door and propped me against the wall. She walked away a few steps, speaking to someone who was squeaking back at her, must be a house elf, then there was a dry metallic scraping.

I put my hand over my eyes. They were scraping him up, he had to be scraped... little round boy, who liked ragging on Draco, *and who didn't?* in a little pile, scraped up, little idiot.

“All right, Severus,” she leaned close to me. She had a metal box under her arm. “It’s all over.”

“It never is.”

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OLD FILES

“**W**hy *did* you come back?” she asked.

We were back in the staff room with fresh tea of a much better quality and a healthy dose of Filius’ stash. Minerva had hidden the box with Vincent’s remains. I didn’t particularly want to know where.

“I would have thought that staying ‘dead’ suited you. As a heroic martyr and all.”

“Oh, please.” The storm that had rolled over both of us had left us in a sort of suspended calm. We were back to picking at each other the way we had done for years.

“Don’t tell me you don’t enjoy the glory.”

“What glory? You think a smear expose by Skeeter is glory? If you want one I could start feeding her some dirt on you.”

“The exciting and glamorous life of a headmistress. I’m sure that would be a hit.”

“It’s not that I wanted to come back. I wouldn’t have set foot in this place again if I didn’t have to; I’d leave you all in peace.”

“I’ll show you.” Minerva stood briskly and brushed down her robes.

“What?”

“The glory. I’m not talking about tawdry books and tabloids. I’ll show you. You ought to know who your friends are at least.”

What was she on about?

She led me down to the hallway leading to my old classroom. The familiarity was making me feel queasy again.

The small alcove that used to hold the bust of Paracelsus had been lifted out of obscurity by a charmed hot-house light and a glass case enclosing a spray of flowers. It was a blue orchid, *Agan-*

isia cyanea, a rarity. It was from Dick, without a doubt. He wasn't the herbologist who discovered it, but he was one of the first to bring a viable specimen out of the rainforest.

"It's from Dr. Stoltz, that pen-pal of yours," said Minerva.

"I do not have pen-pals."

"Oh, I'm sorry, your professional correspondent then, since you don't have any personal connections. *He* seemed to count you as a personal friend. He sent that and a very touching letter a few weeks after the battle. Pomona wanted to put it in the greenhouses, but Bulstrode got your House behind her and made such a fuss until I agreed they could be the caretakers. Miss Bulstrode did make the case that your House needs assignments and things to take charge of. They guard it very jealously."

Sure enough, the brass plaque below had been polished to gleaming. I wondered if they thought they could polish their reputations along with the plaque.

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SEVERUS SNAPE.

PROTECTOR OF HOGWARTS.

1960-1998

I stepped back quickly. "You can have it taken down."

"That's not all he sent, you know," Minerva went on as though I hadn't spoken. "He and a Dr. Ellery, the potions head at Miskatonic University, funded a scholarship in your name for the graduate education of Hogwarts students in the field of potions."

"He *what?*"

"And a donation to upgrade the potions equipment here as well."

"Damn it, he –" I stopped abruptly.

"He what?" Minerva was looking at me carefully.

"He shouldn't have," I said carefully.

"*That* is not what you were going to say."

"He didn't tell me," I admitted.

"Tell you? So he knows that you're alive?"

She wouldn't believe me if I lied. "He does now. Not at first, when he sent that."

She was taking on that narrow dangerous look again. She turned abruptly and began back towards the staff room. "I should know, I should know by now," she said tightly. I wasn't going to take her bait, but she didn't give me a chance anyway. "What special quality of friendship allows you to tell *him*, a pen-pal, who you only met a few times, above all your colleagues who you worked with for years..."

I hurried to catch up. "Those same colleagues who opposed me at every turn and wanted to kill me –"

"That was just because of your cover!"

"You had a side, and it wasn't mine."

"Just your cover! I've known you since you were *eleven!*"

"Yes, well, maybe I needed someone who hadn't! Who wasn't in that fight!"

We had stopped again in the corridor.

"And I didn't have a choice; I needed an out and he could get me out. So I didn't go to you. I wouldn't have gone to you and I wouldn't have come back here if I didn't need to. But what does it matter? You know now just the same."

"What does it matter? I'll tell you what I know now. No matter how many years we've known each other, you still don't trust me or consider me a friend. And so how can I really trust you? I know for a fact you won't tell me what's really going on unless you're forced to."

"That's not true! It was just too dangerous; it would have put myself and you and others in direct risk if I told you!"

"Yes, fine, *then*. And now, what about now? Why did you come back?"

I didn't answer.

"I see. Yes, you're quite open with me. Is it possible that if you had got what you wanted last night, you would have come and gone without a word? No answer? I don't think I need an answer after all. Let's get you what you want so you can disappear again and cut yourself off just as you please."

"I don't –" I started, but she was already marching briskly down the hall. It wasn't any use to argue; she clearly wasn't in a mood to listen to reason. If she did have a copy of the contract I could take it now and explain later. Perhaps send a letter once she had cooled down. Or

perhaps I would just intend to send one, reconsider it later, and decide to have no contact after all. I scowled and hurried after her.

She gave a little huff as I caught up with her, but didn't speak again as she led us on. It wasn't the staff room we were headed for, but the administrative offices on the first dungeon level.

The offices were in as much disarray as I'd ever seen them, except for the time Mrs. Norris had staged a running battle against a kneazle there, and had left a trail of blood, fur, and toppled files all through the offices. Now the desks and furniture had all been shoved to one side and covered with towering heaps of files. The endless ranks of file cabinets that turned the place into a bewildering warren were now dismantled down to the drawers and runners and their index cards hovered in the air like a swarm of moths.

As we entered, there was a hollow thump from behind an enormous stack of files. Minerva stalked around to the other side.

"Miss Bulstrode, do you have the file I requested?"

Bulstrode? I stepped around the edge of the pile. Bulstrode was crouched on the floor over a disassembled file drawer, laying charms on the joints.

"On the desk." She waved vaguely at the desks without looking up. Minerva went off to get it, I supposed.

"Making a mess as usual, Bulstrode?"

She froze over her work, but managed to get any surprise well covered by the time she looked up at me. Bulstrode always hated to show anything if she could help it.

"Filing system's shite, sir," she said blandly.

Minerva rejoined us with a disapproving look at Bulstrode's language. "Miss Bulstrode has decided that the files need a complete overhaul."

"Accios don't even work in here anymore. Not a single sorting charm on the cabinets. Need to put in sorting ascension charms on dates, names, addresses, Houses, and then the archives..."

Bulstrode was right, the archives were a shocking mess, and there were a lot of them, everything before 1800, and all dreadful, organized by family tree, with separate cabinets for muggleborns, Catholics, and foreigners.

"*Ought* to be able to call up a file with just a tap, not a whole expedition," Bulstrode went on. That would certainly be a drastic change for the secretary pool. Madam Malocchio, the charming old battle-axe who ran the place, had them spend most of their time running down files.

"Whatever will Madam Malocchio do with herself?" I wondered.

"Something useful for a change?" suggested Bulstrode.

"Careful, Bulstrode, she'll do you for loose talk."

"Oh, no, sir. I bring her cannolis."

I tried to tamp down a smirk. Clearly Bulstrode was well on her way to running the place in a few years.

"Very well, you two have had your fun. Here's your contract." Minerva handed me a paper. I saw my signature, 1981, god, how young. And what other school made you sign in blood?

"That's what you came for, yes?" She was looking at me keenly again. She knew very well it wasn't what I had come for, but I wasn't about to tell her more or get into another argument at the moment. I needed to change the subject immediately.

"Miss Bulstrode, we have recovered Crabbe's remains..."

Bulstrode's face went blank and she said, quietly, "*Vicky*."

"*Vicky?*" said Minerva.

It didn't seem quite the time to go into the byzantine workings of Crabbe's House nickname. God, it hadn't been quite the time to bring it up without warning either. Bulstrode was looking down at the half-finished drawer at a loss. "*Vicky*," she said again, eyes on the drawer. I needed to give her an assignment, right away.

"Bulstrode, you are to contact the rest of the House and inform them."

"Severus! I hardly think that's a job for —" Minerva began, but Bulstrode said, "Yes, sir," over her. She kept looking at the floor for another moment before taking a breath and beginning again.

"You have something for us, sir? That you owe us?"

Minerva looked a bit shocked at her temerity. It would have shocked her more to learn what the payment was.

"Yes, but it's not with me at the moment. We will have to meet elsewhere."

"Yes, sir."

"Owe you?" asked Minerva. Neither of us answered. It was probably the last straw. "Very well, very *well*." She swept out and shut the door with finality.

Bulstrode bent back to the drawer again. "I have my assignment, sir."

Was she telling me to go after her? Sod it all. I left the contract and went. I caught up with her outside the staff room.

"I couldn't talk to them either –"

"Oh, get in here, for Merlin's sake." She shut the door behind us.

"I couldn't talk to them, Minerva. What would you have done if one of your students came to you and told you that they were thinking of joining the Dark Lord? Would you have talked to them?"

"*Talk* is the least I would have done."

"Well, I didn't. As their Head of House I had the duty to advise them not to throw their lives away, and I didn't. If I hadn't needed to keep my cover for that damn *plan* I might have convinced them not to waste their lives for the self-interest of a bloody madman."

"You think you could have convinced them?"

"Oh, I can be *very* convincing. But I didn't try. To serve that plan. And they paid for it with their lives and their reputations and their futures. So yes, I owe them. *Everyone* who benefited from that plan owes them, including you, not that I expect anyone to acknowledge that."

"But did you have any choice?"

"I chose to follow it, Minerva. But what if we had tried something else? If I had been honest with them from the start and united them with the rest of the school? We might have found some other way."

"You couldn't know that it would work, and if it failed..."

"I couldn't know that Albus' plan would work either. He never even told me the whole of it. I suppose I thought it must be better than it was. It very nearly failed, Minerva. If the Dark Lord had been just a little more *direct* with me, I wouldn't have been able to pass those memories..."

"Still, Severus, you did tell some; you spoke to your eyes."

"Yes, a select few. It hardly pays for all those ruined futures. And even the ones who never joined, their reputations are ruined too."

And Vincent, would he be alive now if I had just been honest with him? I wasn't honest with them, Minerva; I played games with their lives. So, yes, I owe them. And if you think I owe you too because I wasn't honest with you, fine, name your damn price, but get to the back of the bloody queue!"

I felt short of breath. Minerva was studying me calmly from her armchair, anger no longer etched onto her face.

"Is that why you came back? To pay something you think you owe?"

It was a bit ridiculous to be standing in front of her. I sat.

"It's for a friend. It's not mine to tell, Minerva, it really isn't."

"I would name my price, Severus, but I think you paid it just now. Besides, there won't be much left of you after your students bleed you dry. I'll let you off this time, but see that it doesn't happen again."

I snorted.

"Oh, I mean it. If you think you can cut off contact again, when I know you're alive, I'll have Bulstrode hunt you down. And she will, too. She's very efficient."

"There's a reason I picked her as one of the eyes."

"The head of them, the way she tells it. Not that I'm complaining. She's our best admin. And she keeps your House together from the sidelines. She has them well in hand, gives them assignments and has them stick in groups for protection. Horace... his heart isn't in it. He dearly wants to retire again, but no one else who I'd trust wants to touch that job. I have to bribe him more every year to stay on."

She was trying to give me a meaningful glance. Unfortunately I was looking studiously at the ceiling at the time and missed it entirely.

"Severus."

"Not with a ten-foot pole."

She sighed.

"You didn't really expect me to, did you?" I asked.



"You know more
than you think you do."

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"I suppose not. Very well, since we have all our pretense out of the way, do you still want to speak to Albus' portrait? I can take you up."

Take me up and listen in, no doubt – I thought not. If I was going to speak to him, I would do it alone. And truthfully, I had no desire to see him or have any more confrontations today. I could sneak back in later. "No, I need to be getting on."

Minerva stood. "I expect to hear from you again. You know where to find me."

ALL IN FAVOR

Aberforth caught me on the service stairs of the Hog's Head, heading up to the back bedroom.

"They're waiting for you," he said.

"What?" I stood gripping the banister, back pressed against the wall.

"Oh, for Merlin's sake, your students, not a bloody Auror squad."

I didn't exactly relax.

"They're in the back room. Didn't *look* like they were planning on cursing you. You going to slip out the back?"

I sighed. I might as well get it over with. "No, just don't let anyone else wander in."

I retrieved the padded box that held the payment I owed them, then went back downstairs. I stood just outside the door of the back room. Aberforth was clashing pots in the kitchen down the hall, but the back room was silent. They were in there. If I was going to make an entrance, I couldn't bloody waver like this. I steeled myself to throw the door open and sweep in.

It didn't come off. Rather, I couldn't bring it off. I couldn't slam the door on them. I opened it, and closed it quietly behind me. Bulstrode certainly was efficient. She had managed to get about forty of the

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by Mottsnave

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House in the half-hour since I saw her in the administrative offices. All my Slytherin eyes were there: Bulstrode, of course, Theo Nott, Daphne Greengrass and Graham Pritchard. I supposed Bulstrode thought I didn't owe the Ravenclaw and Hufflepuff eyes as much as them. Most of the rest were from my last years at the school.

Charles Frederick Montgomery Sullivan Urquhart was the first to stand. Damn him, if Sully tried to make a speech, I'd hex him. But he didn't, standing in silence for a change, followed by Zabini next to him, other across the room, and all the way to Bulstrode at the back. It was more of a silent gantlet than an ovation, the faces studiously blank. I was there to pay a debt, after all, the kind that can never be fully paid.

I could feel each pair of eyes on my back as I made my way across the room to Bulstrode. It was rather like that last year at Hogwarts, dinner in the Great Hall, with so many watching and hating me. I put the box on the table in front of her.

"You've brought the requested payment, sir?"

"Yes. The temperature in the box is lowered, so she is brumating. You'll have to raise the temperature very slowly over a week or so to bring her out safely."

"What kind, sir?"

"*Crotalus oreganus*."

Bulstrode carefully opened the box and looked in. Theo joined her and nodded to the rest of the group. They were starting to sit again, thank god. Bulstrode was still standing. "I call this meeting to order."

Damn, they wanted to make it official. And I only had myself to blame for the years in training them to conduct the meetings.

"We are here to decide the motion: former Head of House Severus Snape will render one snake in payment for his debts to Slytherin House. I open the floor..." She was hardly done before Sully was on his feet to speak.

"I recognize Sully, if he keeps it *short*," said Bulstrode.

"Point of order, how can this be decided on behalf of the House when most of the House is not present?"

"Sully, most of the House is not available on fifteen minutes

notice. If they don't like our decision they can bring their own damn motion."

"And who decides that?"

"I do." Yes, Bulstrode had managed to take control of the House, I saw.

Edmund, 'the Dodger' Mingus was up next, his Lieutenant Phelps giving him a little push. "Point of information. Aren't there, aren't some of us are owed more than others? Certain people," he said, glancing at Bulstrode and the other eyes at the end of the room, "were given information that put them in a very good position at the end. The rest of us have to shift for ourselves."

I thought it was time to step in. "Objection. Really, *Edmund*, your point of information is to whinge that 'it's not fair'? I believe you've heard me express myself on that point many times. *Certain* people gave me proof over many years that they could be relied upon with sensitive information. *Others*," I said, staring down Mingus, "could be counted on to sell any and all information at the first opportunity."

There were nodding heads at that. Mingus couldn't really dispute the point; he had put far too much effort building his business in the House for anyone to believe that he wouldn't sell anything and everything possible.

Astoria Greengrass stood, face red and too upset to introduce her point with protocol. "The point isn't 'it's not fair,' the point is that Vicky's dead and Greg's in Azkaban and some of us had to leave the country! Because *you* wouldn't talk to us!"

She sat abruptly, still red. Daphne squeezed her shoulder. Well, yes, that was the point, wasn't it? Eyes were back on me again.

"Unfortunately for all of us, if I had told the rest of you what I told the eyes and it had spread into the wrong hands, I would have been immediately removed, killed, and replaced with someone much, much worse. And if I had told you and you joined me, and the war had ended another way, you would all be much worse off than you are now. My course was to keep you safe *whatever* the outcome.

Even so, I did not leave you without protection and without advice. The eyes risked themselves to keep you all safe. And I gave you the best advice I could for all circumstances: *keep your heads down*. Crabbe and Goyle did not follow that advice."

There was silence for a moment. I thought I might be turning them to my side, when Zabini stood up.

"That may be, but all I'm hearing is a lot of excuses. I've been informed many times that the House does not take excuses."

"Mr. Zabini, my not telling the House and you not turning in your parchments on time are not the same thing."

"No, they're not," he shot back, "your not warning us is worse. My late parchments never put your life or future at risk!"

He had a point, and it had to be answered.

"The plan, as it stood, required certain sacrifices. I agreed to it, and all of *you* paid for it."

My admission was met with silence.

"I agreed, because I knew that of all the Houses, only ours would be able to make that payment and remain standing."

Pansy's voice rang out in the silence. "It's been bad!"

"Yes," I answered, "nevertheless, you have managed, and you have survived, which is more than can be said for some."

"Managing is not enough for us," Zabini said, "we want more." He turned to Bulstrode, who had been calmly watching the breakdown of protocol.

"I object to the proposed motion. That is not enough payment for the debt."

Bulstrode raised her eyebrows at him. "What do *you* propose? A debt's no good to us if he can never pay it."

Sully stood again. There were a few groans. He had that heady air he got when he was about to start with grand pronouncements and verbose speeches.

"As an objection has been raised by an honorable member of the House," he nodded at Zabini, "and it shows reason and merit, I wish to offer a substitute motion to resolve the objection, should it please the honorable Miss. Bulstrode."

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"Sully," said Bulstrode, "it'll please me if you get on with it."

"I therefore propose the motion that the former Professor Snape, in payment for all his debts to the House, shall render one snake mascot as specified above. Further, he will provide recommendations, professional and academic references, placements, and referrals within his power, under his right name and dated currently, to any and all who were members of the House during his term at Hogwarts and who request them. The references must be of the best quality possible and delivered in a reasonable time after a request is made. He must open a venue of communication for such requests to be made."

"Seconded," said Zabini immediately.

Sully had a bit of genius about him. It was something the House certainly needed and also a perfect way to twist the knife. I couldn't fulfill that without my name coming out. I had put their lives and futures at risk and now they were intent on returning the favor. The vote sailed through, of course. There was nothing I could do. Any of them could reveal my existence in a heartbeat if they chose. None of them had taken any vow to keep my life a secret, and I didn't exactly have any leverage to force the issue. Well, wasn't this what I had signed up for when I came back to pay my debts? I ought to have known that my exposure was a likely consequence. Perhaps after all my debts were paid I could cut off all contact again, build another new identity and go back into hiding. Then I could have my real peace.

When the last 'aye' came in, the blank or grim looks fell from he faces as my former students crowded in to look at their new snake.

"Don't push!"

"Oh, she's small."

"Well, she's got to be younger than Maxwell."

"Does that mean she'll move more?" asked Daphne. Maxwell had been an impressive five feet long with a distinguished portly build. He never moved unless he absolutely had to.

"She's cute," said Barbara 'Baby' Cross.

"Cute?" said Zabini, indignant.

"I mean in a dangerous kind of way," Baby corrected herself. "I like her."

Bulstrode backed out of the press and leaned over to me. "Don't worry, sir. It will all blow over now. Now that they see you haven't left them," she said quietly.

Bulstrode was reassuring *me*? And surely she didn't think it would be that easy? But the mood of the House, mercurial as always, was shifting. Nott was there waiting to shake my hand along with my other eyes. And Sully was trying to talk to me over Pritchard's shoulder.

"Sir, I just sat for the solicitors qualifying exam, and once my diploma comes in I'll be taking a position at Farnsworth, Frobisher, Fotheringham, and Khan."

No doubt he would pass and his name would be cluttering up the firm title in a few years.

I had shaken some twelve hands and the press was getting a bit too close. I took a step backwards. Bulstrode spoke up again. "Order! We still have one item..."

The students, former students, drew back again grudgingly.

"The former Professor Snape has an announcement."

Damn, they wouldn't like this. But I had made these sorts of announcements before.

"Earlier today I recovered Mr. Crabbe's remains from the Room of Hidden Things."

There was silence then, just as when I entered. Now It wasn't all eyes on me. They were looking down, or looking away. No, there was a pair still on me from across the room. Draco Malfoy was standing just to the side of the door, behind Miles Bletchley. I stopped speaking abruptly. When the hell had he come in?

Bulstrode followed my glance and took the meeting back. "Reference requests will go through me. You will each pass the news of our decision to the other members of the House. Meeting is adjourned." She was handing out assignments all around now, shortly informing the others who they were responsible for contacting. As Minerva said, she really did have the House in hand. The students were leaving in small clumps as Bulstrode dismissed them.

Draco was still there, standing just by the side of the door. So that was it, I couldn't leave without going past him, he was arrang-

ing it to be inevitable. Bulstrode gave him a nod and a few muttered words that I couldn't catch as she went out. We were alone.

Wonderful. I might as well seize whatever ground I could. "Rabbit." I was using his oldest and most hated House nickname.

"Don't call me that."

There was a pause. It was about as comfortable as a Ministry interrogation room chair. He didn't seem inclined to take a step away from the wall. Nor did he want to give me an opening. He was trying to watch me coolly, but as usual, his face began to flush. Well, I supposed everything was up to me, as usual. I took a step toward him.

"Draco."

"I thought you were dead!"

"Oh, really? Then you were the only one in the House who did."

"You know what I mean!"

"No."

"They didn't *know*, it was all just guessing. That's not the same as knowing. That's not the same as talking to you. And you weren't *here*."

"I'm here now, and now you know."

"You weren't here when I needed you!"

"Unlike all the other times. Did you have to take care of yourself for once?"

He flushed again but said nothing.

"Why are you here? Did you just come to blush at me?"

As I thought, that provoked him out of his silence.

"I'm breaking my probation just to come here! I'm supposed to notify my officer every time I leave the house. I could get a year added to my sentence for this, and you won't even *talk* to me!"

"I'm talking to you."

"Damn you!"

"Look at me, Draco, I'm talking to you. I'm here now."

"Three years!"

"Yes, I didn't know – "

"Three years! And you didn't send any word."

"Until two months ago I thought I would be attacked or arrested if I returned."

"What? *You* got a pardon."

"I thought it was a trap. Because of your father."

Draco caught the back of a chair and gripped it.

"Don't you *dare* blame my father."

"I'm not. It's the Ministry I didn't trust. They didn't honor your father's contract, so I didn't trust them to honor the pardon."

"So there *was* a contract?"

Hadn't his father told him? Or did even his son not quite believe him?"

"Yes. I found out two months ago that the Ministry doesn't have it."

"Then who does?"

"That's why I'm here."

"*You* don't know?" His anger was back again.

"No, I'm here to – "

"How can you not know?"

"Draco, it was for your father's protection. I arranged it, but I was not to know where it was kept. I thought your father knew."

"Don't pretend you were concerned with his protection."

"I'm not *pretending* anything."

"And how the hell would I know that? How could I ever know?" His voice, which had risen to almost a shout, broke off abruptly.

"I – " I started.

"How can I *ever* know?" He was almost pleading now.

That was the real hurt. He had thought that he knew me. What could I possibly say now that he wouldn't doubt one way or another? I had built it all myself; enough deception and lies that even he who had known me all his life couldn't trust a word I said.



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"I needed help and your father helped me. Now he's paying for it. Draco, I wreck everything I touch. That's why I'm here."

He looked at me in silence.

"And why are *you* here?"

"I had to see you," he said at last. It came out of him like a confession of weakness. "To... see that somebody came through all right. And if I didn't, I don't know, maybe you would have just *left* again." The pleading tone was back.

"Draco, I thought I could quickly locate the contract at the school. After that I would have contacted you to turn it over."

"Me?" He sounded hopeful. "Not the Ministry?"

"I have no intention of letting the Ministry know that I'm here. I would rather they don't know that I'm even alive. That wasn't my choice."

"Since they didn't have your body, they'd be idiots not to figure it out."

"Well..."

"You don't think they're going to find out you're here? The House knows, and if you keep hanging around Hogsmeade..."

I sighed. "The idea was to pick up the contract last night, deliver it to you, and leave. It's proving more difficult than that."

Draco looked down. "Of course it is."

"I'll need to speak to your father."

"But he doesn't know where it is! If he did he would have used it for his defense."

"Even if doesn't know where the contract is currently, he may be able to give me a lead. He may have been able to see where the Headmaster put it at the time or other details."

"The Headmaster – did you ask his portrait?"

"I need to talk to your father."

He may have noticed my evasion but he knew better than to mention it. Anyway, I had no clear explanation of why I'd rather face a visit to Azkaban than a bit of charmed paint and memories. And I certainly didn't want to get into my little *episode* the last time I had attempted it.

"It's... difficult," he said. "It's family only. Our barrister thought it would be best for his protection. I mean, we do have an arrange-

ment with one of the guards for bringing in personal necessities and not checking us too closely – " *Of course they did.* " – but it wouldn't extend to bringing in someone presumed dead and very famous."

"I'm prepared to not look like myself for an hour."

Draco looked uncomfortable. "I don't know."

"Do you want him out?"

"Yes, but I don't want to go back in. If we get caught, they would revoke my probation at the very least. We were... if we could get father out, then as soon as my probation is up we'll leave the country. Mother has friends on the continent. They're all we have left." I noticed that he didn't include me. "I don't want to do anything that might ruin that."

"You wouldn't know anything about it."

"I don't know."

"That's right," I said, deliberately misunderstanding him.

"I mean, I'll see. I have to – we usually visit every other week."

"Sooner rather than later, Draco."

"Yes, sir."

THE APPOINTMENT

I was in one of the dungeons below the school. In front of me was the arched doorway at the head of the stairs down. I felt a cold dread. Did I really have to go down? I started on the first steps, but stopped quickly. The stairs were flooded with dark water. It was moving slightly from below. I backed

up across the corridor and set myself against the wall. I knew I couldn't run. Something was coming. I could hear shuffling thumps on the stairs. A white shape was coming up. It heaved. The top of a head barely above the steps, a pale forehead. There was a thump,

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it heaved again. Regulus' dead face. His chin caught the top of the step. His elbow twitched up. There was a thump. He heaved –

The thump had a glassy rattle and there was soft morning light and soft bedclothes that I pushed down with a convulsive jerk. I was in bed in Aberforth's spare room, having nothing more than the usual sort of rubbish dreams and there was a damn owl thumping at the window. The leather anklet marked it as one of the school's birds. I had long since warded my name against such things as owl deliveries, howlers, Point-me's, and tracking charms, but if someone knew my location, they could simply send an owl to a destination rather than my name. Bloody Minerva.

I threw open the window and snatched the letter from its claws, but it was Bulstrode's heavy handwriting across the back of the folded page: *I believe this is for you, sir.* I opened it.

File Clerk,

By this letter, I request a copy of my Hogwarts transcript. As it is required for an immediate application for employment, I will not be able to wait for owl delivery. I request permission enter the grounds and visit the file room to collect the papers at ten o'clock this morning.

Thank you for your consideration,

Mr. Draco Malfoy

A red "inspected by no. 166," DMLE seal glowed at the bottom of the page. So that's how it stood. The words *back room* had been written and crossed out just before *file room*. The meaning was clear enough. I only wondered how Draco had managed everything so quickly. He must have dug up the motivation somewhere. Unless he wanted to meet me to tell me he'd have no part in it. I rather doubted it though; if he really wanted no part in it he'd hide at home and not appear at all.

I rummaged through the vials of potions I had packed for what I needed and left the room. I stopped at the head of the stairs for a moment, but the last shreds of the dream were already fading in the morning light. No need for that now. I made my way down to the kitchen. The Hog's Head didn't open for hours, but Aberforth was already working, opening up crates of bottles.

"I'll be using the back room at ten," I told him.

Aberforth snorted. "Aye, that's the way, no 'may I use the back room, do you mind?' Just announce it like it's your due."

"Yes, very well," I said, taking him at his word, and went to the back.

Draco arrived early, carrying a satchel. I smirked as I placed a locking charm on the door. Once you learned dark wizard standard time, you never unlearned it.

Draco dumped the contents of the bag on a table and started separating articles of clothing.

"All right, I've made the arrangements but we'll have to be fast." He was flustered and not looking at me.

"We?"

"I'm coming too. Mother and I always go together. It looks better." And he must have decided that he didn't trust me alone with his father, if he was willing to risk his probation and freedom.

Draco was opening a box with jewelry. Shite. He saw my expression. "If you're going to be mother, you need to look the part." He was right, of course. And of course I would have to wait for the transformation before starting on the details; the earrings would have to wait until I had piercings, for one thing. I would have to be very quick.

Draco was holding up a long blond hair and looking queasy. I took it.

"Do you have a spare?"

He shook his head. "They make sure no one carries polyjuice in with them now, ever since Crouch. *Our* guard won't check us for ingestion, but even with our arrangement, you wouldn't be able to get a vial in."

Wonderful; one hour, and no backup.

"Our guard is Priestly. He's meeting us at the Ministry floo point in fifteen minutes."

No use delaying, then. I added the hair to my vial. "Start a Tempus," I told Draco.

"No good, they'll take our wands. I have a watch." A small weather-clock swung from a chain. He set it and put it back in his pocket. I stared at him. He really had planned this out. He didn't usually have so much foresight.

I downed the vial and began to struggle into the clothes as quickly as possible as the transformation took me. Draco turned his back. No one wanted to see their mother starkers. How the hell was that thing supposed to fasten? I could have used an extra pair of hands, but I needed Draco functional and not dead from embarrassment.

Once everything was strapped into place and I was decently affixing jewelry (not the good stuff, I noticed), Draco finally faced me again. I was putting on what must have been a replica wedding ring. Draco was observing me critically. "It will have to do." He opened a wand case and handed me his mother's wand.

I hated to leave mine behind, but I would hate even more for it to be confiscated by the Ministry.

We used the floo in the back room to save time. It deposited us in an alcove that was undoubtedly DMLE by the drab beige paint and the overwhelming scent of old parchment and Scourgifying Solution in the air. It didn't seem to be off a public corridor, thankfully. Some doors led off to offices, but there was little traffic. A broad balding man was there to meet us.

"Got your transcript then, Malfoy?"

He must be Draco's probation officer. And damn it, I didn't know his name.

Draco tapped his pocket. "Yes, thank you, Mr. Fenton."

Ah. What would Narcissa say? Of course she would want to snub him, but as he held her son's liberty in his hands, surely she would have been buttering him up for a while.

"We *appreciate* it, Mr. Fenton," I said. It was close enough to pass.

We didn't rate a welcome. He led us down another corridor without a word. We passed 'Broom Travel Fines,' 'Restricted Ingredient Per-

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mits,' and the 'Impound Office.' We must be in some low-security wing.

Draco glanced behind us to make sure no one was following closely, then leaned over and said in a low voice, "you're walking very strangely today, *mother*, is everything quite all right with your hips?"

"Yes, my hips are perfectly fine, *darling*, thank you for your concern," I hissed back. What was wrong with my walk? I was sure it was passing. I tried taking smaller narrower steps while keeping up with Fenton.

He was leading us through a door into a wider space with narrow high-set windows. There were people here, Ministry officials and a few queues in front of grated service windows. Draco's head went down and he stuck close to Fenton's heels. We were getting some stares here, and they were not very kindly. It reminded me sharply of stepping into the Great Hall at Hogwarts that last year. My hands were clenching. I couldn't show anything, not now. They were not staring at me, after all, they were staring at Narcissa. And what would Narcissa do? She would attempt to keep her head up and glide through it, I decided.

I wasn't sure how my glide looked from the outside, but it was an effort to keep my breathing even by the time we reached the other side of the hall and I was heartily wishing the Ministry allowed Disillusionment.

Draco visibly relaxed when we stepped into the quieter back corridor. I could feel the hour slipping away from us, but happily there wasn't much further to go. Fenton stopped before a guarded door. "Priestly, you take them in."

Priestly, the guard Draco had called 'ours,' a bull-necked man with close-cropped grey hair, detached himself from his post by the door and led us into the checkpoint. Draco slipped him a small pouch while I was turning in Narcissa's wand. The movement was so quick and practiced that I almost missed it. He was almost as good as his father now. He must have learned quickly.

His payment received, Priestly took us through the checkpoint with the most cursory examination. The other guards didn't seem to notice us at all. How much of the Malfoy fortune had that taken? I wondered how much was left after all the Ministry judgements they'd had to pay. The sooner Narcissa and Draco could go to their

friends on the continent, the better off they'd be.

Priestly stood between Draco and I, a heavy hand on both our shoulders, as we entered the secure floo. Another instant and I knew from my next breath that it all was a terrible mistake. *Azkaban*, the smell of it; salt, wet stone, and fear sweat. At least Shackbolt's reforms had got rid of the Dementors, but still, my own sweat was running down my back as we stepped from the floo alcove to be checked in by yet more guards. Narcissa didn't sweat, ever. If I didn't get hold of myself, I would give the game away. Draco wasn't showing anything; for god's sake, I couldn't be the one to slip up. I swallowed the saliva that was gathering at the back of my mouth. I kept my gaze fixed on a point high on the wall as Priestly stuck a visitor's badge on my robes. *Everything was as it should be; the staff we had paid for their service were simply going through the motions as they did every time I visited my husband. It was entirely routine and they weren't even worthy of my regard.*

Another corridor; I could hear muffled shouting and a heavy metal clang somewhere in the distance. The visiting room was close to the floo, thankfully. We were sat on one side of the metal table with a guard stationed inside the door. No Lucius.

"Darling, how much time do we have before my appointment?"

Draco pulled out the watch. "Thirty-four minutes, mother."

The door opened as Draco snapped the watch closed.

I almost didn't recognize him. The guard brought him to the seat across from us at the table and attached his shackles to the metal ring at the edge. Lucius' hair had been cropped short and he had a few days' growth of beard. His wrists in the shackles looked almost frail. His wary look fell away as the guard stepped back to his post at the door. Lucius leaned forward eagerly.

"I thought you weren't coming until next week. Draco – we have to watch our resources."

Draco flushed. I was sure he didn't want me to know they were feeling the pinch. "Sorry, father."

Lucius leaned back with almost a smirk at me. "How are the pear trees?"
Pear trees? "Fine."

Draco sighed. Lucius started and looked at me in absolute bewilderment. Well, *that* was the wrong answer. Apparently, Narcissa would have said something very different. *Pear trees?* If I tried to cover for the slip now, it would just waste time; we might as well come clean and get to the point. I leaned my head forward and pinched the bridge of my nose for a moment, then looked up at Lucius and gave him my best glare. He leaned forward staring at me, puzzled. It took him a moment. His eyes widened and he whispered, "filthy hybrid?" He knew me.

"Inbred degenerate," I replied.

He turned angrily on Draco. "*Draco.*"

"Father!"

He turned on me. "*Mongrel!*"

"Ponce."

Draco set his hand on the table. "We're wasting time. If it can possibly help –"

"Oh, *now* the mutt wants to help?"

The guard didn't seem to take any special note of our exchange, but it was time to move this along. "*Darling*, I've been looking for a parchment that you signed a few years ago. You remember, dear, after you had that drink with me."

Lucius did his best to fold his arms in spite of the shackles. "Why, *sweetheart*, I thought your *old man* had that parchment, if it still exists. Or aren't you speaking?"

"Things have changed."

"You surprise me."

"Can we just –" began Draco.

"*Honey*, I thought you might recall what happened after I left that meeting."

"Well I do recall a sudden portkey trip that landed me in a muddy field in the middle of nowhere. Your old man ruined my good boots."

"I mean, *love*, I thought you might have seen what he did with the parchment at the end of the meeting."

"Well, treasure, as he arranged that I touched that portkey immediately after I signed, in blood, very gauche, I didn't see a thing. So,

he didn't tell you where he put it."

It wasn't a question, but I answered him anyway. "It was arranged that way for your protection."

"I find it so interesting," he mused. "He never trusted you." Lucius was smiling.

"That's –"

"And here I am, who went along with you, at *you know* what cost, and who trusted you, enjoying my reward."

"You may remember, *darling*," I said in a low voice, "just how I rewarded the old man, and why."

"Every day I find something new to be thankful for."

"Bloody hell," muttered Draco.

"Don't swear, Draco, it's vulgar," I said.

"Your *mother* is right, Draco."

"Father, we only have a few minutes, mother has an appointment."

"Yes, of course she does. Just a few minutes now, you say?"

It was very good that Draco was with me, I saw now. Lucius' voice had gone dead flat. He was quite possibly angry enough to blow my cover if it wouldn't have put his son in jeopardy.

"If you don't have that parchment, you're of no use to me." He turned to Draco. "Draco, about that supposed friend of yours," he said calmly. "It's one thing for me to be manipulated and betrayed, but if he ever toys with the hopes of my family, *that* he would pay for, *that* I would not forgive."

Draco wasn't looking at either of us. He raised a hand slightly to the guard at the door. The guard came over and pulled Lucius up by his elbow. He had to stand hunched over as the guard released his shackles from the ring in the table. Just another little humiliation for him. He didn't look back as the guard took him out.

We didn't waste time getting out ourselves. Draco muttered, "fourteen minutes," as we hurried ahead of our escort to the secure floo. Priestly gave us another cursory check and collected our visitor badges. Fenton checked us in when we flooed through to the Ministry. And why did the Ministry have to have so much paperwork for everything? And what did Narcissa's signature look like? I

ought to know it well enough from countless reports and permission forms. I scrawled my best approximation.

Fenton looked at us a bit strangely in our rush to get out, but I didn't care as long as he didn't slow us down. I hardly noticed the stares in the public hall this time. We made it through and flooed back to the Hog's Head with four minutes to spare.

I got most of Narcissa's clothes off and my own on before the transformation took me. "Shit!" I gasped in pain.

"Sir?" Draco was still avoiding turning around so as not to see either me or his mother exposed.

"Bloody earrings! Help me with this – I'm decent, goddamn it!"

Draco finally turned around and managed to get the earring backings off and used his handkerchief to get the blood sopped up from my brand-new piercings.

"Sorry, sir," he muttered.

"I'm just glad I got the ring off."

Draco tried for a smile but didn't quite manage it. He was folding his mother's robes. "Is that it then, sir?"

I hesitated, thinking about Lucius' warning about toying with his family's hopes.

"Not quite."

Draco was Scourgifying the blood off the earrings. "Not quite?" he said carefully.

"I have one more lead. I'll contact you as soon as I've followed it."

"The portrait."

I didn't answer.

"Which is right here and doesn't put me or my father at risk."

"Drop it, Draco." He still looked angry. I sighed. "Your father has more incentive to be honest than *he* does."

"You don't trust him? I thought you two were friends." There was scorn in his voice.

"There are different kinds of friends, Draco. He is my friend, not your father's. The fact that he hasn't brought forth the contract in the past three years raises some questions."

"Yes, it does." Draco picked up the satchel and left.



Art by Mottsnave

THE NOTE

There really wasn't any point in delaying. I made sure that all traces of blood were gone and my earlobes were thoroughly healed before I disillusioned myself and started for the school. I found Minerva with Bulstrode in the owly sorting letters into piles by destination.

"Look who's back," said Minerva blandly.

"Hello, sir." Bulstrode turned back to her uncooperative owl. "Six Pennyfarthing Lane, Portmerion, got it?"

Chapter 10 of **THE GOOD FRIEND**
by Mottsnave

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THE GOOD FRIEND

The owl gave a non-committal hoot and took off through the window. "How can we help you, Severus?" asked Minerva. "I need to speak to him after all," I said reluctantly. "Very well, I'll take you up." "No need; you can just give me the password." "Unfortunately not, I can't have Miss Bulstrode overhearing that." "Already know the password, headmistress," said Bulstrode calmly. "No you don't, I changed it this morning." "I'll just find out again, ma'am." "We'll see about that. Come along, Severus."

Minerva had told me once years ago, "you Slytherins always have to have your games." She had been fed up with me at the time, but it seemed that she had finally taken it to heart and given Bulstrode a game to play. Bulstrode loved ferreting out secrets. No different from the rest of us, really.

The password, as I found by leaning in quickly as Minerva addressed the lock, was 'Ovid.'

Minerva gave me a look. "All alike."

The gargoyle was gone; another casualty of the war perhaps. Or perhaps Minerva had got fed up with him as well. The door didn't look especially formidable now. I still felt a ridiculous reluctance to take that last step.

"I'll be here if you want me," said Minerva. I looked at her. Not even trying to come up and listen in? "Go on, then." She took a seat on the bench used by delinquents to cool their heels before being called upstairs. It was my turn now. I started up the stairs.

I needed to get my brain out of this track by the time I reached the office. *I* was not being called up; *he* was the one who hadn't followed through on his word. It was absurd to avoid this any longer. There wasn't any *him* there, after all. Just a bit of charmed wood and paint, scraps of memories. And some very old enchantments. The portraits of the headmasters that the school supplied must have been some of the first enchantments in Hogwarts. Years ago, some of my students had discovered that the unused corridor hidden behind the dry cistern in the west courtyard was a good

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place to skive off and smoke. I'd had to roust them out regularly. There were some very old portraits there, with stylized angular faces and eyes that remained facing straight forward even when they turned their heads to the side. They muttered in guttural Old English and occasionally broke into chants or hymns. They'd probably been exiled there when no one could understand them anymore. Well, almost no one. I'd run into Filius there a few times with a step-stool and a notebook, asking them questions in halting Old English and jotting down their answers. "Really?" I'd said.

"Oh, it's very interesting," he'd replied. But then he always liked obscure alliterative allegorical poetry. Utter rot. They were all long dead, nothing left but empty symbolic gestures.

I was at the top of the stairs. I peered in from the doorway. The office was different now, of course. Minerva had several comfortable chairs about; the one behind her desk looked much nicer than mine had been. The desk was smaller and supplemented by a work table in front of the windows to take advantage of the light.

I waited in the doorway, not sure if I was quite ready to step into the sight line of the portraits. *It's different now; it doesn't look like it did that last year. No flashbacks will be needed.*

I stepped in, hanging near the wall for a few steps before venturing out across the carpet to the desk. Phineas, who liked to keep track of comings and goings, was the first to spot me. "Ah! I knew the pride of our House would not so uselessly perish!"

"Thank you, Phineas. A little discretion, if you please."

He gave me a silent nod, but the damage was done. Portraits were beginning to stir. There was Albus, of course, in the middle of the wall and beaming at me. "Severus, my friend!" He leaned forward in the frame. "I knew you would come back to me"

I froze halfway across the room. Just coincidence and a bit of enchanted canvas, no need for flashbacks. I made myself step closer.

"I knew you would be resourceful enough to pull through... with a little help of course."

His help, he meant. I wasn't going to admit that I had relied on it. "News has been coming to me from various sources, in bits and

pieces, of course. You've done well for yourself; I'm very pleased with your progress."

Once I would have been hungry for that kind of approval from him. Now I could hear something else behind his words; he was putting a claim on my accomplishments and well-being. The thought was immediately followed by guilt; he didn't have a life of his own now, of course he wanted to be part of others' lives.

"I didn't come back for you," I said as calmly as I could. There was movement in the corner of my eyes. I turned to see Phineas hustling some straggling portraits to the edges of their frames. Albus and I were alone.

"Nevertheless, I am very glad to see you, Severus." He gave a kind smile. "Do you need to get right to business?"

How understanding and sympathetic, damn him. It had always seemed to me that the portrait had captured the worst of Albus. There had been good times between us, too. Before the plan had to be put in place. Or at least I had tried to remind myself of that, over that last year. There was so much I wanted to ask him, the missing pieces that had been gnawing at me. That last terrible year I'd had to keep my doubts and questions well-buried. I knew that if I let my purpose waver for even a moment, it could finish me. When I found that old letter of Lily's that implicated his involvement with Grindlewald, and worse, with their own deaths, it led to a breakdown that I could ill-afford. It had been almost physically painful to bury my doubts after that and face the portrait as though nothing had happened. He'd probably had me working to his purposes long before I'd dreamed of joining his side. And that rubbish prophecy, how could he ever have believed it? And why on earth had he never laid any secondary plans? And how could he have never warned me about the trap of the Elder Wand that was slowly closing around me?

Now that I didn't have that merciless purpose to serve, I could ask him anything I wanted.

He was smiling gently at me from his frame.

"The contract you were to turn over at the end of the war: where is it?"

"Is that why you came back? After all this time?"

"I didn't know that it was safe to return. I thought the problem with the contract was that the Ministry was not honoring it, not that you had failed to turn it over."

"You thought the Ministry would betray you?" He was avoiding my criticism.

"A distinct possibility."

He shook his head sadly. "Severus, I kept your papers safe for you. I thought you'd be back long before now."

Was that it? He was just waiting to give the contract over to me personally? Did that mean if I hadn't made it he would have told no one at all? I stepped closer.

"Of course I kept them safe. I revealed their location to Minerva, and she stored them, well, behind me."

Minerva knew where the contract was? But she had really seemed like she knew nothing about it. Was she lying to me all this time?

I liked having the desk between myself and the portrait, but I knew I was being ridiculous. I took the last steps round the desk, to that familiar place. The rug was still scuffed. *No need for flashbacks.*

I slipped my hand behind the frame to release the catch and swung the portrait out. There was a single folded paper in the alcove. I pulled it out and examined the paper in the light. It was old. 'Sevy' was written on the front in mum's handwriting.

I dropped the note on the desk and left, Albus' voice fading behind me. I took care not to listen.

Minerva was still waiting for me on the bench below.

"Did you get what you – what's wrong? Stop."

I wavered, then sat on the bench.

"Did he say something to you?"

I didn't answer.

"You look just like you did the other night. You can sit here as much as you please, but it won't get you anywhere to run off and get potted again."

"It's not what he said."

"What then?"

"He told me he gave *you* all my papers." She was silent. "Well?"

"He pointed me to some. Just, ah, not any contract. I thought that's what you came for. Just –"

"Just *what?*"

"Just... some old potions diagrams and your mother's note, nothing else."

"*Nothing?*"

"Did he try to give it to you, just now? Oh, Severus. Stubborn old fool."

I wasn't sure if she meant him or me.

"Once I knew you were alive, he wanted me to send it on to you."

"He what?"

"Even if I had known where you were I wouldn't have done it. I tried to tell him he was crossing bounds. Severus, he's not trying to hurt you. He just thinks it's important. He thinks it would help you, somehow. I don't think he can see that it might cost you something, to read that. I told him it would be a perfect way to drive you away. You're an adult; he can't decide what would be good for you or how you should handle things. I didn't think he would try to spring it on you. That's it, I'm coming up. You two need a referee."

Perhaps she was right. Besides, I wanted to see her glare at Albus. I followed her up the stairs. She strode across the room straight to the desk, put the note back in the alcove and closed the portrait with a snap. Albus swung back into view looking sheepish.

"Minerva, chaperoning? Is this really necessary?"

"Apparently so," she said. Ah, there was the glare, very satisfying.

"Severus, I didn't mean to drive you away."

"Leave it," I said. I told myself, as I had done many times before, it wasn't any use being angry at a magical construction. There wasn't any real person there to be angry at, he was long dead. Perhaps I had needed his kind of manipulation and control, once. So of course we were stuck in the same pattern. It wasn't if he could change now, any more than I could. "You *know* what paper I'm looking for. Where is it?"

"Lucius Malfoy's contract?"

Minerva snapped her head around at me. "*Whose* contract?"

"Oh dear, I thought Severus told you, since you're here. Yes, he had a contract for the aid he delivered to Severus during the war, such as it was."

Minerva was glaring at me now, which was not so satisfying.

"Don't give me 'such as it was,' Albus. If he hadn't been able to confirm my information there was a very good chance I would have been discovered before the end," I said for Minerva's benefit. Now that she knew the gist, it seemed pointless to hold back details. "Minerva, I already told you that it wasn't mine to tell. Not that that stops *some* people."

"Severus, I already said that I thought she knew."

"It doesn't explain why you'd let it slip now, but fail to turn over the contract location to the Order immediately at the end of the war, as was agreed."

"Well, there was a slight problem with the location, you see."

"No, I don't see. At all."

"My gatekeeper. It was a secure location for more than just passwords. I gave the contract to it to swallow."

"The gargoyle."

"Yes, but it was destroyed in the battle and disposed of before I could alert anyone in the Order of the existence of the contract. I agree that it was very unfortunate, Severus, but at that point there was nothing else I could do."

"Quite impossible to mention it to anyone?"

"Not impossible, Severus, but surely you see that it wouldn't have been any use. Without being able to produce a physical contract, my word alone wouldn't have helped him much. A portrait's testimony can't be considered in court, since the truth of our words can't be bound or tested. An unsubstantiated rumor of his collaboration without any proof would have done Mr. Malfoy more harm than good."

It was essentially what Shackbolt had told me. It was reasonable and made perfect sense, sod him. It didn't help that I knew he detested Lucius. I couldn't quite accept that all physical proof was destroyed. After all, Albus was stuck to a wall, he couldn't exactly have seen the damage. I would have to try another tack.

"That *is* a pity, Albus. I have met with Draco and it's clear that the Malfoy family situation is becoming more desperate. From the accounts I've heard of the end of the battle, Potter clearly owes Narcissa Malfoy a life debt. If their situation deteriorates, I wouldn't be surprised at all if Narcissa decides to start putting pressure on him for help on the strength of that debt. Potter is necessarily tied to the Malfoy family's well-being now. It could become very messy for everyone involved."

Albus looked uncomfortable. "Well, ah, if Minerva can confirm, I believe the gargoyle wasn't entirely pulverized. If the pieces are still left maybe the contract can be retrieved. It would be in the mouth or throat."

"Minerva?"

"I'm not sure. The house elves dealt with the smaller rubble, but I don't know what became of it. I'll call one. *Kob!*"

"What? *Wait!*"

But it was too late. Kob appeared barely a meter away from me.

"*You!*"

You

"*You!*"
Kob didn't look happy to see me. I wasn't particularly pleased to see him either.

"*Really?*" Of all the house elves for Minerva to call... I'd always had cursed luck since my youthful experiments with Felix Felicis variants.

He was glaring. He took a step towards me. I took a step back.

"What's this?"

Kob ignored Minerva.

"*This is not your home* — " Kob began. Damn, was he going to

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set the whole place against me? If he used his power in earnest, I doubted I would get out alive, not this time.

"No, but he is here as my guest and thus he is under Hogwarts' protections," said Minerva quickly.

Kob grudgingly stepped back. I was lucky that Minerva had recognized the danger.

"And what is this, Kob? A Headmaster is not to be questioned."

"He is not Headmaster. I never question him as *Headmaster*. It is what he does since."

"What he's done since then?" She addressed Kob, but she was eyeing me.

"Yes, Headmistress. He is not to be trusted."

"You knew he was alive, and you had contact with him?"

At his nod she turned a full glare on me. "I see."

"That was *not* my choice," I protested.

"I can't help seeing a pattern of you approaching everyone for help but me."

"Help? He came to me and forced me into doing favors for him!"

"*Favors!*" Kob spat. "He deals with evil men and uses our parts and when he is done, it's no use, they are dead already!"

"I would have done nothing at all if you hadn't forced me into it. And your precious relatives were probably dead before you even spoke to me!"

"I said I never speak to you about this again!"

"Yes, I wish you wouldn't!"

Minerva made a valiant attempt to catch up. "Wait, dead relatives?"

Kob didn't seem to want to answer her, but she was Headmistress after all.

"He was just to find them, only find them, but they are dead. Killed! Cut up by evil men and goblins."

The pieces finally clicked into place for Minerva. "That house elf trafficking ring in Canada... they just uncovered it – that was you? And there were Hogwarts' elf victims? I should have been *told* that at least!"

She aimed that last bit at Kob, thankfully. He did that awful little subservient head bob that the Hogwarts' elves loved and always put

my teeth on edge. It was much too close to the bows and scrapes I'd had to perform.

"Oh, no, Headmistress. They being relatives of ours, but not Hogwarts' elves. It is not right to bother the busy, busy Headmistress with house elf family matters."

Minerva didn't seem much impressed with this excuse. "Let me be clear. In the future, I am to be informed immediately about any possible criminal activity with any ties to Hogwarts or Hogwarts' elves, and I am never 'too busy' to hear important information that involves former Hogwarts' staff. Is that understood?"

"Oh, yes, Headmistress." Awful head-bobbing and sincerely clasped hands joined his words. He hadn't actually agreed, of course, just said that he understood. I didn't point out the loophole to Minerva.

"Now, whatever Professor Snape has done since he left Hogwarts, he is my guest and is under all Hogwarts' protections, now and in the future, and he is not to be retaliated against by you or anyone else. Say, 'yes, Headmistress.'"

Perhaps she had noticed the loophole on her own. She had certainly noticed Kob's implied threat to me. If I wasn't careful, I might end up owing Minerva a debt, and she would be quite sure to collect.

"Yes, Headmistress."

I smirked at Kob, but didn't say anything. He was slippery enough to try to find a loophole in that as well.

"Now, Kob, I called you here because I stored a very important parchment in the mouth of one of the gargoyles before the battle. What was done with the rubble that the house elves cleared away from this area?"

So now we were all lying to each other. I was going to start feeling nostalgic any minute.

Kob gave a bow. "All bits and pieces is piled in the foundations on the lake wall side, since the lake wall is damaged in the Bad Time, Headmistress."

"Thank you, Kob, that will be all."

Kob bowed, but he didn't leave. He was watching me.

"*That will be all, Kob, leave us,*" said Minerva.

He disappeared. But of course it wasn't over. Minerva turned to me. "It seems that we have much to discuss."

Albus chose that moment to stick his foot back in. "Now, Minerva, from what I've heard of the matter, Severus has nothing to be ashamed of."

Did he think he was helping?

"What *you've* heard?"

"Here and there, bits and pieces."

Oh, he was making it worse and worse. I tried to salvage what I could. "Minerva, there's not much more than what was already in the papers."

"Kob is not in the papers. You are not in the papers, so there must be considerably more to it than that. And there is nothing to explain why Kob should be threatening you now."

"It really has nothing to do with Hogwarts."

"No, and neither does Mr. Malfoy's contract. And yet here I am, getting information for you and protecting you from house elves of all things."

So she was going to count that as a debt to be paid. And if the contract really was in the foundations, I couldn't get any farther without her help; the foundations were protected by some very old wards and only the current Headmaster or – mistress could open the way.

"Shall we go somewhere else?" I asked, glancing towards Albus' portrait.

"Yes, of course." Minerva would be happy enough to get some information that Albus wasn't privy to.

She took me down two flights to one of the arithmancy classrooms. I looked around as we entered. No portraits, good. Minerva took the chair behind the teacher's desk.

"Well?"

"Do you want me to stand as I recite, or...?"

Minerva looked a little embarrassed as she stood. "Just habit, Severus." She transfigured a couple of the student chairs to a more comfortable size. "That's a better footing, isn't it?"

"All right, Minerva, what do you want to know?"

"Well, I should probably know something about why Kob wants

to drive you off, especially if I'm going to have house elves digging around in the foundations on your behalf."

"Ah, it's probably best if I do my own digging. Kob would find some way to sabotage the effort if he thought that parchment meant anything to me."

"And why should that be, Severus? If I understand correctly, you did help to break up a house elf parts ring. Was it the one mentioned in the papers?"

"Yes, it was. But I didn't exactly volunteer, Minerva. Kob virtually blackmailed me to get involved. He wanted me to find some missing elves. Well, some things about their disappearance suggested a pattern, and I suspected that someone might be dealing in parts. So I posed as a buyer."

"You –"

"I did some business with them, which was the only way I could get close enough to get their location. Kob disapproved of my methods."

"I'm not sure *I* approve of that method."

"I'm sorry; I'd forgotten that you know all about infiltrating criminal organizations."

She flushed. "I do not have to 'know all about it' to question it as a method. There wasn't any way to proceed without actually doing business with them? Surely you could have gone to the authorities."

I gave her a look.

"Severus, what do you think I'm accusing you of?"

"Accusing me?"

"Yes. You have that 'don't you dare accuse me, you don't know what I've been through' look. Fine, I don't know, since you don't see fit to tell me. But I haven't accused you of anything."

"You just said you don't approve –"

"I don't approve of any of my former students throwing themselves into unnecessary danger."

"Oh, you don't?"

"Oh, is that it? No, I don't! I know you think I encouraged my students to rebel against you and the Carrows that last year, but I did what I could to stop the worst of it and keep them safe."

"Did you?"

"Yes! But I couldn't control them any more than you could absolutely control your students. Or the Carrows. I don't hold you responsible for what the Carrows did. I hope that you would return the favor."

"I didn't bring it up!"

"As good as."

"Fine, whatever you say, you did everything you could."

Minerva stood again. "Oh, this is ridiculous! I told myself I wasn't going to get dragged back – look, let's drop this. Just get you your contract. I want to talk to you Severus, but I think we'd both be better off somewhere with a pint and without portraits and angry house elves and the ghosts of the past breathing down our necks."

I stood with relief. "Good. The contract. Just how much rubble is down there, Minerva?"

"Plenty, I expect. It'll be a job for you. Shall I lend you Bulstrode? I think she can make stone blocks crack with a look."

"No doubt, but I think I'll try another method. If we can stop by the owlery, I'll need her to send off a letter."

When we reached the tower, Bulstrode was still at work, though she was down to the last few letters.

"Bulstrode, I need you to take a letter."

"Sir?"

"As from the Hogwarts' file clerk. In reply to the one you received this morning."

Bulstrode nodded and summoned a sheet of parchment with the Hogwarts' letterhead.

"Mr. Draco Malfoy," I dictated, "unfortunately we have been unable to locate the missing page of your transcript with the required signature. As the search is proving difficult, we request that you provide sample material of the signature so that we can complete a tracking charm. Reply with the date and time you will

report to the file room with the requested material."

"Sample material?" asked Minerva.

"Albus had him sign in blood."

Bulstrode began to fold the letter. Minerva put a hand on her arm. "Wait a moment, Miss Bulstrode, you'll have to change that last sentence. I don't want him on school grounds."

"Surely you don't think he's a threat to anyone," I said.

"Not exactly. I said that I wouldn't allow anyone who's taken the Mark back at Hogwarts."

"What? You can't seriously imagine that he had a choice."

"I'm not interested in making exceptions. I won't break my word."

"You've already broken it. I'm here."

"That's different."

"Yes. I took it by *choice*."

"He attempted to murder the Headmaster!"

She must have realized as soon as the words left her mouth, or else the look on my face said enough.

"Forget it. Forget all of it. Do what you have to do. You always do." She rushed out. She didn't slam the door, I supposed that was something.

"Sir?"

"Send the damn letter, Bulstrode."

Minerva was waiting on the stairs two landings down, leaning on the sill and looking out the window onto the Quidditch pitch.

"You're my guest, Severus. You're welcome here. You always are, do you know that?"

"Kob might have something to say about that."

"Oh, no, he wouldn't. If he gave you any trouble, I'd give him the heave. I feel like giving myself the heave sometimes. The longer I stay here... the more it gets into you. Your House seems like the whole world. You live and breathe that schedule that grinds you down. And when I look out the window, I can see the battle like it was yesterday."

She pushed back from the sill. "Maybe you were right to cut yourself off. Maybe you don't have to dream it every night."

I didn't answer; no sense in shattering her illusions.

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"Let's get out of here. You can't do any more on the contract until that little snot answers you. You still owe me several detailed explanations of the past three years and I will get them. But not here. Not in this place."

She was already heading down the stairs again. Maybe I could delay her and all those explanations I 'owed' her.

"Do you need to get anything before you leave? I could go ahead and meet you somewhere..."

"Oh, no you don't! I'm sticking to you until I get my explanations! Here, we'll cut across." She pushed open the staff door to the Great Hall. "Fine."

The space didn't seem so cavernously empty now with two sets of steps echoing across it. Or else it was that *He* was standing there, slightly to the side, about three-quarters of the way across. *No need for flashbacks*. God, it was just like before except that I could see him even more clearly now, hairless head, bare feet on the floor. *Just a flashback*. My nails cut into my palm.

I couldn't show it or Minerva would notice. Never show anything; I had done that before. Just keep walking like there was nothing there, and that was fine because there was *nothing* there. I couldn't hear anything but my heart. I wasn't sure I could just walk past him. He was smiling at me.

"Ah, Severus, my friend."

I stopped. Had Minerva noticed that I had stopped walking? She had stopped a few paces behind me. I turned to look at her. She was staring past me, her face ashen.

Looking past me, at him.

Minerva was looking at *my* flashback.

"I knew you would return to me."

Behind me, she was looking behind me. *He* was *behind* me.

"Severus, stand before me."

He wasn't a flashback and he wanted me. I didn't think I could stand. I turned to him and knelt.

"Come to me."

I wasn't sure I could do it. I had to try to obey.

"No, no, no," said Minerva faintly. She started moving, small struggling steps towards me.

"Turn to me."

She seized my upper arm and pulled me hard, off balance.

"No, get up, get up."

"Severus..." he said.

I was on my hands and knees on the stones.

"Get up, son of a bitch, coward." She hauled at me, fingers digging into my arm. I was half up and she was pushing me, staggering, back to the door.

He was somewhere behind us, I couldn't hear him.

Minerva pushed me through the door ahead of her. I held on to the door frame. She was casting locking charms, waste of time, never stopped *him*.

Might as well sit and wait for him to

When I came back to him in the graveyard two hours late he

I couldn't breathe.

"*Expecto Patronum*. Bulstrode, get out now. Go through a side door; do not enter the Great Hall. Get out now!" The glimmering form of her Patronus rushed past me with its message for Bulstrode.

Minerva grabbed my arm again. "Stop it. Come on." I braced myself on the doorframe to keep my balance. "We're getting out, do you hear me?" There was a quaver in her voice.

Her shoulder dug into me as she pushed me down the hall. There was nothing but our breathing for a few minutes. She propped me leaning against the wall to get the side door open. We stumbled out onto the lawn. Early-afternoon sun was glinting off the lake. I wanted to vomit.

"Come on, we're walking," she said.

Bloody grounds lasted bloody forever. I was walking on my own by the time we got to the service gate. Just walking.

"Keep your head down," said Minerva. She jostled me into the alley behind the Hog's Head and in through the back fence. She knew Aberforth's ward keyword?

The kitchen was filled with steam and the thudding noise of a chopping spell turning potatoes into chips. She pushed me into a

chair in front of a heap of potato peel.

Aberforth turned from the stove. "What the hell?"

"Aberforth, get Poppy on the Floo."

"Isn't she off –"

"Get her, now!"

"Aye, keep yer knickers on!" He pulled spits off the fire and rummaged for the powder.

"Not that brother of mine again?"

"Again? No! And it wasn't the first time, either. 'Nobody said nothing – I know who *'Nobody'* is!" she snapped at him.

Nobody, he was nobody, nothing. He *couldn't* be there, but Minerva was looking behind me, why did she have to do that? *Damn* her.

"I know who 'Nobody' is! Oh, Severus, why did you –"

Brought him, had I brought him with me? Had he been with me all this time, every time I had seen him over the past three years, all my dreams, real?

I vomited into the peel bucket.

"Bloody hell! Get him away from the food prep! Oi, what a waste! Put him in the back room, it's empty. I'll send Poppy's through." Aberforth began shoveling chips into the rubbish.

"Come on, up, you heard him." Minerva hustled me down the corridor to the back room.

Not quite empty; Bulstrode was there saying, "what's going on?"

Minerva got me into a chair. "Miss Bulstrode, step out and watch for Madam Pomfrey."

"Yes." She went out.

Minerva leaned close to me. "Oh, Severus, why did you have to kneel? You *know* I didn't mean it. I *never* meant it. Why didn't you say anything?"

When, now? I still couldn't get my breath and she wanted me to talk?

"I didn't mean it; I just had to get you moving. Did you know he was there?"

I managed to shake my head to that. There was a sharp knock and the door opened without waiting for an answer. Poppy came through with her wand out.

"Miss Bulstrode, wait outside," said Minerva. Bulstrode closed the door behind her and leaned against it with her arms folded. "I'm off the clock, ma'am." She wasn't going anywhere.

"What happened?" asked Poppy calmly. I didn't like how she was looking at me. Clinical.

"He saw something. I think he's in shock."

"Sit down, Minerva. Did you give him a calming draught?"

"I don't need a fucking calming draught!"

Minerva sighed with relief. "Thank Merlin! He went all quiet on me."

Poppy was shining some bloody great light in my eyes. I tried to swat her away.

"Be still, Severus! What did he see?"

"We saw his ghost in the Great Hall," said Minerva.

"Slow your breathing. Whose?"

"His. *You-Know-Who's*," she said.

"Bollocks!" Bulstrode said forcefully, but her face had gone white.

"*Excuse me*, Miss Bulstrode?"

"No, ma'am, no! He can't be there. I asked, and they said no."

Poppy took no note of the conversation at the other end of the room and tried to make me breathe into some sort of a bag.

"Asked? What are you talking about?" said Minerva.

"I asked the ghosts. I wanted to make sure he wasn't hanging about, so I asked them and they said no!" said Bulstrode.

"When was this?"

"Just after the battle. A few days. When we were doing restoration work. Told me they didn't even see wisp of him!"

"Who exactly did you ask?"

"The House ghosts, all of them."

"Myrtle?"

"Uh, she won't talk to me. Told her to dry up and quit her whinging once. Doesn't like me."

"*She* would be the one to know, Miss Bulstrode. And why didn't you tell me?"

"Answer was 'no.' Would have told you if they'd said yes."

"I wonder. I'm getting a little tired of people not telling me things!"

"I never tell anyone anything," said Bulstrode.

Minerva glared at me as if I were responsible for that. "Well, he's there now."

Poppy looked up again. "What happened, Minerva? Did he try to touch or attack him?"

"No, he spoke to him, though."

Oh, hell.

"What did he say?"

I couldn't listen to this. I had to get out. I stood.

"Severus –" said Poppy.

I headed for the door.

"Miss Bulstrode –" Minerva began, but Bulstrode was already helpfully opening the door for me. I went out.

"Miss Bulstrode, why did you let him go?"

"He had to go, ma'am." I heard behind me.

I passed Aberforth's muttered curses in the kitchen and went out the back door. *Out, I had to get out.* I disillusioned myself and apparated.

THE TIP

I stopped after the sixth apparition point and leaned over clutching my knees. I felt sick again. It was a miracle I hadn't splinched myself so far. And where the hell was I? I had been going off my memorized points, but I'd lost track after the second.

I looked around. I was in the abandoned factory outside Bradford where I had stashed my portkey home. I *could* dig it up and take it now. No, I had better think this through. I just needed to be... safe for a moment, somewhere I could think. Well, hell, it wouldn't be hard to apparate to my old home

Chapter 12 of **THE GOOD FRIEND**
BY MOTTNAVE

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from here. At once it was an overwhelming desire. I just wanted to go home. *Not your home now*, but I couldn't care less at the moment.

One short apparition and I was on the edge of the canal. The smell of the stagnant water hit me with a punch of memory. *Keep moving.*

My scramble track up the bank was choked with weeds now. I cut through the vacant lot and down the alley that led to the back garden. I could feel my old Notice-Me-Nots and wards on the back fence. They were still up. If the Hogwarts' wards still knew me, these certainly should as well. I spat on the ground, hitting my ward boundary, and sure enough, it came down for me. I stepped through the back gate, struggling to remember my keywords to reset it.

My little plot of potions' ingredients had run wild to take over the tiny back garden. I had to use slicing charms to whack my way through the masses of nightshade vines and brambles to reach the door. My wards there were stronger; I had to dredge up several passwords to enter the kitchen.

Aberforth was right; the place really was a tip. There was a distinct smell of mildew; I could see it blooming on the walls and curtains. Most of the shelves were empty. Just as well; I didn't need to be reunited with any of my three-year-old foodstuffs.

I stepped from the miserable kitchen to the front room. It was almost pitch black and I had to light my way with a Lumos. The front windows had been boarded up. The sitting room was a worse mess than the kitchen. It had been taken apart. The bookshelves were completely emptied out, the furniture virtually dissected. All my books were in tottering stacks of boxes on the floor. Had Aberforth been intending to move them out? No, that wasn't it – each box had a sheet of parchment stuck to the top. I picked one up with a bit of trepidation.

Snape residence. Front room NE wall, shelf 2: Texts only, no objects or loose papers. EIGHT EXTRAORDINARY VESSELS, by Li Shi-Zhen, ENCYCLOPAEDIA OF WINDS AND ELEMENTS, twelve volumes, VINES OF THE SPIRIT, by Richard Stoltz, all containing technical handwritten notes and page markers, no names or places. HELTER SKELTER, by V. Bugliosi, cover apparently removed and replaced. Some kind of muggle history book, no notes, considerable underlining. Nothing of interest.

The bottom of the list was signed R. Philpott and stamped with an Auror badge number. I glanced over some of the other papers, they were much the same. The Ministry had been here, of course, searching. For what? Some secret messages I left just for them? They should be so lucky. I supposed they must have got the idea from the information I left with Bulstrode to pass on. Well at least they hadn't destroyed the books as they had the furniture. There wasn't even any place to sit.

They were probably responsible for the boarding over the windows as well. I cast a *Specialis Revelio*. A tracery of wards appeared over the front door and windows. They were of the usual Ministry type. Perhaps they had just come in the front and never bothered with my wards at the back.

I had a morbid curiosity for what they had done to my bedroom. It could hardly be more depressing than it usually was. As with the front room, the furniture was mostly destroyed. My file drawer of family papers was simply gone, and with it the small boxes of photos. Nothing, there was nothing for me here.

Had it always been this small and squalid? As a child, it was just normal to me, no better or worse than the rest of the neighborhood. I'd never had a taste of anything different. No, that wasn't quite right. There was that one memory.

I must have been very young, too young to remember my exact age. I did remember being pulled into my mother's turning embrace of apparition and landing on the edge of a garden. It had been a warm summer evening, and the garden was beautiful blue punctuated by glowing warm lights and noise somewhere through the hedges.

My mother led me by the hand past a dripping fountain and sunken glades up winding pale stairs through the trees. We came out on a lawn at the back of a house that was so grand and fine that I had never seen anything like it. There were grand and fine people there, and the floating colored lights glittered off their clothes and jewels. My hand was tugged along, and then dropped when we were at the edge of the group.

"Play with your cousins," mum said. *Cousins*, those must be the

long-legged children that were swarming on the edge of the lawn closest to the wild blue darkness of the garden. They were a bright flock working their way up to something. A *game*. I had never had a game with quite so many other children, though I had seen some at a distance. And now it was starting and we all spun off and scattered into the darkness; *run and hide*. I was past the dripping fountain, past the white long-armed statue that loomed at me like an apparition, and the shouts of cousins were far-off. *Hide*.

I went on my hands and knees and the cool grass and crawled into the prickling darkness of the yew hedge. My passage dislodged a swarm of flying black specks that tried to settle in my nostrils before I swatted them away. I could hear the shouts and laughter coming and going in the tangled paths of the garden. My hiding place was safe. Red yew-berries were scattered like jewels in the darkness. I stacked them in a little pile. A cousin stumbled by once, panting. I squeezed a berry between my fingers until it burst in a mass of delicately red jelly and black pip.

My hiding place was the best, I was sure of it. I would win the game; they would never find me. All at once, the prospect terrified me. *Never find me, I would be hiding forever*. Alone in the darkness with little red jewels of poison.

I burst out of the hedge and ran back to the lawn. I was panting. I couldn't see any cousins at all, was the game long over? The grand people were inside now, past the shut glass doors. Bits of music were coming out, wavering. I wasn't sure if I should touch those glowing doors, if I was even *allowed*. But there was no need to wonder; my mother came out of the doors at once, in a black rage. She came up to me, seized my hand, and pulled me out of the garden.

Angry or sad? I couldn't tell except that she was shaking. I never knew the meaning of it, if there was any. Perhaps no meaning at all, except that I never had cousins or gardens again. Or perhaps every meaning and the courses of our lives had been decided and we were all locked in our own prickly darkness forever, with little jewels of poison.

God, I wanted a drink. England was surely having a terrible effect

on my habits, but I didn't particularly care at the moment. I always kept a bottle or two around the place. If the Ministry hadn't taken them off to be drained and tested, perhaps they were still here.

I went down to the ground floor lav and looked in the medicine cabinet. Empty but for a slip from a receipt book: *Two bottles of Old Ogden's — Aberforth Dumbledore*. And he had the nerve to challenge me about drinking his stash? Damn him.

But perhaps he and the Ministry had overlooked that very muggle hiding place that held my other stash. I dug my fingers into the chipped spot in the grout and tugged the medicine cabinet free from the wall. I always used to love watching dad deposit his old razor blades down the slot in the back of the cabinet. I imagined a secret world, the little black slot and the tiny clink of the blades leading to a hidden place of marvels. Once the house was mine, all I had to do was excavate a bit of plaster to have a nice secure hole without a scrap of magic about it. The ministry could cast a thousand detection spells and they'd never see it. It didn't hurt that what filled it had no magic either; a bit over £4,000 in muggle money. *Beautiful*.

I collected my cash. At least there was one little positive in this sodding awful day. Every hour it seemed like more people knew about my presence, and now, now...

Now he was really with me. My one consolation from the thought that he knew about what I'd done was that he was forever dead and gone. And now the Dark Lord could stand in front of me and call me to him again, and then...

I could feel myself getting short of breath. He wasn't even here and he could still control me. As far as I knew, he wasn't here. How many times had I seen him just as I was falling asleep, or in my dreams? What if they weren't dreams or flashbacks any more than that *thing* in the Great Hall? What if he had been with me for the past three years?

I felt sick. And he knew about this place, I was sure of it. Never been here, but seen it in my head, and he knew about me, how I had turned on him, bloody idiot Potter told him to his face and it must have been one of his last thoughts, just before he died. I couldn't hide

from him. I had to get out of here. It was what Dick had told me once: if I ever felt trapped, I could always walk out. I got out.

The pub was a new one, an off-license five streets over, where the neighborhood was a little less disreputable. Shiny lit signs, shiny new chairs, colored lamps hung at different heights over the bar. Dad and his crowd would have hated it. There was carpet on the floor, *carpet*. I almost walked out, but decided that hating the place might be a useful emotional outlet.

I took my drink at the bar, and then put out the bartender by having him change a £20 note to coins. I had spotted a phone box on the way in. A phone was safe, not like the Floo. I had to ask someone. Once, years ago, I might have taken my panic and doubts to Albus, but those days were long gone. For now, Dick was safe. I had to ask someone, and he was safe.

The phone box was set back from the side of the pub. It smelled distinctly of piss. I jammed the door shut behind me as best as I could, though the frame was warped.

It was Tuesday, wasn't it? He would probably be in Arkham. I had to read the instructions on the phone three times and deposit an exorbitant amount of money before the call would go through. Finally, it was ringing.

Dick's voice came through, "Richard Stoltz."

"Dick."

"Ah, Cyril! I'm afraid we don't have results yet. The delivery was a bit slow coming in, so the RAs have only just started testing."

"Fine."

"I'll give you a call as soon as we've gone through the first rounds."

I didn't say anything.

"Cyril, is that why you're calling?"

"No."

"Is everything all right?"

"You recommended that book."

"Hmm?"

"About that... disorder. About flashbacks."

Dick paused. "Did you have one again?"

"No."

"Well, good."

"No."

A voice came on the line. I almost started out of the booth before I realized it was pre-recorded message. Something about adding money. I hurriedly fed in more coins.

Dick's voice came on again with a click. "–ll there? Cyril?"

"Yes, I'm –"

"Cyril, where are you calling from?"

"I went back."

"What? Look, give me the number and I'll call you back. Then we won't be cut off."

I read off the string of numbers. "You'll need the, uh, country code. England."

"What?"

"I went back."

"Stay right there, I'm calling back."

I picked up halfway through the ring.

"Cyril? That's better. What's going on?"

"I came back."

"Yes, and you had a flashback? I wouldn't be surprised. There must be a lot of bad memories there for you."

"No! It wasn't just a memory. I thought it was but it wasn't."

"What?"

"I saw him, Dick, his ghost was waiting for me."

"Whose?"

"*His*. The... Dark Lord."

"How do you know it wasn't a flashback? You told me you've seen him before."

"Someone else could see him too."

"Ah, yes, well, definitely not a flashback then. What did you do?"

"I couldn't... he called me his friend. He wanted me to come to him. I couldn't move. Then I, I got out."

"You handled it. Perfectly. You got out."

"But Dick, it was real!"

"All right."

"I've seen him before! What if those were real too?"

"All right, what if they were?"

Was he being deliberately dense? "Then he's been with me, all this time. Following me. I'm not free of him. I thought I was free of him!" The panic was edging up on me again.

"Is he there, right now?"

"No. Not that I –" *And how could I ever know?*

"Right now, you're free of him. Most of the time, you are completely free of him. It's just those occasional dreams and –"

"But they could be *real*, Dick, how do I tell?"

"Cyril, I don't know if you *can* tell."

"I have to!"

"No, why?"

"Because he –"

"Has he done anything to you? Anything but talk to you, that is."

"No, that's plenty."

"I'll agree that it's plenty, more than you should have to deal with. But you were dealing with it. You were managing."

"That was before I thought they might be real."

"But what has actually changed now? You had some techniques for dealing with the dreams and flashbacks, such as changing your thought patterns, or leaving the area and going to a safe place. You saw him, yes, and it was real, yes, but you just used the same tech-



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nique and it worked. Nothing changed. You managed it.”

“But I couldn’t move at first. I couldn’t do it. The other person who saw him had to pull me.”

“I’m glad you had a friend with you. Did the ghost follow you?”

“No.”

“You said your friend pulled you. Did he carry you?”

“No.”

“Then you got yourself out of there. I won’t count a pull against you.”

“What if I had needed more than a pull?”

“Then I imagine your friend would have helped you more. You said he didn’t follow you. Do you think he would have followed you if he could?”

I didn’t like to think about him following me, but after all, he hadn’t. “Maybe.”

“Well, maybe he can’t. Maybe he’s tied to that spot. Some ghosts are location-bound, yes?”

“Yes, but he could just be waiting. He’s good at waiting.”

“Lots of people are. It’s easier than getting things done. Do you know, I suspect he can’t. I don’t think those dreams and flashbacks you’ve had are really him. I think they are a completely normal reaction to what you’ve been through. A completely normal reaction that you’ve been managing entirely on your own for the past several years. And if I’m wrong, it doesn’t matter, because it doesn’t change the most basic fact: you won and he lost.”

“Won?”

“Yes. You got out. He’s stuck there. He tried his damndest to kill you, and he couldn’t manage it. You lived, and he died. You are incontrovertibly the winner, no matter how much of a sore loser he’s being now. He probably can’t stand it, knowing how much you trounced him.”

“But he *would* have managed it. I would have died – I had help. Someone kept me alive.”

“Ah, I didn’t know that. But it still doesn’t change the fact that you won. It just proves, again, that you have good friends. You win

on that count too. Now, I’m going by newspaper accounts, but I don’t recall anyone trying to save his life when he fell.”

I snorted.

“Do you think you’re very good at making friends, Cyril?”

“*What?*”

“Well, now you know who’s worse than you. Hard to imagine, but there it is.”

“Thank you, Dick.”

“So you win again. You have good friends who want to see you live, and he’s the ghost who lost, who has no friends, and has nothing better to do than hang around and make a bad attempt at haunting.”

“It felt like a very effective attempt. Listen, Dick,” I was getting short of breath again. “He called me his ‘friend,’ and he called me to him.”

“All right.”

“No, it’s not all right! I’m not – ” I tried to catch my breath.

“I think it’s pretty clear that you’re not his friend, but it bothers you.”

“He’s saying he thinks I’m *like* him.”

“Well, there’s another way to look at it. He’s very alone now. He has no friends. It could be an act of desperation.”

I gave a short laugh. “I can guarantee that’s not how he’s thinking.”

“So? You don’t have to think like him.”

“*Yes!* I *have* to be able to anticipate his thoughts.”

There was a pause. “No,” said Dick gently. “That’s over. You don’t have to do that anymore.”

“But – ”

“It no longer matters what he thinks, not even what he thinks about you.”

I was silent.

“He can’t do anything to you anymore. He’s powerless. You can simply walk away. Which you did, and which you can do again any time he tries to bother you. Or you could avoid the area entirely. Unless...” Dick trailed off.

“What?”

“Well, if he really is just waiting around for you, you could always twist the knife a bit. Show up with your Paracelsus Prize. Let him

see your bank balance, that sort of thing. If you were the sort of person to enjoy twisting the knife.”

“Yes, if only.”

He laughed. “Seriously, I think you should do exactly what helps you manage it best. Which is exactly what you’re doing right now. You’ve got this, Cyril.”

“He got to me.”

“He got you upset for a while, certainly, but you sound calmer now. So now you have to put his name on the rather long list of people who upset you, if it wasn’t there already. He can go right next to Dr. Zosimos.”

“Sodding dangerous idiot.”

“I would tell Dr. Zosimos that he’s on par with the Dark Lord as people who upset you, but you know how he gets puffed up.”

“Best not to say anything.”

“That’s right. Now, I’d say that I’d be calling you soon with the variant results, but since I don’t know where you are at the moment, you’d better call me. In a few days or so.”

“For the variant results.”

“That’s right. Take care, Cyril.”

I put the receiver back in its cradle and leaned against the wall of the box. Was that it, just manage? And what was I going to manage to do now?

I had absolutely no desire to go back to either Hogwarts or the Hog’s Head. I had no real desire to go back into that priggish pub either, but it was an off-license, after all.

I spent far too much on a bottle of scotch, but then it was good scotch and it was mine. I could have the good scotch, and he could drift around the Great Hall sniffing other people’s pumpkin juice. Fine, everything was fine. I would manage by going back home and repairing a chair to sit in and reading my own books and drinking my own scotch. And if the Dark Lord wanted to come into my home, if he even could, I’d take my book and scotch and go. He could have the house, it was a tip.

I entered through the back again. I found an old mug in the

kitchen and poured myself a generous drink. I turned to go to the front room but there was a figure in the doorway. I dropped the mug as I drew my wand.

AGREEMENT

The figure in the doorway held its hand out.

“Hold on. Take it easy, Snape.”

I knew the voice. Shackbolt.

“Bloody hell! That was good scotch!”

“I didn’t mean to surprise you.”

“What the hell are you doing here?”

“The alert wards we have here went off a couple of hours ago, so I sent someone in to check it out.”

Damn me, I should have expected Shackbolt to leave traps for me. I had been too upset to think properly and take precautions. “Where are they?”

“Relax, I recalled him. When he reported the only thing touched was your money, I concluded it was you. I’m the only one here.”

“And why are you here? Why is it any of your business that I enter my own home and retrieve my own property?”

“The alert wards were not for you. As I’m sure you know, there are a couple of your old colleagues still at large. You could be a target for them, and this would be a good place to start if they were looking for personal items to track you with. We’ve already removed anything they could use, of course, but the house itself makes a useful lure. Now, as you are here, I was hoping we could talk.”

“I didn’t come back here for you.” I retrieved my mug. The handle was chipped.

Shackbolt leaned casually on the counter. “I suppose you came back for that other matter we discussed. How is it coming?”

Chapter 13 of **THE GOOD FRIEND**

BY MOTTSHAVE

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I grunted. "Just got here, didn't I?"

"Well, since you are here, you might consider my offer. My help for yours."

I put the mug in the sink. Pointless, now. "What sort of help can you give me?"

"Well, to start with, were you really planning to stay in this tip? That secure location I've got is still on offer."

I looked at the mildewed walls. "All right."

Shacklebolt gave a little cough. "What, just like that? And here I was planning to twist your arm for an hour."

I shrugged. "This place is a tip."

"Oh glory, we're in agreement. Come on, I've got a portkey."

I grabbed my bottle of scotch and joined Shacklebolt at the counter. His hand hovered over an old biro. "Together," he said. Taking a portkey with a Ministry official, destination unknown. Normally I wouldn't even consider it. Now it seemed to be enough that he was a breathing human. I needed a refuge. We touched the biro.

We landed on a grassy verge near a flat and slow river. "You've got the usual protections on your name and location?" Shacklebolt asked. I nodded. He shrugged off his robe and tucked it under his arm, revealing an unremarkable grey suit underneath. So we were going in mufti. As I'd never put on the robes again, I supposed I was fine as I was.

Shacklebolt led me up the bank and out of the park to some quiet back streets. A sleepy shopping district in a sleepy comfortable muggle town. We went up the back stairs in a white-washed brick block of flats, all very pleasant. There was the smell of cooking floating in from somewhere, god, I was famished.

We stopped on the fourth floor, at a door with a number pad set above the handle. A number pad? He looked over his shoulder at me as he punched in the code. "No casting. Like that office of yours, right?"

I nodded, taking note of the code.

We stepped in. There weren't any wards to pass, no Notice-Me-Nots, no anti-apparition boundaries, nothing.

"You slum as a muggle?"

"I have you to thank for this little refuge." He was opening curtains to reveal a view across to the park where we'd landed. We

were high enough up that no one could look directly in on us. "It took us three searches of your place before we found your money. It was Proudfoot, the one muggleborn member of the team, who found it. He saw some loose grains of plaster on the back of your sink and he knew what it meant. You taught me something that day. If you want to hide something from wizards, don't use magic."

It was a small modern flat with the kitchen and dining areas opening into the sitting room. It was clean and minimal, everything done in cream and black. A few doors led off to the sides. "A safe house?" I asked.

"Not exactly. A refuge. It's secure enough as long as you've already protected yourself from trackers and Point Me's. There's a disrupting ward outside the windows to take care of anyone trying to scry for me. There are times when I have to get away from Floos and owls and especially the sodding Restoration Committee."

"This is *your* flat."

"My muggle flat. Sometimes, like tonight, I'll arrange a night off, leave a protean note with a couple of aides and enjoy the quiet. And maybe some scotch."

"It's *my* scotch!"

"You're staying in *my* flat."

I paused. "I expect dinner."

"Done."

Shacklebolt stepped around the counter and opened the refrigerator. I hadn't seen one of those in ages.

"I've mostly got breakfast things here. Eggs, tomato, and sausage?"

"Fine." I found a glass on one of the shelves and poured myself a drink. Shacklebolt could take care of his own.

"That's the third thing we've agreed on today. Either you're going soft, or I'm offering too much."

"You guess."

"I'm not going to guess. I am going to suggest we talk about my deal."

"Your deal?"

He turned from slicing tomatoes and pointed the knife at me. "The deal where I help you getting a new sentencing hearing for Mr. Malfoy and you help us locate the missing dead. That deal."

“Hmm.”

“You had objections to coming back here at all, but you seem to have resolved those yourself. Perhaps I can help you resolve any other objections.”

“One objection would be the efficacy of any help you could give me.”

“Meaning?” He looked at me. “Meaning you don’t have your proof?”

“Not yet,” I admitted.

“Well, can I give you any help there? I’m interested in seeing that proof, myself.”

I considered while I drank. I had my course of action, and that was stalled at the moment waiting for Draco to bring me material for a tracking charm. I didn’t fancy rooting around in the foundations without something to guide us. It was generally unhealthy to spend too much time down there. It *weighed* heavily, down in the foundations.

Shacklebolt was watching me again. “You haven’t found the contract yet.”

“I know the approximate location.”

“Well, then, what’s keeping you? If it’s simply a matter of finding it – have you tried a tracking charm? I think Mr. Malfoy’s advocate said it was signed in blood.”

I watched him.

“Out with it, Snape.”

“I’m working on it.”

“I said I want to see the proof too. Maybe I can help.” He turned to the eggs. “I thought you Slytherins liked to bargain. Maybe I’m wrong, the way you’ve just been *agreeing* to things straight off.”

“I bargain when I think I may have something to gain by it.” That wasn’t entirely true; back in the House, bargaining was regarded as a sport in itself.

“There’s nothing for you to gain here?” He took the pan off the burner. “Or does asking me for help reveal to much vulnerability for you?”

“You think I’m afraid of you?”

“I didn’t say you were. You could have valid concerns. This whole matter involves friends of yours. The Malfoys are fairly vulnerable at the moment, I think you’d agree. I don’t believe you’d casually put them at risk.”

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If Shacklebolt had heard my last conversation with Lucius, he might not have been so quick to call them my friends. We were tied together though, I couldn’t deny that.

“What if I told you that anything we discuss is strictly between us?”

“You’re asking me to trust you,” I said.

“Hallelujah, yes, I am.”

I didn’t reply.

“I don’t think it’s productive to rehash our arguments again. If I have some very clever scheme to trap you, you might agree that it hasn’t been effective up till now. You can weigh your own risk for what you have to lose. On the other hand, I’m offering you my help. Maybe you don’t need it, but maybe there is something you can gain.”

The image of the Dark Lord standing barefoot in the Great Hall flashed into my mind. I tried to will it gone. I couldn’t ask for help on that. The Ministry had never made a single effective move against the Dark Lord and they never would. And on top of that, Shacklebolt might regard me as somehow attracting or summoning his spirit and handle me as a threat. Impossible.

He was dividing the eggs and sausage on two plates. “Let’s start with just a small bargain. You tell me what help you need in finding that contract. If I can help you, then show me the contract once you’ve found it. That’s all.”

I stared at my eggs. "To track blood, you need blood," I said.

"Yes, that does make it easier. Interesting. I just happened to be looking at Lucius Malfoy's file. I notice that Draco Malfoy has put in a visitation request. Again. After a request just a day ago. It probably won't be approved for some time since they just had contact. Now, the Ministry does have blood samples of all prisoners to be able to track them in the event of escape or disguise. I wonder if that would be any use to you."

"Yes," I said simply. There really wasn't any point in being coy now.

"I'll release it to the family. I assume you're working with them already." He started in on the eggs. "And you?"

"If I find the contract."

"If you find it, I want to see it. You wouldn't get very far with your efforts to release Mr. Malfoy if I didn't."

True enough. I began to eat.

"We're getting somewhere. I want to bring you back in, Snape, I won't pretend otherwise, but I'm content to take small steps." He gave a short laugh. "My advisors would be furious with me. First skiving off in the muggle world, then making bargains with you. They wouldn't have me bother with you, you know, better to leave you in hiding."

I rather agreed with them. "Well, damn you, why bother me, then?"

"I've told you I want you to point us to the bodies. No one in Azkaban is talking about locations, Snape. They know their sentences could be lengthened if there is any physical proof out there to link them to specific deaths. And the Wizengamot isn't inclined to cut any deals with them for information. But you have a pardon. You have a free hand. I'm not going to give you any bull about it being 'the right thing to do.' But I have a feeling. I've learned to pay strict attention to those over the past five years. You are not a loose end that we can leave hanging. I think I need to bring you back in, as far as I can."

This purpose of his, as nebulous as it was, was somehow more reassuring than the thought of him simply wanting to help me or strike up a friendship.

"And you've already been in contact with the Malfoys? How long

have you been here?"

"A few days."

"And how is it to be back?"

"Every day I'm reminded of why I left."

He snorted and helped himself to my scotch.

We concentrated on the food then, to my relief. It was growing dark outside. It was very odd to see the electric lights beyond the curtains, unnatural orange and green. It was almost like when I was a child, back in the end, though there were fewer lights then.

"I still don't know if you trust me."

I turned sharply to him. He had been watching me looking at the window.

"I could blame it on my being Minister, but it goes back further than that, doesn't it? Even at the Order meetings at Grimmauld Place, you put your back to the wall and watched us all like we were getting ready to cut your throat, and that only applied to a couple of us."

"I'm sure the feeling was mutual."

"Not exactly. Do you believe me?"

"You can't tell me that Black or Moody trusted me."

"Oh, not them." His tone was light.

The strangeness of it all struck me; I was sitting in an electric-lit room, chatting about secret Order meetings with the Minister of Magic. Well, not exactly with the Minister, we were talking as two Order members. Reminiscing over drinks, for god's sake.

"You're saying that the others trusted me, that they didn't have any trouble with me?"

"Oh, they had trouble, all right. But not necessarily because they didn't trust you."

I looked at him skeptically.

"You were a walking dead man. No one could imagine you making it through alive. And by the look on your face at those meetings – you knew as well as us it was only a matter of time."

He was watching me. "Yes," I said shortly.

"They say that's how to find out who your real friends are, right? If you're a terminal case, some people will just disappear like they

might catch it. And on top of that, most of us were enormous arseholes then. I mean, we had to be, just to make those kinds of terrible decisions required for bloody victory. Another side effect of fighting in that miserable war. And now I'm Minister, and that doesn't help. Being an enormous arsehole is practically a requirement of the job. Anyway, it was hard to be around you, then. It's hard to be around anyone you know is going to die."

"Not so easy to *be* that one," I muttered.

"Albus' sacrificial goat. But you weren't the only one. Maybe you were the only one who *knew* it. Not sure if that made it easier or harder for you."

"It was bloody miserable, but I suppose it gave me time to come to terms with the idea."

"Well, we could tell. The miserable part. You would come in to those meetings ready to snap. What an awful waste – you know, you could have got away with almost anything with that crowd, and all you ever did was take the piss out of Sirius Black."

"Someone had to."

"Arthur still talks about the time you dosed his tea. It was harder for you after he died, wasn't it? You'd never have a go at us, even when we tried to bait you a bit."

So he had been *managing* me for years, they all had.

"Aberforth told me you were in bad shape when he peeled you off the floor in the shack, and the phoenix had already been working on you for a while. How close was it?"

How close? I had been close enough to see it, a strange place where light and dark were reversed, and I was floating down or up away from myself. But I could hardly put that *other place* into words, much less know if it was anything other than a hallucination.

"I stopped breathing," I said simply.

"You take the piss out of anyone now?"

I didn't answer.

"Or talk to anyone at all? Your friend, that Dr. Stoltz, for example."

"I know *you* speak to him."

"Since you know that, you must be speaking to him too."

"I'll assume you know everything you need to about whom I speak to," I said tightly.

"At least you're still speaking to me, for now. I still consider you a member, you know. Of the Order. We're all in this together, Severus."

I didn't have any answer to that. We cleared the plates away, *all in this together*, and he made the sofa up for me as a bed. He retired to his own bedroom and I fell asleep to the dim orange glow of the town's lights behind the curtains.

Avery was pulling me up. I was still in the graveyard, at his great rebirth. I had been late too late, two hours late, and he had been so very displeased with me and now I couldn't stand. The others were moving away, but Avery was helping me up.

"What," I began.

"Shut your mouth, mate," he said, not unkindly. "Come on."

He put my arm across his shoulders and heaved. My ruined legs dragged. Had to cast on them but I didn't have a wand.

Avery did. He repaired them until I could stumble along with his support. Not too much to undo His punishment, just enough to get along. I couldn't feel much now, but every step was like wading through sand. An edge of dark forest was rising up before us. He was in there, waiting.

But when we were enclosed by the looming darkness of the trees, I couldn't see Him anywhere. There wasn't any Dark Lord, only nothing. The other Death Eaters were arranged in a wide circle, and in the middle was a hole, a dark well going down. Avery deposited me at the edge. It opened dizzily before me, down and down, and a small white shape at the bottom. I clung to the edge and tried to make it out. A chair, impossibly far away. They were going to send me down. My hands were slipping on the edge and the twisting gnawing pain of His punishment ate into my leg –

I woke panting, hands trying to grip the edge of nothing and the wrenching knot of a muscle cramp twisting in my right calf. I clenched my teeth against the pain and tried to push my foot back to relax the muscle. No good. The knot in my calf tightened like an

iron band. Damn charley horse. I pushed myself off the couch and tried to brace my foot against the floor. My cramping leg folded and I hit the floor with a thud.

I froze for a moment and looked back at Shackbolt's room. No sound. I dug my fingers into the knot in my calf until it slowly eased. There was a pale yellow glow from an electric clock on the mantel. Three in the morning. Of course it was.

I didn't want to explain to Shackbolt. Actually, I didn't want to explain anything to anyone, to cooperate or bargain, to manage or be managed. I wanted to be out of it. I let myself out silently. That was an advantage of a muggle flat in a muggle town. No need to drop wards or put up a disillusionment. I could just walk out. I walked while the ache in my leg faded, until the town streets changed to a winding road along the river. My short night was weighing on me. I needed to sleep. I wasn't going back to Shackbolt's flat, or my tip. I sighed. I had a long set of apparitions ahead of me.

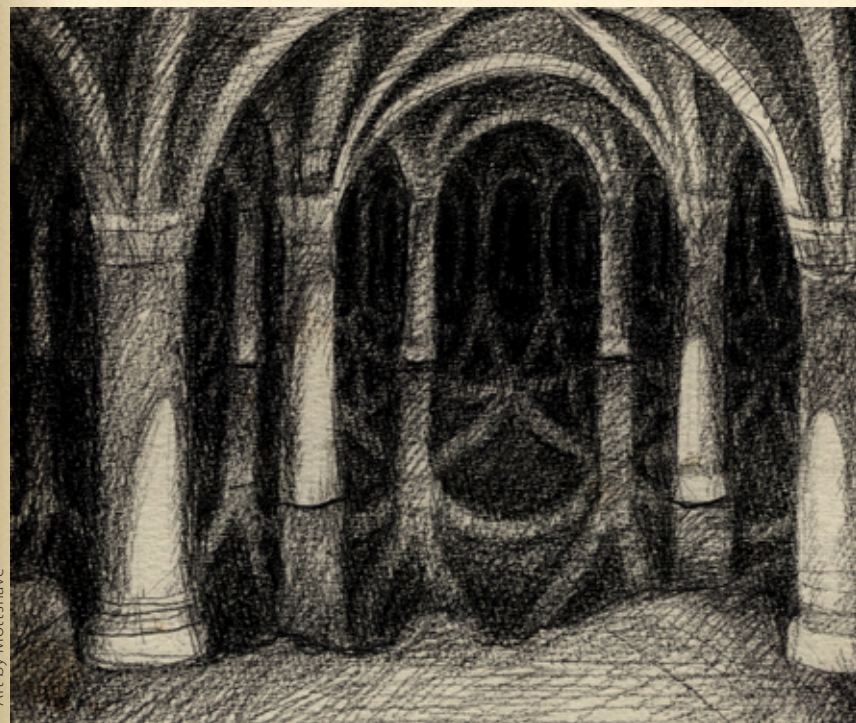
It was just getting light when I finally landed in the alley behind the Hog's Head and let myself in through the wards in back. It would have to do. The spare room was dark and quiet and there was no blasted bird, and that was good enough.



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Art by Mottsnave

THE FOUNDATIONS

I woke grasping for my wand and pushing myself out of bed. Something was thumping against the window. It took a moment for the fog of sleep to clear enough to see it was an owl. Damn it, again? No use waiting, it would only start hooting. I shoved the window open and took the letter. The envelope had Bulstrode's writing on the back. *For you again.* I opened it.

File Clerk,

I have the sample material you requested to track my papers. I will

Chapter 14 of **THE GOOD FRIEND**
BY MOTTNAVE

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present myself to turn it over at eleven this morning, should you kindly extend permission to enter Hogwarts' grounds.

Yours,

Draco Malfoy

So Shackbolt had come through, and quickly, too. Eleven? What time was it? I cast Tempus. It was ten-fifty. Damn, I was going to be late. I hated being late. I splashed some water from the basin on my face and struggled into my clothes. I really didn't want to go into that place again, but if Draco was going up there... hell. He had better not go into the Great Hall.

I didn't stop or Aberforth's shouted, "oh, wait a tic –" as I passed him on my way out the back. I kept myself under a disillusionment until I reached the school. I was probably kidding myself that I could keep my presence a secret much longer, since my House and the Ministry knew, but I wasn't ready to completely surrender yet.

I clenched my hands in my pockets before I reached for the door. No need for flashbacks, no need to go into the Great Hall, and no need for *Him* either. I had won, he had lost, and that was the end of it. I pushed into the entrance hall.

It was always cool in the dim stone hall, but that didn't entirely account for the frigid atmosphere. Minerva was standing in the center of the stairs, arms crossed, watching Draco down the end of her nose. Draco was hanging awkwardly about at the foot of the stairs. He had on the haughty expression he hid behind whenever he was most uncomfortable.

"Ah, finally," said Minerva. "Mr. Malfoy, Professor Snape and I have something to discuss. In private. You will step outside and wait until you are summoned."

Draco shrugged with bad grace and left. As soon as the door shut, Minerva dropped her stiff pose and hurried down the stair to me. "Severus, he said he'd sent you a note, but I wasn't sure you'd come back. Where did you go?"

"I went for a walk. I was back at the Hog's Head last night." True enough, as far as it went.

"Well, I wish you hadn't gone off like that. I suppose... if you

couldn't stay, you couldn't." It was more of an admission than I thought I would get from her.

"I've been checking over the school very carefully. There's no sign of our *visitor* now. I've also done what I should have done long ago and questioned the ghosts about him. Trust Bulstrode to think of it. Well, none of them have any information, not even Myrtle. The Baron has agreed to watch the hall."

The Baron probably didn't like the idea of a spirit who was more menacing than him.

"Now, please, Severus, did you know he was there?"

"No. When I saw him the first time I thought he was a... flashback. It wasn't until I saw you looking at him, the second time, that I realized."

"You've had flashbacks, you've seen him before?"

I very much did not want to go into that. "You think I brought him."

"I'm wondering if you may have... *triggered* him, somehow."

"Somehow, such as betraying him."

"He did find out about that just before his death."

"Ah, yes, I remember reading that *someone* told him all about me."

"Now, Severus."

"Don't 'now, Severus' me. He didn't do me any favors."

"He certainly didn't mean you any harm."

"That would be a first," I muttered.

"The point is," said Minerva firmly, "that whatever the trigger may be, it seems to have taken effect only when you enter the Great Hall. You have been several other places in the school and on the grounds without incident, if I'm correct."

I nodded.

"If I thought there was any immediate risk to you, I wouldn't have you back here at all, but as long as we steer clear of the Great Hall, I don't think it's very likely. Still, I believe it would be best for you to avoid the grounds altogether once this business with the contract is over."

"I have no intention of loitering around here."

"And I have no intention of driving you off! This is just until we can solve the problem. I'm uncomfortable with leaving things as they stand and just assuming that something else won't trigger

his spirit in the future. I can't have children exposed to him. I've already put Filius on the problem and I'll be calling a staff meeting as soon as he has any ideas. I believe he wants to ask you a few questions about his first appearance."

"You told Filius."

"Severus, he's known about you at least as long as I have. He had a long talk with Albus' portrait when he found out that your body hadn't been recovered. Of course he put it together."

I sighed. "The whole school knows."

"You don't *have* to fight everyone all your life."

That showed how much she knew.

"Will you talk to Filius? Maybe he can discover some way to get rid of him."

"I'll think about it. Minerva, right now I just want to get the contract and get out of here. I need a few materials for the tracking charm."

"Materials?"

"I can get them from the staff room."

"Hmm. I'll meet you at the Foundation stair door. I expect you to keep Mr. Malfoy under your close supervision at all times."

When I opened the main door, Draco looked relieved that Minerva was gone.

"Sir."

"Come on, we need to make our tracker." He followed me down the corridor.

"She doesn't like me, sir," he remarked.

"Well, aren't you the clever one."

Minerva wouldn't have been pleased that I took Draco into the staff room, but I couldn't see that it made any difference. It wasn't very likely that Minerva would ever let him onto Hogwarts' grounds again.

Draco slouched around pretending to admire the place while I obtained a teacup and a bit of stick from the kindling box.

"Professors know how to live in style."

"Don't pretend you've never been here. I know you sneaked in your third year. You've got the blood?"

He brought out a Ministry-sealed vial. "*You* pulled strings for this."

"There wasn't any point waiting and having you spend your resources when you didn't need to." I opened the vial and soaked one end of the stick in the blood. Draco didn't look pleased at the implication that he needed to save his resources.

"Yes, but now the Ministry knows."

"One person in the Ministry knows. He won't be leaking it."

"Who?"

I sighed. Draco, his whole family, really, would have to know soon, if Shackbolt were to arrange another hearing for Lucius.

"Shackbolt."

"What? He'll use it against father!"

"No, he won't."

"Our barrister told us he didn't believe her about the contract and didn't cooperate with her when she was trying to have it introduced at his hearing."

"That was before I was able to confirm its existence. Shackbolt has agreed to arrange a new hearing for your father if I can present him with some physical evidence, such as the contract."

I applied a drying charm to the blood. No sense in having it wash right off again.

"Why?" Draco asked carefully.

"Because he owes me." I didn't care to go into the details of my deal with Shackbolt.

"So you're calling in a favor for this?"

Let him think so, he might even start trusting me again. I filled the teacup with Aguamenti.

"You set the tracking charm," I said, handing him the stick, "it's less likely to point to you as a false positive if *you* cast it."

He went to work. When he was done, it wasn't immediately clear that it had taken effect. Lucius' blood was fairly fresh, which helped, but his signature was several years old now, and the stick was wavering in the water. Draco regarded it with suspicion.

"Come on, let's get it closer." I led him into the dungeons. The smell of it, god, held far too many memories. There was a two-

meter-thick wall separating us from the lake, but this part of the dungeons always smelled of water. The corridors here were so familiar I could have walked them in pitch blackness, as I had done many times before. Back again, and I didn't want to be back again. But it still tugged at me like it was home.

We found Minerva past the third security door in the small round chamber at the head of the foundation stair. She and Draco avoided looking at each other. She put her hand on the door and it shuddered slightly at her touch. "Make it quick, I don't want to hang around here all day."

I nodded and she opened the door to the spiral stair.

It grew colder as we descended, and the walls sparkled and dripped with long tubes of niter. The contours of the stairs were blurred with centuries of use, dipping in the middle. Further down, the drippings from the walls slicked the stairs. I could see the clouds of Draco's breath rising in my Lumos. He trailed one hand along the wall. The stick of the tracker was spinning slowly in its teacup as we wound down. The niter was thick here, draping the walls like frozen curtains. When we reached the bottom, we were in a tunnel of white.

The wall and door in front of us were clear of niter, of any sign of age. There was a small circular niche above the door arch, long bricked over, but beyond that it was all as if it had been built yesterday, the wood still green and the iron polished. Draco reached for the handle.

"Wait!" I pulled him back. "We can't take spells in there."

"What?"

"Deactivate the charm."

"But we'll need it –"

"It's just for this one room, we'll reactivate it on the other side."

Draco pulled the stick from teacup and shook off the water. "*Finite.*"

"Do you have any other active spells on you?"

"Just a couple, an Impervio on my boots –"

"Drop them all." I was casting my own Finites.

"Why?" he asked, but he complied.

"When we are in that room, you will not speak, you will not

touch anything, you will certainly not cast any spells, and it's best not to even look at it."

"At what?"

"Shut up. You will just go through and out the other door as quickly as possible."

"What about the Lumos?"

"We won't need it. *Nox.* Now open the door."

I could hear him fumbling against the door for the handle in the dark. Warm firelight spilled out as the door opened. I steered Draco in with my hand on his shoulder and quickly shut the door behind me.

The four torches mounted on the wall were burning, as always, casting a flickering reddish light over the round room. The dead thorn tree, its branches filled with innumerable scraps of white cloth still gripped the boulder with dead roots. And the pool, the black pool, flat and still and always *wanting* me.

Keep moving, keep moving.

Draco's head was twisted slightly to the left, he was looking at the pool from the corner of his eyes. All black, except that it reflected the tiny white scraps of cloth like stars in the sky. You could fall into that forever.

I dug my thumb into Draco's shoulder blade and pushed and he finally started moving, sticking close to the curving wall. We stumbled out the door on the other side of the room into the darkness beyond. Once I had the door closed behind me I recast the Lumos. Draco's face appeared white in the sudden glare.

"It... it isn't *alive*, is it?"

"Shut up."

"But what –"

"*Later.* The sooner we find the contract, the sooner we can be out of here."

Draco placed the cup on the ground in front of him and went down on his knees to reset the tracking charm. We were in a low vaulted space supported by thick columns. It was bordered by raw rock to the left and stretched out into darkness on the right. The house elves certainly had plenty of room to dump the rubble. How

had they brought it all down? Well, house elves had their ways. I couldn't see a trace of it from where we were.

Draco stood and examined the tracker. "The reset weakened it," he said, giving the stick a nudge. It wavered and pointed vaguely to the right, into the darkness.

We set off through the forest of columns, following the charm. There was an irregular dripping somewhere, and our echoing footsteps. The Lumos didn't spread far and I didn't want to strengthen it so close to the Room, so soon we were in a floating island of light in a sea of darkness all around. The sensation became even more pronounced as the general dampness of the floor turned to puddles, then pools, then we were unavoidably wading into the icy water.

"Are we getting close to the lake?" whispered Draco. Even whispering, his voice bounced away through the columns and returned like a stranger. I nodded, not wanting to hear my own voice like that. The water eddied around the sides of our shoes, then over the tops, then swirled around our shins as we went deeper. Were we going to have to swim soon? But then we were at the rubble pile, shattered blocks and snapped beams packed to the top of the vaults and stretching away into the darkness. So much – surely it wasn't just from the one battle? Or had the house elves been piling rubble here for centuries? Centuries of Dark Lords. And how many more would there have to be before they filled this space?

"Oh, Merlin, how are we going to find it in there?"

"Narrow it down."

Draco paced along the face of the pile, watching the tracker slowly swing. There was a three meter stretch that attracted the charm. I tried "*Point Me Gargoyle*," but I didn't get a hit. Whatever was left probably didn't qualify as much of a gargoyle now. A Point Me on the contract wouldn't do any good. Hogwarts was full of contracts.

An hour of freezing sodden feet and hands stiff from endless levitation charms and we finally uncovered it, the old gargoyle head with blank grey eyes staring up. The animating spells had long worn off, and unfortunately for us, the mouth was closed.

"I could Reducto – " Draco offered.

"No, that might destroy the contract. Hold it steady." I applied a slicing curse to cut away part of the head.

"Not so close to my fingers!"

"If you hold it steady your fingers will be in no danger. Stop wincing! And don't roll your eyes. Remember what happened last time?"

"Yes, *sir*."

When Draco had regained his nerve, I was able to slice close to the side of the mouth, leaving the head in cross-section. A delicate curl of parchment was just visible in the black cavity of the mouth.

"There! Turn it – " I teased the parchment free. It was all there, Albus' careful printing outlining the impossible terms and Lucius' extravagant signature at the bottom, in his own blood. I rolled it and tucked it into an inside pocket.

"That's it? Let me see."

"No, we'll get out now."

Draco frowned and dropped the remains of the head on the rubble pile.

We stopped to dry our boots and destroy the tracking charm when we reached the dry part of the vault. Draco cast angrily at his feet and the dissolving moisture came out in puffs of mist.

"It's my *father's*."

"Hmm."

"Why won't you let me see it?"

"I want to get out of here."

"It will only take a second."

"It's none of your business."

He looked at me in angry disbelief.

"Get your hand on the door, I'm dropping the Lumos."

For a moment I thought he would refuse, but then he grimaced and turned to the door. I dropped the spell and we



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plunged back into darkness. Draco opened the door.

The room was different now, somehow. Draco didn't need my hand on his shoulder to hurry him along. What was different? That was it; there was a breath of air stirring the strips of cloth in the branches of the thorn tree. The torches were flickering. The breeze ran in circles around the room. The surface of the water was moving. Draco came out almost at a run and I was right at his heels. I pulled the door to and leaned against it.

Draco cast the Lumos this time. He was even paler than before. "It can't *follow* us, can it?"

"No, the room stays here." I stepped away from the door. It held; all was still.

"All right, what is that place?"

"All spells die with the caster, yes?"

"Yes..."

"*Unless?*"

"Um..."

I glared at him. I didn't spend years pounding magic theory into his thick skull just so I could get 'ums.'

"Uh... unless a spell is cast on an external source of power."

"*Such as?*"

"Such as... a life, a sacrifice, a symbol, or a manifestation of an element... oh! All four of the primary elements are there!"

Finally. "The founders are long dead. Something has to keep this pile running."

"That's Hogwarts' Source, then? I didn't know it had one."

"Of course it does. It's part of the reason *he* wanted the school."

"Oh, Merlin."

"And that's why it's essential to *not* disturb it. You'd have the whole building down around your ears."

I edged past him on the stairs.

"What if he had taken it?"

"Only the Headmaster can get through the upper door."

"That was you... he would have killed you if you hadn't let him in."

I waved my hand dismissively. "What else is new? He had plenty

to kill me for aside from that."

"But then why did he... I mean, he tried to kill you before he got in."

"He had more immediate concerns. He had got a bit distracted by the end. He was obsessed with other things. Once he had taken the building he could have appointed someone and then tried to find a way to use the power at his leisure. It doesn't matter."

Draco was silent. I turned and began to climb the stairs. It was gradually getting warmer as we ascended.

"What's wrong with it?" Draco asked.

"Wrong?"

"Doesn't it feel..." He trailed off. I stopped again.

"*What, Draco?*"

"It's sodding creepy! Uh, sir."

"It's an extremely powerful Source that's possibly over a thousand years old. It's not going to be like visiting Honeydukes."

"Is it supposed to feel like that?"

"Like what?"

"Like it's hungry."

Was that the feeling? I thought it was more like wanting. Or *needing*. *The pool needed...* I pushed the feeling away. "I suppose; it's the only Source I've visited."

Draco looked skeptical, but began climbing again. The stairs twisted upwards towards the warmth above.

Draco's voice came from behind me, quietly. "I know."

"Know what?"

"I know. Before his trial, my father told me how you made him agree to help you."

I stopped again. "Did he now?"

"Did you mean it?"

"Mean what?"

"If he didn't... if he didn't help you, you would have framed him as a traitor and turned him over to the Dark Lord." His voice was shaking. His hands too, making his Lumos cast swaying shadows on the walls.

"Draco - "

"*Would you have done it?*"

"Draco, the only way he could possibly agree to take the risk of helping me was if I made the alternative worse."

"Would you have done it?"

"Listen to me. I lost so many friends to him. One killed himself because he couldn't continue with the Dark Lord. I don't know what I would have done if I hadn't found a way out myself. What would you have done if he had won? Could you have lived with it?"

Draco swallowed.

I went on. "I would have done almost anything to keep one friend from being lost to the Dark Lord. I lost enough to him."

"And turning him over to his death wouldn't be losing him?"

"It wouldn't have come to that and it didn't come to that. Your father was too intelligent not to see the situation, so he agreed to the contract."

"If he hadn't – "

"I didn't give him any choice because I was determined to get him out, to get you all out! That impossible choice was the only way he could agree!"

"Well, he's not out now!"

"You are, and your mother is, and with *this*," I said, tapping my pocket, "he will be, soon."

Draco studied me. "Oh, Merlin, you would have done it. You would have got us all killed."

"Draco, I didn't think I would have to remind you. You know exactly how far I would go to save your life."

He dropped his gaze. "I'm well aware of my debts, sir. All of them."

"I'm not currently asking for payment."

"Are you paying my father? With that?" He gestured towards the contract.

I wasn't sure how much he knew of my debts to his father. "You think I might have paid him with the life of his son?"

"There is that." He could finally meet my eyes again.

I started up the stairs again. After a few turns I could hear Draco's steps echoing behind me.

Minerva was waiting with ill-concealed impatience at the top. "You have what you came for?" She was resealing the door.

"Yes."

"Fine. Mr. Malfoy, you are not to enter Hogwarts' grounds again. Do you understand?"

"Perfectly."

Minerva held herself rigid until Draco was gone, then turned to me in relief.

"I'm not sorry to see the last of his lot. Too weak-willed for my taste."

I looked at her in irritation. She could have very little idea what sort of will it took to live in close quarters with the Dark Lord as his special target and still eke out a measure of resistance.

Minerva noticed my look. "Oh, don't try to excuse him, Severus. He had his choices."

"No good ones," I snapped.

"Please. Mr. Potter told me in detail what happened that night. Albus offered him sanctuary."

I sighed. Draco had told me about that himself some weeks later, with a nervous laugh, trying for a sliver of reassurance as his world crumbled in. I told him that the offer had been nonsense, and that Albus was a 'barmy old bastard.' For once, my role didn't require much acting.

"Albus was... not at his full faculties. He didn't have any sanctuary to offer him. He had planned for his death; he should have known he wouldn't be present to provide any protection. And even if Draco had somehow managed to get out, his family would have been held accountable. They would have been killed horribly. That was no choice for him."

"Oh, come now, there could have been some way. I refuse to believe that Albus would deliberately mislead him."

"It may not have been deliberate, but Albus had his own kind of cruelty." I had been dangled at the end of his false choices more than once. Were they any worse than the false choice I had given Lucius? "At times he believed that his good intent was more important than the price others had to pay."

Minerva had gone rigid again. "Hasn't he already paid enough for you?"

I turned and walked out. I didn't trust myself to speak just then. I closed the main door behind me with a familiar thud. I knew she

still wondered about how I had gathered up the will to put behind the killing curse. She probably suspected that I had *wanted* to do it. Sometimes I suspected that myself.

When I arrived back at the Hog's Head, under a disillusionment, I went straight up to Aberforth's spare room. I didn't care to see his familiar features at the moment.

I sat for a long time staring at the Protean note that Shackbolt had given me to contact him. Of course, nothing would come of the contract without his aid, and if he was going to help, the first step was to show him the bloody thing. I sighed. No help for it.

I have it, I wrote.

CALLING IN

By the next morning, Shackbolt arranged it. As he instructed, I took the portkey he had given me to his secure office, and then he took me in a side-along to the flat. I knew the flat; a place Lucius reserved for 'sensitive business.' I hadn't known that Narcissa knew about it, but she was there to meet us at the door and let us in. She looked just the same. Her face still had the lines that living with the Dark Lord had added. She didn't give me much of a look at all.

Draco was lingering near the door. Their barrister was not the fusty old man I remembered, but a woman of about fifty, short and rather round with a cheerful apple-cheeked face. The Malfoys were definitely trying for an image change. Hopefully she was more than just a friendly face.

"Please come in Minister, Mr. Snape." At least she was addressing me for the moment, even if Narcissa wasn't. We each took a seat.

Chapter 15 of **THE GOOD FRIEND**

BY MOTTSSNAVE

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"Thank you, Madam Lubin. Mr. Malfoy, if you would join us," said Shackbolt.

Draco remained leaning against the wall for a moment. "As long as you don't consider it a violation of my probation."

That would be a reference to me, clearly he was not to associate with marked Death Eaters. Since he had scored his point, he joined his mother on the sofa.

Shackbolt was sliding a copy of the contract over to Madam Lubin. "It would be better for you if the actual evidence is presented as being found and coming from us."

Lubin gave a short bark of a laugh and passed the contract to Narcissa. "Exactly as he described it," she said.

Narcissa's formal mask dropped for a moment as she looked at the contract with relief. It was quickly back as she exchanged a look with Lubin. It was the barrister who addressed Shackbolt. "Before we take any specific steps, we will need to know your intentions behind this." She tapped the contract.

"As I said, this is exactly the sort of new evidence that would be required before I would approve a new hearing in Mr. Malfoy's case."

"Yes, we quite understand that. The question is more: what is your specific intention for such a hearing? You must understand that presenting this contract without some assurance of Mr. Malfoy's release presents a very real risk to Mr. Malfoy's safety. What are the prospects, as you see them?"

Shackbolt paused. "The Wizengamot sentencing boards have absolutely no desire to revisit this issue or release Mr. Malfoy. Public opinion is against it and they are happy to let themselves be ruled by public opinion. If they have any opportunity to discredit or discount the evidence, they will do so. Now, it would be difficult for them to discount the contract itself. It can be tested and it will be proven genuine. But they still have avenues of attack. It wouldn't be difficult to argue that, while the contract is genuine, there is no evidence that Mr. Malfoy ever acted on it or actually contributed to the Order's efforts."

"And if there was such evidence?" asked Lubin.

"It would depend on the quality of the evidence, of course, but if it was direct and credible evidence from someone who had a position within the Order, the sentencing board would feel that the weight of public opinion might swing in Mr. Malfoy's favor. The public may still have certain thirst for retribution, but they are looking for heroes as well."

"So, direct testimony would be the only chance at a favorable verdict."

I hoped that Madam Lubin was a bit more subtle with her leading questions in court.

"Yes, I believe so," said Shackbolt.

No one was looking at me, not that it mattered. The son of a bitch was *managing* me. Not even the bare respect to try to hide it. If he didn't have the nerve to say it to my face, the same couldn't be said of Narcissa.

"I would like to speak to Mr. Snape. In private," she said firmly in the growing silence. She stood abruptly.

Shackbolt adjusted his chair.

"No, don't rise..." She crossed to a door on the other side of the room without looking back.

I stood and went along, like a sheep. Or was I a sacrificial goat again? As long as she didn't weep at me this time. I had a rather sick feeling that she would.

She led me down the short corridor to the kitchenette and dining area. It wasn't as I remembered it. It wasn't a stuffy false front any longer. It was being lived in now. And it had Narcissa's touch. A pair of framed drawings on the wall depicted the Malfoy estate and gardens in carefully modulated greys. The detail was precise enough that I could see the small gate in the silvery yew hedge that led into the garden.

I remembered the first time I had stepped through that gate. Lucius had graduated that spring, but as I was several years behind him, I was still 'sentenced to the dungeons,' as we'd called it. He had taken a bit of an interest in me during my third year, and said I had "the potential to become less of a disgrace to the House." Still, an invitation like that was a different sort of interest. Looking back

now, I wondered if he had thought of recruitment even then. At the time, I thought I had gained entrance to another world. I was being invited into fine gardens. Lucius held the gate for me. Somehow the bright sunlight made the geometry of the gardens all the more precise. The garden was like a series of interconnected rooms and corridors, walled by hedges and espaliered pear trees, as though the family had arranged for the order of their house to spill out onto the grounds as well.

Every room was in order and everything was in its place and the course was set. I didn't yet know what my place was, but I was sure I would be put in it. And there was that knife edge of possible exile hanging over it all. I had been exiled from fine gardens before as the smell of the yews reminded me.

What had I been to him then? *Faithful retainer*, perhaps. Or *grateful worthy raised up by the Malfoys' graces*. Until I decided to step off my plinth and crawl my way through the hedges.

The drawings of the house and gardens managed to soften their rigid order; the silvery lines made them look almost inviting. Was it really a comfort to them? And here was Narcissa in a modest flat, and she was going to be begging favors of me. All their careful order upturned.

She turned to face me. I couldn't help notice that she didn't seem particularly tearful. She was regarding me steadily.

"I won't say that it's good to see you, Severus." It hardly seemed that she was about to break into pleading. I should have been relieved, but I didn't like it.

"I won't pretend that I don't owe you a great debt. The life of my son, on more than one occasion, to begin with. With the life debt that he owes you, well, we decided that I should be the one to speak to you. Considering his debts, Draco can hardly speak freely with you. On *equal* terms." That last came with an effort.

"Terms?"

"I wish to be very clear. I am *not* begging a favor."

"Are you not?"

"No. My husband's circumstances do not allow him to speak freely

either, so I must speak for him. I am calling in the debt you owe him.”

“What would that be, precisely?”

“I don’t believe you need to pretend ignorance to comply with your oath. Well, since you can’t speak of it directly, yes, I am aware that you took a vow to the Ministry not to speak of your detention as a condition of your release. In 1978 you were detained without being charged under suspicion of being a Death Eater. You were being interrogated. You might have been held indefinitely. You might have disappeared entirely. It had happened before. But it didn’t happen to you. You were released on the direct actions of my husband. Were you aware that he was the agent of your release?”

“Yes,” I admitted. I didn’t like to remember that time, that chair, and that room, but it was true.

“And has he, in the decades since that time, ever called on you to pay him for that debt?”

“No.”

“So, the debt stands.”

“Perhaps your husband may consider the life of his son adequate payment, even if you do not.”

Narcissa clicked her tongue impatiently. “That is another matter entirely. I expect that he regards that as an important debt to pay to you, but we are not currently discussing those terms. In 1978 you were incarcerated and at great risk at the hands of the Ministry. You had no prospects for release, no family to advocate for you, and no influence. You hadn’t bound yourself to be Dumbledore’s dog yet, had you? My husband used his influence and arranged for your release at considerable personal expense. Today, my husband is incarcerated and at great risk at the hands of the Ministry. If there is anything in your power that you can do to aid his release, you must do it or violate your debt.”

“I don’t believe that Lucius’ financial and political outlay in 1978 is on par with my physical risk in testifying and revealing my existence.”

“Oh yes, your physical risk. I find that very moving. Perhaps almost as much as you found my whole family’s risk when you forced Lucius to sign that contract!” Her voice had risen.

“That wasn’t my intent. I never wanted – ”

“Your *intent* would not have mattered to us if he had found out! If things had gone another way – nothing would have mattered to us then!”

“I don’t think I need to remind you that it did *not* go that way. And once, you dearly hoped it would. But no, none of that happened. And in the course of events that we are actually in, where would your family’s hopes be without that contract?”

“Oh, about the same as they are now with it, unless we have some direct testimony to back it.”

I didn’t have an answer to that.

“Tell me something, Severus. How did you choose Lucius? He couldn’t tell me what gave him that honor. Was it that you thought you could rely on his aid, or that you believed he owed you? Or was it that you thought it would be no great loss if we were found out?”

Couldn’t tell her? Or didn’t he want to admit to her that he’d had his own doubts. And would Narcissa even understand if it wasn’t a matter of debt and owing?

“I needed to get someone out. With him, I thought I could manage it. Otherwise, we were all going to be lost, one by one. I had to at least try to get him out.”

She gave me a searching look. “Then, or now?”

“Yes,” I said.

She gave me a slow nod. After all, it had already been decided decades ago. There was nothing else.

The rest rose as Narcissa reentered the sitting room; I was close behind. Her expression was clear enough. Draco looked down and smiled.

Shacklebolt addressed me. “You will testify.”

“Yes.”

“Thank you, Mr. Snape,” said Madam Lubin with a friendly smile. “I wonder if can take some time to go over your testimony. There can be no surprises if we want a successful outcome to the hearing.”

I sighed. It was going to be a long morning.

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Art by Mottsnave

THE TOWER

I was feeling a bit ill by the time we left the flat. *Just need a cup of tea*, I told myself, *fine hospitality of Narcissa not to offer it*. Nothing at all to do with the hours of questions and answers and dredging up the muck of the past, the tight looks on Narcissa and Draco's faces as I recounted Lucius' betrayals.

When we at last stood outside past the apparition wards, Shackbolt looked at me and took hold of my arm. I sighed, but didn't

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pull away, which I suppose he took as permission. He took me in a side-along apparition, landing us at the edge of a field, a barbed-wire-topped fence at our backs.

High-handed, leading me around by the nose as he had all day. He didn't look the least bit ashamed. "We're going to cut the crap now, Snape. You're testifying, and you need real security. No more skulking around Hogsmeade, right?" He must have been in contact with Aberforth.

There were wards were just a few steps in from the fence. He spoke some keyword softly and then led me across with a hand on my shoulder. We were headed to a featureless green lump of a hill in the center of the field. There was a heavy raincloud centered over the hill that seemed to be dumping a constant torrent all about it. Shackbolt cast an Impervio on us both and I ducked my head as we entered the downpour. It proved to be only a few feet wide, a ring of rain in a perimeter around the hill. It was probably good for spotting anyone under a disillusionment or an invisibility cloak. Was the Ministry finally getting clever? It didn't seem likely, from what I knew of them, but perhaps that was Shackbolt's influence.

There was an invisible door set in the grass, and one of stone just behind that, all keyed to Shackbolt. The corridor wasn't the dark stone I expected, but clean, white, and spare, curving away on both sides. Shackbolt indicated the way to the left. I didn't want to walk in front, damn it, in that clean white place. I set myself to the side of him and behind. I couldn't hear a thing but our echoing steps. If there were any guards, I thankfully couldn't see any trace of them.

The corridor went in a complete circle and soon we were back at the entrance, but Shackbolt kept past it until we had made the circuit three and a quarter times, then back one and a third. He opened a door that hadn't existed before into the center of the hill. Inside was a sitting room with a couple of connecting doors to the side. Comfortable furniture, faded gold wallpaper, and a fireplace. I closed my eyes for a moment. He had brought me in. He might as well set me on the mantle like a trophy.

Shackbolt must have seen my look. "Do you want to be uncom-

fortable? Do you need a little more adversity to relax?"

I sat disgustedly in one of the Ministry armchairs. It was very nice, damn it.

Shacklebolt took a seat across from me. "First of all, Snape, we're going to talk about security. For the hearing, I want you glamoured back to your old appearance. Hair, robes, everything. We don't need the public familiar with your current appearance."

I heartily agreed with that.

"It will be a closed session. No reporters in the hearing room. Only the sentencing board and those testifying will be present. You'll be in a secure room when you're not in the hearing room itself. And outside of that you're welcome to stay here. It is very safe. But I'm not holding you against your will." He motioned to the fireplace. "It's an outbound-only floo. You can leave any time you want. I just don't advise it."

"Don't you?"

"There are a couple of your immediate former colleagues still at large."

"Rookwood."

"Rookwood, yes. And Avery."

"Avery's dead."

"You're certain?"

"Oh, yes."

He regarded me for a long moment. "Self-defense?"

I didn't answer.

"Well, Rookwood then. Now, I wouldn't put Rookwood as an immediate threat. You can correct me, but from our assessments, he was always very careful and foresighted. His most intelligent course of action would be to not jeopardize his own safety by attempting to approach you, who would be more likely to recognize him than anyone else."

"Rookwood is most probably living very quietly very far away, with a new name, a new face, and a tidy nest egg."

"We concur on that. The Ministry won't stop looking for him, of course, but I expect he'll have landed in some country without an extradition agreement and hostile to cooperation with us. No, not

an immediate threat to you. Now, low-level supporters and collaborators. Many are imprisoned, but there's no way to be sure we have everyone who was an ideological follower. Many are undoubtedly angry and frustrated by the course the war took. Of course, most of them will be keeping their heads well down if they have any sense. We might see the same level of threat from those opposed to Voldemort, actually, who don't believe your true loyalties. Or the families of those who died."

He was right, the threat could lie on both sides.

He sighed. "People seem to think, 'the war is over, and we've won, and that's that.' It's a bloody narrow line to walk. I can't say a word of this as Minister. Severus, I think you understand. There were some real and legitimate grievances with the way the Ministry has been run for generations. And if we continue blindly on the same course simply because they were opposed to it, I swear to you we will be fighting this over again someday. But damn it, as Minister, any reform I try to put through is a 'concession' and they think I'm weak, I'm coddling Voldemort's followers. I certainly can't say that they were right about the abuses of the judicial system and the Statute of Secrecy. I even got push-back for disposing of the Dementors. You wouldn't believe the favors I had to call in to achieve that. Any advance I take on those fronts has to be offset by... conciliation."

"Leverage," I said.

"Leverage?"

"Bringing the bodies in."

He nodded.

The calculation made sense. And it would reduce my risk in one direction, the families of those who died. I felt more comfortable now, his motivation was beginning to make sense.

"Well, then, how do we proceed?"

"The timing is most effective if the hearing is held first," said Shacklebolt. "Malfoy's cooperation is revealed, and then the bodies are recovered. The public will associate the events as a progressing narrative with a purpose. It will help your and Malfoy's positions as well."

"It won't help the outcome of the hearing."

"It *will*, if we reveal it after the hearing but before the deliberations. I'll hold a press conference while the hearing is taking place. We'll make sure the news makes it in to the sentencing board at their recess."

I nodded. It was a good plan.

"Because the timing is sensitive, I want you to reveal the locations of the bodies now so we can lay the groundwork for the discovery. We don't want to be held up struggling to identify victims against a hard deadline."

"Shacklebolt."

"Yes."

"I'm going to need a cup of tea first."

He showed me where the tea things were in the little kitchenette off the sitting room. When I came back out with my cup, he was rummaging through a drawer in the table between us. "Now, I won't be going along, I have to get back to being Minister sometime," he said, resigned.

He spread out a large map on the table. He looked at me, then back down at the map, an eager gleam in his eyes. I felt uncomfortable again. Something didn't match. He smoothed his hand over the paper folds. I didn't move to join him at the map. A gleam in his eyes. Political leverage. Aid to grieving families. Late-night conversations over scotch about the tying up of loose ends. It was all a load of bollocks. I could feel the smirk slowly spreading across my face.

He looked up at me as I didn't come over. "*What?*" he asked impatiently.

"You *miss* it."

"What?"

"You're bored stiff as Minister," I said.

"Listen, if you'd ever been in a meeting with the sodding Restoration Committee..."

"*You* want to be back on Order business," I went on.

"I –"

"You're an adrenaline junkie."

He gave a short laugh. "You're the one to talk; you can't keep your nose clean for five minutes."

"Should I send up a Dark Mark? You could declare a state of emergency, you'd enjoy that."

"Just a few months ago you were trying to destroy a criminal conspiracy armed with a glass sliver."

"To which you showed up with no backup."

"I *did* have –"

"I'm so glad I could help you relive your glory days."

"Don't be stupid Snape, now get over here and help."

I set my cup on the edge of the table and pulled the map around.

"From here on in you'll be showing the locations to members of the Order. Don't give me that look; you know them and you've reported to them before. I need people I can trust on this, and there will also need to be Aurors on hand for protection and to secure the evidence."

I sighed.

"And I'll want a thorough report –"

"I'm *right*."

"Get on with it, Snape."

I drank my tea and leaned over the map. Shacklebolt left me to it. I had several locations marked when I heard their voices in the hall. Familiar voices. I froze. Emmeline Vance came in first, smiling. I should have expected her; she was part of what had put Shacklebolt on the bodies in the first place.

"You *came*," she said.

I gave her a nod.

And dear lord, behind her, Arthur Weasley with much less hair and a few more pounds on him. Arthur was playing it down, thankfully. "Severus." He gave me a nod. "Shacklebolt says you have some locations for us."

Shacklebolt ushered in two Aurors I didn't recognize to complete our little group. The older one was a bit officious, with a shock of greying hair. The other was a bit younger and was studying each of us like he was building a criminal profile. Shacklebolt introduced them. "Aurors Proudfoot and Savage, they've been briefed. Everyone here is under a Fidelius to me in regards to your involvement and information, which will be released when we go public with

the discovery of the locations.”

He came over to look at the map. Arthur was leaning over to the officious-looking Auror, Proudfoot. “Chester, thank you again for the books! Especially that last one, *The Way Things Work* – just invaluable!”

Proudfoot chuckled. “Let me know when you’re ready for more. I’ve still got most of my childhood library packed away.”

Shacklebolt pointed to a couple of marks on the map. “Ah, now, these here, Snape, if these are the muggleborn holding facilities at Clatteringshaws, we did get those already, through the information you left with Bulstrode. And *this* – ” he indicated the slate quarry dumping grounds for bodies that the Dark Lord had deemed not valuable for use, “Benedict Crabbe gave us that; he became most cooperative at the end. But *these*, these we don’t have.”

He was indicating the ‘Tower’ and the ‘Temple.’ “Which do we do first?” asked Arthur. I felt an acute stab of memory. Order meetings at Grimmauld place, stand and report, skeptical gazes on me.

“The tower has the greater number of bodies. About close to forty at my last knowledge, but it was still in use when I was out of that side of the operations. The temple was used for anything he thought might be of strategic importance. Information, relics, and valuables, and I believe about twelve remains.”

“And... the woman?” said Emmeline tentatively.

“Would be in the temple,” I said.

“What woman?” said Arthur.

“That’s how he got me out, Arthur, he had to produce a substitute body.”

That was one way of putting it, I supposed. I didn’t want to go into it with an Auror audience, pardon or no.

“Anything we should know about getting in there?” asked the Auror they’d called Proudfoot.

“There were wards passable only by those who had the mark, but those should have fallen. The other wards were cast on external symbols at the sites themselves, so they may still be active. In any case I know the keys.”

“Tower first,” said Shacklebolt. “Survey and count the remains,

and do a quick scan for identifying items, but don’t disturb anything at this point. We’ll be bringing in a forensics crew after you’re out. I want a thorough investigation of the temple, especially if there’s new information there. Report back here when you’re done. Proudfoot will be able to bring you back in.”

We flooded out to an MLE outpost that had been cleared for the purpose. I took Proudfoot to the scrap of woods near the tower in a side-along, then I leaned against a tree and waited while he cast around with various detection spells. Looking for traps I supposed. The woods were pleasant enough in the warm early afternoon light. More overgrown than I remembered.

Proudfoot gave me a nod and apparated away, soon arriving back with the others in a side-along. “All clear, Chester?” asked Savage.

“All clear,” said Proudfoot.

I led the way in, cutting through brambles with slicing charms. It wasn’t too far in. At ground level, the building was nothing more than a low concrete box with one horizontal slot window on each side, crumbling under the decades-long assault of rain and vines. Mulciber had told me once that it was an abandoned muggle military building. It did have that sort of ugly utilitarian look. Proudfoot and Savage cast about at the doorway, checking for wards.

Arthur appeared excited. He wouldn’t be for long. “I thought you said it was a tower, Severus?”

We crowded in through the low doorway. I didn’t even feel a twitch as we went through. The mark-based ward was long gone now.

“It is, in reverse.”

The room was sprouting grass where the slit windows let in a little light, but the rest was the featureless concrete I remembered. Proudfoot cast around with more detection charms before he let me continue. “All right, all clear, Mr. Snape.”

No delaying, and there would be no need for flashbacks, either. Where was it? The corner opposite the door. I drew the symbol of the lightning-split tower on the wall with my wand. The lines glowed and held.

“Stand clear,” I said.

The group drew back to the opposite wall.

I added the two marks for the figures cast from the tower, and the wall dissolved in a cascade of sand. I stepped back quickly as the air came out.

"Well then –" began Savage. He broke off again as the smell hit us. Three years. There had been preservation spells on some of the 'materials,' but most of those would be gone now. The Dark Lord had directed the corpses to be saved. Raw materials for ingredients or inferi.

Arthur coughed and cast a wind charm. The Aurors cast more detection spells through the doorway as the stink eased. There was an occasional answering glow now and again from the darkness beyond; the last of the preservation spells. When they were done, Proudfoot cast a strong Lumos.

"Mr. Snape?"

I stepped through the door. The tower was a roughly ten meter wide well, a spiral stair on the outer wall running down into the darkness. I could hear the echo of Proudfoot's breath and water dripping. His Lumos didn't reach the bottom; it looked like it could keep descending forever, turning back in on itself over and over. I felt a bit dizzy looking at the stairs curving away in the darkness.

"How deep does this 'tower' go?" he asked.

"About four stories." I indicated the doorways opening off the stairs. "The lower rooms were filled first. The upper rooms are probably empty." *He* had always wanted room to expand.

The rest were coming through onto the landing now, their faces pale in the Lumos.

"You said about forty?" Savage started down the stairs.

"The last I know, yes."

We descended. *Steps going round and round, Mulciber with his wand out, a still shape limp in the air in front of him.*

The first two rooms were empty, thankfully. I paused in the second as Proudfoot and Savage continued their casting at the doorways below. No need for flashbacks, I would get hold of myself in a moment. I put my hand on the damp stone wall. Someone was in the doorway, watching the glow of the Lumos descending.

Emmeline.

She turned to me. "They probably don't need you down there."

"Oh, thanks for that."

"No, I mean it. I don't think you need to go down."

There was a stifled noise from below. The first room with the 'materials.'

"All right," I said quietly. We still had another stop tonight, and it had already been a long day.

"So," she stopped again.

"What?"

"She, she's not here then?"

"*You*, you mean?" I always did get more vicious when I was tired. But she didn't flinch.

"Yes."

"No, Order and resistance members were considered more valuable. She'll be at the temple."

There were voices below. Arthur's was raised, but I couldn't make out the words.

"I don't know that I thanked you properly. For saving my life. When I think about ending up someplace like this..."

The Lumos from below grew brighter and dimmer again as they went on to the next room.

"With what happened, I don't think I can take *gratitude*."

"Fair enough."

Voices again. Something scraped below.

"I didn't go into any details with the rest of them. Except Kingsley, he insisted on a full account. But he agreed that the others didn't need to know."

So Shackbolt had known before. We had touched on it at the Malfoys', but Madam Lubin had quickly dismissed it from my testimony as too damaging to be helpful.

"Did... did it *work*, at least?"

I looked at her blankly.

"Kingsley told me that Albus arranged it. I mean, the capture of the safe house. You needed some sort of valuable information to

pass on to Voldemort to secure your position. So it was decided to have you turn over an empty Order safe house with some planted information. Of course everyone had to be cleared out first. At the time, Albus only told me that I had to be gone, I was *just so* sure that he had said four o'clock, and so when they came in before..."

"He said four?"

"I must have been mistaken. And just because of that you had to do... everything."

Bloody hell, everything. When Emmeline was captured at the safe house, smarmy little Peter, of all people, was the one who had brought her into the holding cells below the Manor. The others were still busy searching the safe house, excited by the prospect of burning it. So I had a little time, a little. I knew I had to get her out, if they questioned her... Peter was easy enough to distract with a "secure the door, *idiot*," while I plucked one of her hairs and she looked at me in silent terror. The others would be back soon, and they wouldn't be as easy to fool as Peter, and I couldn't let her be questioned. She had to die.

I always carried several emergency potions, and the packet included a vial of my experimental polyjuice with the permanent, painful effects. At one time, I thought I might have to use it on myself. This was worse, in a way.

The little group below was descending another level, the Lumos growing fainter as they spiraled down.

I'd had to find someone quickly, at random. A running path in a nearby town. A dark, quiet section through the trees. A young woman, alone. A stunner, complete Obliviation, and the Polyjuice. When I got back moments later, I had Malfoy command Pettigrew off his post and I made the switch. Emmeline's look of fear was replaced with horror when she saw what I was dragging into her cell. Herself.

I cast the woman's clothes off and Emmeline didn't need to be told, changed without a word. And she didn't argue when I told her, "get out. Lose your name. Disappear," and handed her a Portkey. The last thing I saw of her was her looking down at her unconscious double on the floor.

When the others returned, they could get nothing out of that one at all, no matter what they did. By the time the night was out, she had been disposed of as useless.

There was an echo of an "all clear" below. They had reached the last room.

The Dark Lord had stopped testing me after that. No more false information fed to me to see if it leaked. No need to confirm everything I heard through Lucius. I had delivered an Order member and a safe house into his hands, after all.

"It worked," I told Emmeline.

The voices below fell silent.

Had he said four? I didn't pose the question to Emmeline. There was probably no way to know if Albus had intended all of that. In any case, it worked.

The Lumos was coming up the stairs quickly now. We stepped out of the dark doorway to meet the rest. They didn't make any remark about us hanging back. Nobody said a word.

THE TEMPLE

We left quickly, by unspoken agreement, after Proudfoot and Savage warned the tower off from unauthorized visitors. The temple was too far for a single apparition so we had to take it in stages. By the time we reached the rocky outcrop at the head of the crooked valley, sunset was brushing the tops of the folded hills. The rushing noise of a stream played nearby. I always thought it would have been peaceful here, if it weren't for *him*.

"Where's the entrance?" asked Proudfoot.

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I indicated a flat section of the rock face in front of us. "It's an old temple of Mithras that he converted. I don't know how he ran across it."

"Mithras, is that a muggle practice?" Arthur asked hopefully.

Proudfoot snorted. "Not since the fall of the Romans," he said.

Savage finished with his detection spells and stood back for me to key it open. I sighed. The Dark Lord had made this one *complicated* and I was worthless at drawing. Finally I had the god, the bull, and the snake, glorified stick figures all, etched in glowing lines on the rock. I made a small cut on my little finger with a slicing charm and dragged the blood across the bull's neck, and the rock swung open.

Proudfoot and Savage stepped in front of me and checked over the opening. Their dark robes in front of me and the smell of the wet stone. We'd come jostling in here quickly in mask and robes... I pushed the image aside.

Proudfoot and Savage stepped in. The way was clear now.

A rough stone entry opened into a more finished rectangular space, ancient whitewash on the walls, offering tablets and the strange statue of the lion headed man wrapped foot-to-head by a serpent. Savage grimaced at the lion's frozen roar and joined Proudfoot at the entrance to the nave. Arthur and Emmeline were scouring their Lumos over the old stonework. Proudfoot and Savage were done with their casting on the archway to the main temple, and we went through.

It was a long narrow space, stone benches on either side running down to the altar at the other end, our Lumos dimly picking out the statue of the god slaying the bull, the dog and snake leaping up to drink the blood. The cracked tile floor was full of cult symbols; some could still be made out – the hammer, sickle, thunderbolt, crown. The mosaics stopped where the ordeal pit gaped between the benches. Savage was approaching it cautiously.

"It's only about two meters deep," I said. My voice echoed down the vaults.

"How much of this original and how much was *him*?" asked Proudfoot.

"As far as I know, all of the structure and statues are original. I don't think he changed it much."

The place suited the Dark Lord to the ground. I had always wondered if he had found it long before he started the Death Eaters and modeled us after that ancient mystery cult. Passwords, ranks, blood and ordeals and secrets.

"And the pit?"

"Original, yes."

The Dark Lord had always been drawn to pits. Holes. Wells like the tower, caves, pools. Defensible and easily hidden, certainly. I'd always wondered if there was more to it than that. Perhaps the dramatic atmosphere? Or perhaps it came from spending seven formative years living in a dungeon. I supposed that was how it had wormed its way into me as well. I'd had so many dreams about that sort of thing. Black pools, bottomless pits. I didn't like to think that *his* obsessions had got into my head. Well, I'd lived in the same dungeon he had, and for decades more. No wonder that I had those sorts of dreams.

"Oh, there's names here. Are they – " Emmeline had found the writing scratched into the whitewash.

We had found them too, the marks of lonely Roman soldiers, an army of occupiers stationed on a hostile border far from home. They must have found some solace belonging to their secret religion of rituals and sacrifices. They had carefully scratched in their names and levels of initiation into the walls. Then their empire fell and their secret religion was forgotten. They included a Lucius Gallus Sentius, who had achieved the rank of Nymphus. Everyone tweaked Lucius mercilessly about that.

"No, they're original," I said.

"It's remarkably well preserved," said Arthur, leaning in to the writing on the walls. "Did the muggles have some special method of sealing it off?"

"I think the method was 'a large pile of rocks to keep the Christians out,'" I said.

"You said that remains and important items were kept here."

Savage sounded impatient with our archeological speculations.

"The central temple was for meetings and questionings. The side rooms – "

Proudfoot had already found one entrance on the left halfway down the nave and was casting detection charms again. Nothing. We went in.

It was a cramped narrow space, rough-hewn, sloping down on one end to where the bodies were, huddled dark forms packed next to the wall.

Savage and Proudfoot were strengthening the Lumos and approaching to examine them. I turned away. Emmeline was looking at the shallow rock ledge that ran the length of the room. The wands were lined up there, scores of them.

She gave a quick intake of breath. "My wand!"

"Don't touch it," I said sharply. My tone had Arthur over to us in an instant.

"A trap?" said Emmeline.

"No, legal complications. The last spells cast on that will be Unforgivables."

"Oh. *Oh.*"

Arthur said, "quite right, Emmeline, but if we take it into custody properly, we can get it certified that you didn't perform them."

"You know, I'm actually very happy with my replacement wand. I don't think I need to reclaim it."

The Aurors had moved on to the second body and were turning it over. Proudfoot made a noise and they both looked over at Emmeline. Well, they had found her.

I stepped back out into the nave. "Yes, I believe... that's her," I could hear Emmeline say in the other room. I walked along to the altar at the far end of the temple. The statue was discolored where it had been touched; the foot of the god, the snout of the bull, the knife in its throat, the snake drinking its blood. A strange religion.

I could still hear the voices of the others behind me, discussing their find. I moved further away. The arch to the other side room was slightly behind the altar on the right. I aimed my Lumos in. It

was another sloping chamber, much like the first. No, something was different from how I remembered it.

It was empty. It hadn't been empty before. I walked in to the end. There had been valuables there. Useful bits looted from homes and Ministry holdings. Well, it was cleaned out now. There was still something on the floor, though. The remains of a chalk circle. I crouched to examine the symbols. Someone had warded themselves here.

Proudfoot was at the archway behind me. "Snape, what's – " He stepped through and there was a hiss and a flash as a slicing curse hit him in the shoulder and took his right arm half-off. He went down without a word as I gaped at him.

I made it over to him in a few steps and dragged him by his good arm back into the nave. A ward on the archway, and if it went off again... had to get him out of there. Bloody *careless*, of course the ward hadn't been set against the likes of me and I hadn't bothered to check. Had to stop the bleeding.

I was casting when Emmeline ran up. She tried to come around by his head. Damn it, I had to stop my spell. "Keep the *hell* away from that arch," I snapped.

She pushed me to the side and knelt leaning over his body. "I can get the arm back on if you can get rid of that curse."

I ought to be able to, I rather thought it was one of mine. Emmeline was cutting his robe away as I took up with the countercurse. The wound was responding, slowly.

There were running feet and a flash went past me and hissed against the wall.

"No! That's a healing spell!" Arthur was pulling Savage's arm down.

"Never mind, never mind," said Emmeline, "just keep going."

I kept going.

"What the hell happened?" said Savage.

"I don't know, but it was *not him*," said Arthur firmly, "he's healing him."

We were past the worst now, the cut wasn't going any deeper and the bleeding slowed. I nodded to Emmeline. She cast a *Sonus* on Proudfoot then scourgified the wound.

"I need you to hold it in place while I align and seal it. Now, hold it up, slowly."

I pushed his blood-soaked robes out of the way and eased his shoulder up. Emmeline's spell started knitting the flesh together. She adjusted the alignment of the joint, and finally the wound closed. I felt for a pulse on his right wrist. There was nothing at first, then a weak throb growing stronger.

"We've got circulation."

Emmeline sat back with a sigh. "All right, I'll want to bring him in and get him some Blood Replenisher."

Savage grabbed me by the shoulder. "What the hell happened, Snape?" he began, but Arthur interrupted.

"That can wait. Emmeline says he needs to be brought in."

"I want to know –"

"That can wait!"

"*Fine.*"

He reached down to Proudfoot. He still had me by the shoulder. What was he playing at? I started to pull away. Emmeline just managed to grab his elbow as he apparated us away.

I landed poorly had to catch at the wall at my side to get my footing. The bright light blinded me for a moment after the darkness of the temple. I blinked to clear my vision. Savage was lowering Proudfoot carefully to the floor. An ugly puce wall was under my hand. It was sickeningly familiar. Someone had painted all the MLE stations that same awful shade sometime in the seventies. There was a wanted poster of sodding Rookwood above me, bloody hell, he landed us straight into the MLE outpost we had left on the way to the tower.

People were approaching down the corridor, quickly. It wasn't cleared out any longer. I dropped into a crouch as if I were checking on Proudfoot. Emmeline stepped in front of me at once. "*Mark*, keep your head down," she said urgently. She was using the alias I'd given her before, and that was fine, but I needed to find an exit. The specialized wards that allowed Savage to apparate us in would very much not allow me to apparate out. I had to get out of the

building and past the ward lines. Savage was moving towards the approaching figures.

I looked around Emmeline's legs. There was a door close by to the right, and a few meters ahead of us in the center of the room was Savage speaking to a group of Aurors and among them was Potter, damn me, and –

"I have to get out," I whispered.

"Go, *now*," said Emmeline.

I started for the door with my face angled to the wall as Emmeline called out loudly, "this man needs medical attention, now!"

They turned to her, as they were meant to, and I was out the door in an instant. A young man with an MLE badge was heading straight at me from the ward lines, drawn by Emmeline's yell.

"He's in here!" I said helpfully, "quick, it looks like massive blood loss –" I very helpfully opened the door. He pushed past me through the door where he jostled for a moment with someone trying to get out. I would only have an instant. I dropped the door and ran, heading past the wards in four, three, two and I apparated.

RECALL

I took four apparitions in quick succession before I paused. It was full dark now, and the little park I'd landed in was deserted. A sodium lamp flickered over by the roadway. No one was about, and no one would be following me through that soon. If they had seen me. Well, they'd certainly seen me heading for the door. If they had recognized me, was more like it. No, I was deluding myself. If *he* had seen me and recognized me, that was the real question, wasn't it?

Chapter 18 of **THE GOOD FRIEND**

BY MOTTSHAVE

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I kicked at a little pile of rubbish that had drifted up along the edge of the park. I had hoped that this ridiculous return would be over and done with without having to face *him* again, but he was a lucky sod, and I wasn't. My ill-advised experimentation with Felix Felicis in my younger years saw to that.

And what if he had seen me? I had to follow the consequences. If he had seen me, he may or may not have recognized me. But he was a lucky sod, so if he had... well, he could start shouting my name from the rooftops, couldn't he, but that wasn't finding me. For that, he would have to apply himself and it didn't seem likely.

As for shouting my name from the rooftops, my name was bound to come out at the hearing soon enough. So the consequence I had to watch for was publicity earlier than I had anticipated. Fine. So why was my skin crawling with the thought?

Not that I liked being holed up in a safe house, but all things considered it was probably the best place to be for the next few days. Only, Proudfoot had been my key to get back in, and he was unavailable. Second-best would have to do.

I landed from my next apparition on the grassy verge of a slow flat river, lights of the muggle town glinting off the water. I remembered the way to the flat well enough, and the door code on the number pad, and then I was in the Minister's private muggle slumming flat.

I was eating his sausages and eggs and drinking his beer when Shackbolt came in at half eleven. I pushed my wand back up my sleeve when I saw it was him.

"Nothing can ever be simple with you, can it?"

I finished chewing. "Savage is an idiot."

"Proudfoot will be just fine, by the way, thanks to your and Emmeline's quick thinking."

"Hmm."

Shackbolt was inspecting his pan on the stove. I hadn't left him any sausage. "I'm planning on having a shout at him tomorrow for wandering through doorways without checking for wards. Should I shout at you too?"

"There weren't any, for me," I said.

"That doesn't mean you shouldn't check. I suppose death eater and Auror training came out about even, this time."

"I didn't realize you were keeping score."

"Proudfoot told me it was a ward on one of the doorways. Was that new to you?"

I nodded. "That last room had been disturbed. It used to hold various looted valuables. Nothing especially powerful, but things that could be sold on the dark market."

"And they're gone now."

"And there were the remains of a warding circle on the floor. It looked like someone came through who needed a safe place to stay and some money."

"Any ideas?"

"Probably someone now living a quiet life far away with a tidy nest egg."

"Probably. I'll have the squad see if they can pick up any traces from the warding circle in the morning."

"Savage and Proudfoot?"

Shackbolt snorted. "They'll be there." He sat across from me at the counter. "Savage doesn't think you were recognized at the MLE station."

"Doesn't *think*?"

"We felt it would be better to not raise suspicions by asking if anyone had noticed, but no one mentioned seeing you." He paused. "We'll be moving the hearing up."

Doesn't think indeed.

"We'll take tomorrow for gathering evidence and identifying remains. The hearing will be held the next day, and the discovery of the bodies announced."

The day after tomorrow. I closed my eyes for a moment.

"I don't know if I made it clear to you before." Shackbolt was watching me intently. "You are going to be treated as a cooperating witness, not as a prisoner. No one will be accusing you of anything. You will not be sitting in the accused chair and there will be *no bindings*. Just the sentencing board and clerks, no reporters."

"Of course."

It should all have been very reassuring.

He took me back to the safe house that night. Of course if he'd given me the location and keyed me to the wards I could have returned on my own, but I supposed my security clearance didn't go that high.

Shacklebolt showed me the connecting rooms in the suite, bed, bath, and a tiny kitchen. Not luxurious, but comfortable. Shacklebolt paused at the door before he left.

"Thank you for today, Snape. I'm not forgetting that it cost you."

He left me alone. Nominally alone, no doubt there were guards somewhere, but they didn't disturb me.

I had a soak in the bath. It was much nicer than my cramped shower at home, but the gurgling black spiral of water down the drain at the end reminded me dizzily of the tower stairs. And sod it all anyhow. I went to bed.

I walked into the common room. Mostly quiet; finally I could get some work done. There was even a good seat free, the couch facing the window under the lake. Perfect. But when I reached the couch, there was Evan. He looked up at me with me a smile. "Sev, I haven't seen you all day." Rosier moved over on the couch.

"I've got to work."

He snorted and snatched my book from my hands. "No, I want to talk to you, Sev. Let's talk." He shoved the book under the couch cushion he was sitting on. "What will you do if you can't do the work, Sev? I know what I'll do."

"What do you mean, can't do it?"

"Do you remember our plans? They've all gone to hell, haven't they? *Perfect world*. But listen, Sev, you'll manage. You can get out of anything." He slapped me on the back.

"Idiot," I said. He was always an stupid optimist.

He got up. I lunged for my book. When I looked up, he was gone. Where did he go? I had to find him. I opened the door to the corridor, but there was nothing but a round black pool of water at my feet. I could see Evan's white face sinking into the depths. I fell to my knees and tried to reach him. When my hand hit the water, I woke

It was almost six in the morning and I gave up sleep as a bad job. I made myself tea and toast in the kitchen and tried to sort out something to do.

I should never have agreed to a safe house; nothing in the world was more boring than a safe house. It was karma, I supposed, for all the shit I had given Sirius Black at Grimmauld Place. Not that I was sorry.

The bookcase in the bedroom was at least three-quarters absolute rubbish, mostly occult thrillers. Plenty of lurid covers and purple prose. *THE DARK SECRET OF STONECROFT MANOR*, really?

I spent a couple of hours arranging the books from most to least rubbish. Another hour passed seeing how far I could adjust the focus on the view-glass above the mantle. Unfortunately the countryside was so sodding peaceful that the only point of interest was a family of fluffy bunnies out past the eternal rainstorm. Bloody boring.

I was almost desperate enough to start reading dreck when I saw Shacklebolt and Emmeline approaching in the view-glass. They didn't look happy. It was probably bad news. I didn't care; something was happening.

They knocked on the sitting room door several minutes later. "Well?" I said when I let them in.

Emmeline tried to force a smile. "Proudfoot is doing very well, he was back working with us this morning. Thank you for helping me with him yesterday."

"Not that," I said, "what are you here for?"

Emmeline looked to Shacklebolt.

"We're having trouble identifying Emmeline's replacement. What on earth did you do to that body?"

I sighed. This wasn't a conversation that I wanted to have. "Polyjuice."

Shacklebolt was shaking his head at me. "Polyjuice wears off at death. This... *thing* still has Emmeline's features, and the decomposition is *irregular*."

"It's an experimental version I developed. It's permanent. It may have had any number of other side-effects. I abandoned it as unusable."

"Unusable."

"Except for the one time."

"When you say permanent..."

"Yes, I don't think it can be reversed."

"So, we have an identification problem. Emmeline, you told me you took her clothing and possessions. Was there anything identifying?"

She shook her head. I tried to remember myself. There wouldn't have been, the woman had been out on a run. There was a set of keys I dropped down a sewer grate, that was all.

Emmeline turned to me. "Severus, I'm sorry, I don't want to ask it of you, but is there anything you can think of that would help?"

I might not owe Emmeline, but there was the other one to think of, her replacement. What I owed to her I could probably never pay. After a pause, I said, "I can show you where I picked her up. And I can probably recall her description." I had worked on tamping that memory down and bleeding it of emotion, making it as boring as possible, a process I took with every memory that the Dark Lord couldn't see. I knew I could reverse the process, but I didn't relish the thought. It would cost me.

Shacklebolt was pulling out the maps again.

"No, I'll take you."

"I think it's advisable for you to stay here."

"It will help me remember."

"Are you bored already?"

"The books here are rubbish."

"I could have some brought from your house."

"Or I could get them myself."

Shacklebolt sighed. "Since you're set on going against my advice."

Our transport was supplied by a broom closet off the kitchen, then we walked out past the wards of the safehouse.

"Right," said Shacklebolt, "where do we start?"

"Near the Malfoy Estate. Past the wards."

Emmeline looked uncomfortable at that.

"I only went there the once. I'll need to retrace my path."

The apparition landed us in the small parcel of game woods on the edge of the estate. I could see the grey slate tiles of the

roof above the trees, glinting in the afternoon sun. The bright day wouldn't be much help bringing back the memory.

"Well?" Shacklebolt said.

I would have to try to remember. It had been late April, just before dawn, but a clear sky, the last of the stars fading out. The smell of wet leaves and mud. Dark trees. And very little time.

I knew that Bellatrix's thirst for destruction would give me a chance, perhaps half an hour while she amused herself at the outpost, but I couldn't know exactly how long I had. I had left Malfoy on guard by the cell, which could buy me a warning and perhaps a few minutes, but that was all. He no longer had enough influence with the rest of the Death Eaters to hold them off entirely. I would have to move quickly.

The question was where? I couldn't be seen, and I couldn't be recognized. I knew there was a muggle town to the northwest; Narcissa had mentioned it before with disdain. I didn't have any apparition points there, so I would have to go by broom. Now, at once.

I mounted my broom, kicked off, and headed northwest, fast.

"Hoy, Snape!" said someone behind me. They were casting Notice-Me-Nots.

No, I had been quite alone then. I flew fast, a bit over tree level, keeping an eye out for powerlines in the dark, deadly things. There was the line of the trunk road ahead, cutting through the farms. Edge of the town to the left, but dead quiet at this time of day. I had to find someone, alone, and quickly.

There was a church, a churchyard, a winding trail behind it, passing through a park, and *there, movement*. I got out in front of it. The course of the path led into the shadow of the trees. Land behind them, quickly now, get close to the trail, and wait. The steady beat of running steps coming closer. She came into view. *Enough*.

Of course, it looked different now. It was a warm afternoon full of the smell of sun-baked pavement. I could hear a bicycle bell in the distance and the sound of cars on the road beyond the park. Shacklebolt and *she* were standing behind me, off the trail in the shade of the oaks. No, it wasn't her after all.

"Female," I said quickly. "About 40. Medium blond. About 5½ feet tall, maybe 11 stone. Snub nose, brown eyes."

"Kingsley, this is a muggle town," said Emmeline faintly. Shacklebolt did not look pleased. What had they expected?

"I know she was wearing muggle clothing, but it was so ridiculous that I thought she was one of us," she went on. It had been a purple track suit with a yellow stripe up the side.

I did not want to have to explain this to them. I shouldn't have to explain. "I didn't have time to be choosy."

"It's not good, Emmeline," said Shacklebolt.

"Surely the muggles would have records of missing persons," said Emmeline. "With her description, we could still find her identity."

"Well, we could. But her body as it is, would be completely unidentifiable by muggles. We might find out who she was, but she couldn't be 'found' by muggle authorities or returned to her family."

"There's no way to reverse the potion?" she asked me.

"No."

She looked helplessly at Shacklebolt.

"There's no way," said Shacklebolt.

That wasn't quite true. "You have her location and description. You should be able to find her muggle missing person records. You could alter the muggle files to match Emmeline's current dental records, get rid of any DNA samples they might have, then degrade the corpse to the point that only dental records could be used for identification, and plant it where it would be discovered."

Emmeline went white. "Oh, Merlin."

Shacklebolt was looking past the shelter of the trees over to the footpath where a small group of women were jogging past. "No, we won't be doing that."

I felt a surge of anger. Had they thought this would be clean?

"I'm sorry, Emmeline," he went on. "I agree what you're trying to do, to give the family closure, but this would come at too great a cost to our strained political connections, such as they are, to the muggle government. And I will not spend my political capital on any covert manipulation and planting of bodies. She is going to

have to stay missing."

Emmeline was silent for a moment. "I understand."

"And any account of your capture and escape will only mention a substitute body. To your knowledge, she was already dead."

"Yes, of course," she said.

Had they thought I wouldn't have preferred –

"We should get you back to the safe house, Snape. I'll send in some books so you won't get bored," Shacklebolt said shortly.

Had they thought it wouldn't cost anything?

MINISTRY HOSPITALITY

It all cost me, that night. I could sit in a safe house, read my own books, familiar with my notes in the margins, the smell of my own house in the bindings, but they couldn't ward off the memories I had spent the afternoon dredging up. It seemed harder to push them back down than it had in the past. Perhaps the threat of the Dark Lord staring me down had helped, then, but now it was only my own examination of myself that I was avoiding.

It also didn't help that Emmeline had stayed on to talk at the safe house. When Shacklebolt brought us in and left again, she stopped in front of the Floo and said, "would you mind terribly if I had a cup of tea?"

It seemed beyond even my usual churlishness to refuse. It wasn't my tea, after all. Might as well make the most of Ministry hospitality and waste a few Ministry resources. She heated the water while I dug out the tea.

"Have you heard anything from Avi?" She was trying for a casual tone.

Another woman who had got out of a bad situation, at a cost.

Chapter 19 of **THE GOOD FRIEND**

BY MOTTSSNAVE

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She had turned up uninvited the previous month and took over my kitchen making tea despite my objections. Typical house-elf.

"She tells me that Nimmo got her a job with a family. Somewhere in the Capitol Hill neighborhood. I think they're rather in awe of her."

Emmeline smiled. "They should be, she's quite the survivor." She paused, her smile fading.

"I'm sorry to drag you into that for nothing."

"Hmm." I poured myself a cup.

"It couldn't have been easy to go back over all of that."

Lord, did she have to bring it up *again*?

Unexpectedly, she laughed. "That hideous track suit! You know, it really helped me."

"What?"

"When I took that portkey from you and landed in the middle of Toronto, I had nothing, absolutely nothing, except that wretchedly ugly track suit. I had no idea where I was at first, no money, no wand, no papers of any kind, muggle or magical. I didn't know what to do. I suppose I was still in shock. I just wandered and found a park to sit in. It was bloody cold. I remember even thinking about pretending to have amnesia, like I was in some bad novel."

"I think I saw that one in the shelf in the other room," I said helpfully.

"Well, I finally had a brain wave. From the track suit! It took me ages, but I found a phone book and begged some change to make a call to a battered women's shelter. Thank goodness Moody always insisted that Order members know the basics of muggle communications. I called them up and told them I got away from my abusive boyfriend by leaving everything behind and pretending to go for a run. I told them he allowed that because he wanted to control my weight, but I couldn't even take my keys or money with me. I had just kept running, and had absolutely nothing with me.

"The director of the shelter met me in a café and, well, I certainly had the bruises to prove my story. I probably looked shell-shocked enough, too. They took me in, let me go just by my new first name. I told them I couldn't go to the authorities because I didn't have proper immigration status and my boyfriend was holding that over me.

"They gave me everything. Food, clothes. We could make a little money doing chores around the shelter, or babysitting the kids of the other women. Oh, god, those kids. And at least those were the ones who had got out. I remember one woman who had to leave her two children behind and how terrified she was that their father would hurt them to flush her out. I think she had to go back to him in the end, just to get the kids back."

She drank her tea. "I think the shelter staff were getting a little suspicious of me by the end. My 'boyfriend' never came looking for me, and my kind of shock wasn't the exactly the same as the rest of them. As soon as I had saved up enough money for a cheap wand, I told them I was moving in with my sister and went off to find the wizarding quarter.

"When I found it, that gave me a whole new set of problems. I still didn't have any papers. But by then, things were starting to get really bad here, so I came up with a story that I was a muggleborn junior Ministry clerk in Records, and I had destroyed all Ministry records of my existence before I got out with a portkey. And the CMLE bought it. It helped that Canada was being very generous with political refugees from the UK at the time. They gave me papers under my new name and I could finally start looking for work and living openly. I already had enough Healer training to start working as an aide while I finished my certification. Things were easier after that."

"Because you had a hideous track suit."

"Because you got me out."

I drank my tea.

"And I'll give some credit to the Order for all the practice in coming up with good cover stories."

"Well, at least yours were better than any Fletcher ever came up with," I said.

"Dung! I wonder what's become of him! I haven't asked yet; I don't know if I should. He's probably up to nothing good. I'm staying with the Weasleys at the moment, but I'll need to go see my cousins soon. You know, the rest of the Order wouldn't mind seeing

you. Once it's public."

"Perhaps they wouldn't."

"But perhaps you would?"

I drank my tea.

"You must have had your own hard time, starting over."

"I'd made some preparations, I had papers, some money, and a spare wand."

"Still, it can't have been easy."

"I was a short-order cook for a while." I wasn't sure why I was volunteering this, except that at that moment, it felt easy.

"What, really?" she said with a surprised laugh.

"There is no way I can't cook an egg, now. And I'm very fast."

"I might have to take you up on that. In any case, I still have that Protean note, if you want to keep in touch."

Did I? I had its pair in the little store of notes in my pocket, along with the ones for Shackbolt and Dick. I wasn't sure even as she took her leave and flooded out. Perhaps it hadn't been a horrible cup of tea, but I knew it would cost me. I had kept that memory down for a long time; Emmeline's replacement's face as my colleagues, well, finished her off. Come to think of it, it must be costing Emmeline too, to go over all that again. For some reason she was eager to make herself pay. Perhaps we had more in common than I thought.

And it had all worked to my benefit. After 'Emmeline's' death I gained the Dark Lord's trust and I could be *useful* again. I never asked Albus how much of that benefit he had arranged. Perhaps I was afraid of the answer. And I never told him that I had got Emmeline out. I certainly didn't want him to know how I had arranged that. If he had arranged for her capture, would any of it have affected his level of disgust for me?

It was perhaps the worst part of that last terrible year, my growing suspicions about precisely what Albus had arranged coupled with the knowledge that it was far too late to change course.

I started to realize how much he could have arranged when he finally told me the second half to the prophecy. My own memories began to fall apart then. It simply didn't make sense. Since when

did a seer stop halfway through a prophecy and begin again later? Trelawney had looked up and seen me when Aberforth caught me at the door, had stopped prophesying suddenly as if cut off... or released from a spell. I had *seen* that hadn't I? And why hadn't Albus taken the very simple precaution of obliterating me when he knew I overheard the first half? And what of his bizarre arrangement to hold staff interviews in the Hog's Head, which he had never done before or since? By then I was questioning my own memories. I couldn't tell how much of my suspicions were justified or just paranoia and faulty memory, or even a convoluted subconscious attempt to lessen my own guilt. But one simple explanation was that Albus had heard the prophecy from her before, and then arranged all of it. He *needed* me to take the first part of the prophecy to the Dark Lord, and he *needed* him to hear it and to carry it out. Then all he would have to do was wait for Harry to be placed as a weapon into his hands. And myself. For I was surely one too, wretched with remorse and sick with a broken life debt. I placed myself into his hands and begged him to use me. And he had. I wasn't sure what was worse, the thought that I wrecked everything I touched, or the thought that I was just Albus' hammer.

He had never told me that he had followed a madman himself, that we shared that same flaw. Perhaps he was afraid that I would have questioned him more, challenged him on his plans, or simply gone my own way. It was possible of course, but there was also the chance that if he had confided in me more as an equal, we could have come up with some other plan, together. And of course the chances of now having a productive conversation along those lines with a bloody portrait were essentially nil.

Thoughts of what might have been were at least a familiar sort of torture, better than the flashes of Emmeline's replacement's face in her last agony. I needed any sort of distraction.

There was a single tap at the main door while I was clearing the tea things away, and when I came back into the sitting room there was a box of books from my house just inside the door, Auror inspection label still attached. Shackbolt trying to keep me in place, I

supposed. It was the same box that was on the top of the stack from my living room. EIGHT EXTRAORDINARY VESSELS, ENCYCLOPAEDIA OF WINDS AND ELEMENTS, VINES OF THE SPIRIT, HELTER SKELTER.

I picked up the last. I had stumbled across it in the early 80s, while I was reading up on psychopathic disorders. I remembered being strangely comforted by it at the time; I wasn't the only teen-aged idiot by far that had fallen for a ridiculous death cult. Though I did have flashes of anger while reading it; I hadn't even managed to pick a decent death cult complete with sex and drugs. We had had clearly been shortchanged in that regard. Charlie Manson may have been less competent than the Dark Lord in getting his race war off the ground, but at least he understood how to keep morale up.

The first time I read it I had been struck by all the similarities – there were the delusions of grandeur, the hidden messages, be it in prophecies or Beatles songs, the message to followers that they could conquer death, the way recruitment was tailored to each follower, the tattoos, the talk of a bottomless pit, and of course the race war and murders. It was all so close in a way that at first I thought there must be some sort of magical or prophetic ties. Later I realized it was the far more depressing familiarity of psychopathy developed or perfected under decades of neglect and abuse.

At one point I replaced the cover to hide that it was a muggle book, and made Lucius read certain key passages. He was even angrier than I was. By then he had settled into a very non-revolutionary life and the thought of a madman jeopardizing his goals and security made him furious. It was a delicate time after the Dark Lord's first fall. We all had to scrape for a while as we worked to recover our lives and reputations as memories of the war faded. We were in another time like that now.

"Just some idiot muggle," Lucius had said then, but I knew he saw the similarities. He even called Bella 'Krenwinkle' once. It was so much easier to recognize the madness in a situation that was like ours, but not quite our own. It was another reason I knew I could choose him to help me. And now I had to step in and help him. Tomorrow morning. Dear lord. I needed to try to get some sleep.

HEARING

I was trying to talk my stomach into the idea of toast the next morning when Proudfoot arrived to collect me, knocking on the door with one of his equally functioning arms. He didn't muck about thanking me, to my relief.

"The hearing is scheduled in an hour and a half. Until you're called for your testimony you'll be in a secure chamber off the hearing room. We can wait here –"

"No, let's go now." I was sick of these walls.

After a few moments of thought, I tucked my book into my jacket pocket, and we flooded directly through to the holding room. It was quiet and paneled in dark wood. There was a wood writing desk against one wall and a painting of a landscape slowly scrolling along over the mantel. Two sealed doors led out, one presumably into the hearing room. Proudfoot let himself out to guard the other door into the corridor.

There was a small lav off on one side. Well, I still had to change my appearance. I stepped in and used the mirror as I applied the glamours to lengthen and darken my hair and transform my jacket to robes. I knew I needed to return to my old appearance, but it didn't help my nerves. It was rather like being back then in that wretched time, with the weight of impossible plans riding on my shoulders.

I sat on the sofa in the holding room watching the painted landscape drift slowly along and tried to clear my mind. Only my testimony would be needed.

Draco arrived half an hour later and gave a start as I turned to look at him. He wasn't expecting to see me in my old appearance. "Sorry, sir, I just..." he trailed off. Of course, he had his own bad memories.

Chapter 20 of **THE GOOD FRIEND**

BY MOTTSSNAVE

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LUGHNASADH 2014

He took a seat in a rather worn green armchair and immediately began picking at the upholstery seams on the chair arms. He looked off. I couldn't place it at first. There it was, his robes didn't fit him. Surely he had never worn such badly-tailored robes before. They were a bit too large, cuffs falling too far on his hands, his collar too loose. Ah, Madam Lubin was trying to make him look younger and more vulnerable. His nervousness might actually be a help.

"Madam Lubin will have me in first to testify about the contract and some of the, ah, circumstances, and then she'll call you," he said abruptly.

"Yes."

"If... if this goes through, Madam Lubin thinks I have a good chance to get my probation reduced. As soon as we can, we'll be going to stay with mother's friends on the continent. At least for a while."

I nodded.

"And you're going back to... wherever you are." He didn't pose it as a question, but he was wearing his plea openly on his face.

"Miss Bulstrode will be handling communications. For the reference requests."

"Oh. Thank you, sir."

We both sat in our nervous silences.

"How's Goyle?" What on earth inspired me to bring up that miserable topic?

"He's... not so good, sir."

I half-hoped Draco would stop there. No such luck. "I try to visit him when I visit father. Most of the time, he doesn't want to talk to me. He and... he and Vince were closer to each other than they were to me. Anyway, I think he'll be eligible for parole in a couple of years."

I doubted my good references would help Goyle much.

Finally, there was some sort of muffled pronouncement behind the hearing room door and dry shuffling. They were starting. Dim voices were followed at length a higher nasal call rising above the others. The door opened and the bailiff was there saying, "Mr. Malfoy." Draco hurried out.

The door shut and I listened to the swell and fall of distant voices

as the landscape rolled past. Waves of landscape and waves of sound. I was at sea. But we had prepared for all this, all I had to do was follow the script.

The high nasal voice again. I stood and walked towards the door. A moment later, the bailiff opened it and Draco came through quickly, his face flushed. I didn't have a chance to examine him more closely, the bailiff was calling my name and ushering me out into the hearing room.

It was bright and exposed after the small dark holding room and there was a wall of people observing me. I focused on the witness chair and headed straight for it. Lucius was bound in the accused chair in the center, I could see his hand on the chair arm from the corner of my eye. I didn't look at him.

All the eyes were on me, like dinner in the Great Hall, that last year, all of them hating, every one of them wanting to kill me and I must not show anything... no, I did not need to look at that wall of faces.

I looked at Madam Lubin, round face smiling at me. It was different now.

They swore me in quickly, then Madam Lubin was beginning. "Mr. Snape, will you please state your name for the sentencing board?"

"Severus Snape."

"Thank you, and your current address?"

We had been over this. I let my nervousness twist my face into anger. "As there are still former Death Eaters at large, I must respectfully decline to answer that question for my own safety."

We had agreed on a few questions to signal that we had not rehearsed or colluded on my testimony. As we had. Madam Lubin did a credible job of looking abashed.

"Of course, Mr. Snape. Simply a routine question, but I believe we can pass over that. Now it has been generally believed that you did not survive the Battle of Hogwarts. How is it that you were able to survive?"

"Again, Madam..."

"Lubin," she supplied.

"*Again*, Madam Lubin, these are details that could compromise my safety and I must decline to answer. I fail to see how they are

pertinent to the matter at hand.”

As she had told me before, we might as well shut down the predictable prying from the start and have my denials directed at her rather than the sentencing board.

“As, yes, quite right, Mr. Snape. To the matter at hand.”

She produced a copy of Lucius’ contract.

“Mr. Snape, will you please examine this contract? Have you seen it before?”

The sentencing board had their own copies, I could see them shuffling papers. It was a bit easier to look at them now that their eyes were off me and on their papers. One had his head almost buried behind his copy.

“Yes.”

“Could you describe it for us?”

“It is a contract between Lucius Malfoy and Albus Dumbledore dated 8 August 1995, stating that Lucius Malfoy would aid me in my intelligence gathering for the Order of the Phoenix and that he and his immediate family would be protected by the Order after the end of the war.”

“Were you present when the contract was drawn and signed?”

“Yes.”

“Was Lucius Malfoy coerced to sign the contract?”

“No, he freely chose to sign it.”

Or I would have set him up as a traitor to the Dark Lord, but a choice was a choice, as Albus always had it.

“Based on previous testimony by Minister Kingsley Shacklebolt, Harry Potter, and other respected members of the Order of the Phoenix, you had been well established as a spy and had been successful in passing information to the Order since 1980. Why did you go to what must have been great risk to recruit Mr. Malfoy to help you?”

“After Voldemort’s second rise in 1995, he was in great doubt as to my loyalty. I had actively opposed him and his followers at several of his previous attempts to rise from the dead. I gave him passable explanations for my actions, but after his rise he was constantly putting me to the test.” *No need to remember that, now.* “The simplest

way for him to test my loyalty would be to feed only me a piece of false intelligence and then wait to see if that information passed to the Order. As such, I could not be of any use to the Order without a way to confirm all information before passing it.”

“If I understand correctly, Mr. Snape, Mr. Malfoy’s role was to confirm your information for accuracy.”

“Yes, that was his primary role.”

“And did he carry out that role?”

“Yes.”

“So he didn’t himself go to any particular risk.”

“If he had been discovered, he and his family would have been tortured and killed.”

Someone in the gallery above coughed. I glanced up. The man who’d had his face buried in the contract before was holding a handkerchief in front of his mouth. Was he getting all choked up over the good old days?

“But perhaps that risk was not so great; after all, it sounds like he was able to confirm your information and you were not being actively tested.”

“No. On two occasions I was able to discover I had been given false information by checking my intelligence against Mr. Malfoy. He also covered for some of my absences.”

“If you had not been able to check with Mr. Malfoy and had given that information to the Order, what would have happened?”

Madam Lubin had a look of concern on her face. There was a flash of white in the corner of my eye; the handkerchief had come

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down. I didn't want to look at that wall of faces again, but if there was something going on, I needed to know.

"If the Order had acted on the information, I would likely have been discovered as a spy, tortured, and killed. And if I had revealed Mr. Malfoy's involvement in the course of that, the same would have happened to him and his family."

I glanced back up at the gallery. The man with the handkerchief was half-buried in the contract again. How very interesting.

"At such great risk of discovery, Mr. Snape, why go to the trouble of having a contract at all? Surely it would be safer to have no physical record of the agreement."

"We needed the contract to protect Mr. Malfoy and his family. It was clear that Albus Dumbledore would be targeted for death by Voldemort, and I had doubts about my own chances. We needed some physical proof of Mr. Malfoy's service to the Order so he would not be unjustly punished at the end of the war if we were not available to give testimony."

If I watched from the corner of my eye while looking at Madam Lubin, I could see the man with the contract slowly lower it when I wasn't looking at him. He didn't want me to see his face. And why would that be?

"Well, then why wasn't the contract produced at the end of the war?" asked Madam Lubin.

I kept my head turned to Madam Lubin and quickly flicked my eyes up. He froze. He looked vaguely familiar, but not extraordinary. A shock of brown hair stood up in front, a sort of scared rabbit look. Younger than most of the sentencing board, not that that was very difficult. Of course with how rife collaboration had been during the war, there must have been many openings after collaborators were purged.

I looked back at Madam Lubin. "The hiding place of the contract was destroyed during the war. The portrait of Albus Dumbledore, which was to have turned it over, assumed that the contract had been destroyed as well."

How did I know him? It had something to do with Hogwarts,

and not something pleasant. It must be important if he was bothering to hide himself.

"Is that just hearsay?"

"No, when I learned that the contract had never been produced, I questioned the portrait and recovered the contract from the remains of its hiding place."

It had been in the Headmaster's office, I remembered. Amycus was there. And he was saying... "Mr. Jerome, this is most helpful," and the nervous young Ministry clerk with a scared rabbit look and a shock of brown hair, was handing over a bound report of all Hogwarts students and their family records. *Collaborator*.

"Mr. Snape, how would you describe the importance of Mr. Malfoy's aid to you?"

"It was essential in my gaining and maintaining Voldemort's trust so I could pass information to the Order. Information that allowed the Order to counter some very destructive Death Eater raids. His help allowed us to save lives, at the risk of his own."

"Thank you Mr. Snape." Lubin turned to the head of the sentencing board. "Mr. Lutwidge, I reserve all further questions."

The question was why was there a collaborator on the sentencing board?

Mr. Lutwidge stood, creakily. "I will open the floor to inquiries of the witness from the honorable members of the board, who will be regarded in turn –"

Several fingers and quills were raised.

"And questions will be *strictly* limited to the matter at hand."

Several hands dropped again.

"I recognize Madam Fenno, you may proceed."

An elderly witch with a sharp face and a clear carrying voice said, "Mr. Snape, Mr. Malfoy has previously testified that he and his family were in disgrace with Voldemort and being held under strict observation and control by him and his followers. How was he able to render any useful aid if those circumstances were correct?"

"Those conditions did occur, after Mr. Malfoy's arrest in June 1996. Much of his aid to me was rendered prior to that."

"So, his help to you as described was confined to between the contract date of August 1995 and June 1996. A period of ten months," she continued.

"Not entirely. The fact that he and his family were being held in close quarters with Voldemort and high-ranking Death Eaters did mean that he still had access to information. Occasionally he was able to confirm that information to me without being observed."

Would that be enough for them?

Mr. Lutwidge was calling on a Mr. Cubitt. He cleared his throat at length. "Now, I have been on this sentencing board for *some*, for some time. I do *recall* Mr. Malfoy's first trial. In nineteen-eight- in his *first* trial for aiding and abetting the, ah, the so-called Dark Lord, he pled innocent, *innocent* on the grounds that he was placed under the Imperius curse and made to act against his will. If that, if *that* is the case, then how is it that Voldemort would elevate, would *consider* him a trusted follower to the extent you described, ah, to be party to and able to confirm sensitive information? Wouldn't such a one who had to be *forced* to obey either be Imperiused again or held in extremely low regard? *Hmm?*" He trailed off with a wheeze.

I always knew that Lucius hadn't really thought through all the possible consequences of that plea, but at the time, neither of us saw the Dark Lord rising again. Any possibly explanation of Lucius' status would be thin at best, better not to attempt one at all.

"I cannot possibly speculate on Voldemort's thoughts or logic," I said dismissively, "only that I noted that his rational thought processes seemed to be considerably impaired after his rebirth."

He was fucking mental might be a bit blunt for this lot.

And was that how our collaborator Mr. Jerome had got his spot on the sentencing board? A plea of coercion? I rather thought not; they wouldn't want that perception of weakness and corruptibility for anyone on the board. No, I was fairly certain that no one knew about it at all.

Mr. Lutwidge was calling on a Mr. Tichborne.

"How did you come to choose Mr. Malfoy to aid you?"

"Someone who had to be Imperiused to join would be a very

good choice." Since they had brought it up, I might as well turn it back on them. Besides, my real signal of the veiled remarks we had exchanged over the years would only have confused them.

"Any more? Ah, Madam Rusk," said Mr. Lutwidge.

"In your estimation, what is the likelihood of recidivism on Mr. Malfoy's part?" asked Madam Rusk.

"None whatsoever," I said. If Lucius managed to get out of this, he would be doing everything in his power to reestablish his standing, and nothing else.

There were several more questions, rehashing details of the contract and the information Lucius confirmed. Finally, there were no more quills raised, and I was dismissed. I could see Lucius bound in the other chair as I rose and turned to go. He was sitting in still calm, not looking at me. The bailiff opened the door for me and I was through to the quiet dim safety of the holding room. We were shut in silence again.

Draco was pacing, his robes restored to their usual excellent tailoring. I headed immediately for the writing desk.

"How did it – "

"I need a quill and parchment, now. When do they begin deliberations?"

Draco joined me at the desk. "I think they're hearing some, ah, victim testimony first. And then there'll be a recess until the afternoon. What do you need parchment for?"

I was rifling through the innumerable fiddly drawers.

"There's a collaborator on the sentencing board."

"What, really?" said Draco, delighted. He began yanking open drawers as well, and managed to come up with a few sheets of parchment and a quill.

"Yes. He saw me recognize him. Ought to give us at least one vote. More, if I can get him to influence the others." I set an ink-pot on the desk with a click.

"What – "

"Quiet, Draco." I needed to word this perfectly. It must be crystal clear to Mr. Jerome and completely obscure to anyone else.

My dear Mr. Jerome,

What an unexpected pleasure to see one such as yourself advance so quickly in your career. I only regret that I never had the opportunity to give you public recognition for the aid you gave me in my role at Hogwarts. You truly went beyond what was necessary to simply carry out your duty. If you wish me to make the matter known for public acclaim, you need only say the word, and I would be happy to oblige. I hope for all of our sakes that everything goes well in your current concern.

*Yours,
Severus Snape*

I folded the note and addressed the front. Draco had been reading over my shoulder. "It's *beautiful*, sir," he said in open appreciation. "What did he do?"

"You don't need to know that."

His delight vanished. He opened his mouth to say something, then closed it and turned away.

I began removing the glamours on my appearance, one by one. "Your barrister, she seems competent."

"Yes, of course," he said, irritated.

"Give the note to her; she'll know what to do with it."

"I would know what to do with it too, sir."

"She is better placed to deliver it, Draco, you've done your part."

"That's not what I –"

There was a knock at the door. We stared at each other.

"It's probably Madam Lubin," said Draco.

I moved out of the sight line of the door as Draco went to open it. No need for anyone else to see me in my current appearance.

Draco pulled the door halfway open. I could see his face in profile as he smiled. I *knew* that smile, it was the one he got when he was about to do something he oughtn't.

"Well," he said, "come in, Potter."

TESTIMONY

Chapter 21 of **THE GOOD FRIEND**

BY MOTTSHAVE

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MABON 2014

It wasn't just Potter; that would have been bad enough. It was Potter and Longbottom, both looking more than ever like their fathers, and staring at my changed appearance.

I glared at Draco. He still looked disgustingly pleased with himself. "Get them out."

"But sir," said Draco smoothly, "they're your friends. After all, it turns out you were on the same side."

Ah, he was determined to get his own back.

Longbottom was the one who spoke first, to my surprise. Potter was still staring at me in silence. "Sorry to, uh, barge in and all. Luna told me she was testifying this morning and I just came along for support. And then there was talk in the lobby that you had just testified..."

How had that got out already? And how had they got past Proudfoot? Probably war-heroed their way in. Or else it was that damn cloak.

"We just wanted to talk, if we could."

I certainly did not want to talk to them. Perhaps I could drive them off somehow.

"I thought you were dead!" Potter blurted. I stared at him. "At least until two days ago."

So he *had* seen me at the MLE station.

"Really? You never stopped to wonder why you weren't hit by a broken life debt?"

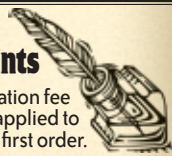
He looked completely bewildered. "But –"

"Or didn't you think that applied to you? Don't worry, I don't intend to collect at present. However, you should try to keep better track of your debts. Madam Malfoy will undoubtedly want to collect."

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Draco looked even more smug, if that were possible.

Potter flushed. "Look, you won't get rid of us like that! And I just want to talk. Even if you don't owe it to me."

Well, hell, why not more bad memories? More questioning and judgment? Have all my misery out? Unless I hexed them all then made for the door... and out into what, a Ministry lobby full of people where word had already spread that I was testifying... and probably reporters. A wave of utter wrung-out wretched weariness passed over me. I was trapped and it was useless. No more bloody running.

I sat in the best chair before one of that lot could take it. Potter and Longbottom took the others. Draco lounged against the writing desk, observing.

"Why did you come back? After all this time?"

"It's none of your business, Potter." He could talk at me all he pleased; I didn't have to give him any answers.

"It's because he owes us, Potter," said Draco casually from his perch.

"Owes you?"

"Oh, yes," Draco went on, cheerfully, "it goes back decades."

What was he playing at?

"Father told me all about it."

He wouldn't. But why not, after all? He had already secured my help for his family, he had my blackmail note to the collaborator in his pocket; he could do whatever he pleased.

"Just after he graduated from Hogwarts, the Ministry arrested him as a suspected Death Eater –"

"*Stop, Draco.*" I cut in.

"No, sir, *no*," he said with sudden vehemence, "you're on *their* side. You already gave him half your memories. *I'm* giving the rest."

There it was, he was furious with me, of course. I had been more honest in a way with Potter than I'd been with him, had given him secrets and memories and been on his side. But as for Draco, I wouldn't let him see his father's contract when we extracted it from the foundations, wouldn't tell him what the collaborator had done, never trusted him with any information or regarded him as competent or acknowledged that he could play the game. And now it was his move.

"They arrested him as a suspected Death Eater, but he wasn't one, not then. He didn't have any information to give them, but they questioned him anyway. You may have heard what it was like under Crouch at the time. Unrestricted use of Unforgivables on prisoners, indefinite detentions without trial."

God, I didn't want to hear any of this. Or think of it now.

"My father doesn't know exactly what they did to him, but he was very changed when he came out. He won't talk about it. We don't think he can. My father knew others who were detained back then who had to take an Unbreakable Vow not to speak of it as a condition of their release. My father eventually found out that along with Crouch, the Aurors involved were Moody and Longbottom," he said, turning toward Neville. Neville looked ill.

"When he found out he was being detained, my father pulled strings and got him released. He took the mark straight away after that."

"What... did they do to him?" asked Longbottom hesitantly.

"That is none of your business," I hissed. I wanted to rail at them all, but I barely trusted myself to speak. I couldn't lose control now.

"We don't know for certain. We do know that he was being imprisoned in dangerous circumstances by the Ministry, and my father got him out. Since that's my father's situation now, his debt requires him to return the favor," Draco said smugly. He was listing me as a family asset, letting Potter know that he owned me as much as he owed me. "And now you two come pushing in here –"

"*You* let us in," said Potter.

"Pushing in," Draco went on, "like you think know something about him, like you're on the same side, even though you couldn't stand him for years. *Now* you want to talk to him?"

It was Longbottom who answered, addressing me. "Yes. Yes, I do actually. Because we *were* on the same side and I was a fool not to see it, that last year, how you and your eyes were protecting us from the Carrows all the time."

Oh this, on top of everything. I did not want his *thanks*.

"Protecting you from yourselves and your useless gestures," I snapped.

He colored. Had he thought I would be happy with him?

"They weren't –"

"You were risking the lives and well-being of my eyes and your own followers to no purpose." *This* I could rant about, now that we were off the awful subject of my past.

"No, that's not right! It wasn't empty gestures! We were resisting."

"Resistance is not a goal. What was your end?"

"We were giving the students hope; they needed that!"

"Unless their hope was not to be crucioed by the Carrows."

As usual, I was being unfair and I knew it. Longbottom had managed to make himself and his army useful in the end, but if I simply acknowledged it, they would never see the other side.

"And we had to resist, we couldn't just let them run the school."

"Yes, you could. But instead you wasted your efforts on what amounted to pranks instead of working towards any substantive strategy. None of your lot even tried to sabotage the Hogwarts file room to keep the Carrows from accessing family records and contacts, no matter how many openings we gave you. I had my eyes do it themselves, in the end."

"I don't even know where the file room is," said Longbottom, "but they must have got them anyway, they came after my gran."

I made eye contact with Draco. "Unfortunately, the Carrows had contact with a Ministry records clerk who gave them the information."

Draco raised his eyebrows and his hand brushed the pocket that held my blackmail note.

"I didn't have the Ministry influence to prevent that."

There was a pause. "Look, sir," said Longbottom. "That's why I came. We found out about the eyes when Bulstrode passed your information to the Order after the battle and it all came out. Well, I guess parts of it came out. She said there were several eyes but she wouldn't say who they were or even how many."

Of course not, what did he expect? I regarded him without answering.

"I know we owe them. I don't even know how much. But if I, if some of the resistance really owe them, I mean, well..."

"Well, what?"

"Well, if you could tell me who they are then I could –"

"Unlike some, I do not go about giving up others' names or loyalties." I glared at Potter.

"But, sir –"

"It's not mine to tell."

It sounded like the Ravenclaw and Hufflepuff eyes hadn't come forward either. No doubt they had their reasons, even if only to avoid awkward questions about how they had come to trust me.

"No, I mean, it's not for anything bad! I'm grateful and if there's any way I can repay –"

"And spreading their names around would be repayment, would it?"

"I wouldn't go just spreading it around. And anyway they didn't do anything wrong."

As if Slytherins didn't have families. Could he really be so stupid? I thought he might have developed some measure of sense.

"But as it is, no one knows which Slytherins were really on our side."

For the first time in that miserable day, I felt like smiling. Why not indulge myself? It was clear that he would never quite realize on his own.

"What a pity. Since you don't know which Slytherins helped you, I suppose you'll have to treat them all as if you owe them, or risk violating a very serious debt. That would be quite unpleasant for you."

Longbottom and Potter looked uncomfortable. Draco was smirking from his perch on the writing desk.

"I'm sorry," Potter said. I stared at him.

"I, uh, really did think you were dead. We all did. I wouldn't have said all that about you being on our side and your reasons if I hadn't."

Had he really figured out that he hadn't been doing me a favor?

"It gave me some bad moments, Potter." Not the least of which was facing down that nightmare of *His* spirit in the Great Hall calling me his friend.

"But it's nothing to be ashamed of, sir."

"And an attempt on my life." There was silence. Draco looked nervous. "It's sorted," I said to him. His father would have to be on

guard now, as well.

"Is that why you've been in hiding? Because of me?"

As satisfying as it would have been to have him stew in guilt, it wouldn't have been very productive.

"If it hadn't been one side, it would have been the other," I said wearily.

"I did turn your memories over to the Ministry," said Potter. I winced. "I mean, I didn't want them to think you were, uh... and anyway it worked, they gave you a pardon."

"Oh, well, as long as it *worked*."

"All right, I'm sorry. I know I, uh, overstepped with your memories before – "

"Overstepped!"

"I know I did, which is why it meant so much to me that you gave me those memories, that you trusted me... "

"Trusted! I had no choice. I knew I only had a short time to convince you of my loyalties, what you had to do, and convince you to follow directions for once. I needed to give you a simple reason that you would accept without question. So I had selected and edited a few clear memories – "

"Edited!"

"– But as I was preoccupied with dying at the time I pushed out more than I intended."

"Edited?"

"Simplified. If I gave you every reason I left the Dark Lord you would have been in that pensieve all damn night. And it wasn't any of your business."

"But my mother – "

Oh, of course, he wanted to hear about his mother.

"Was one of my reasons. You would not have accepted the others."

He stared at me, indignant. "But how would you know? You've always judged me unfairly. Why don't you give me a chance for once?"

"You think I didn't give you chances?" I said with venom. "You think it is any of your business to judge my reasons?"

Unexpectedly, that familiar righteous anger etched on his face

wavered and settled into disappointment. "I thought you might have changed."

"You always were a fool."

"You really think I'm just the same? That any of us are? I may have misjudged you when I was a kid, but you never really saw me either. I was a scared boy who had been bullied all his life, and then you stepped in and kept it going." He looked over at Neville. "We were both scared of you. But we've changed. Everything's changed, and we're not scared of you any longer. And that's not an insult. And don't try to tell me that you've never changed. You *showed* me that! I don't care if you try to convince me now that you didn't mean to."

That was utter rot, of course. I had never wanted anyone to know that about me. I couldn't have wanted him to know. I tried to remember. It had all been such a rush, but pushing out those memories, it has been a release and a relief, and for just that moment it didn't matter who knew what.

"And don't try to tell me I wouldn't understand your reasons! Of course I would! Because I did the same thing in a way. I – I – couldn't face it for years!"

He stopped and passed his hand over his mouth. "I did the same thing, to Sirius. I know I had a hand in his death Because I didn't trust you. Because I didn't even try to learn occlumency. Because I didn't think and went running off to the Ministry and he had to come after me. I almost got my friends killed too. I blamed *you* for years. I think because it was easier. I couldn't face that I played a role in it.

"But then... you gave me your memories. When everything was over and I had a chance to think about it, I saw it was the same with you. You, uh, had a hand in someone's death. Without meaning to. Someone you loved. And it was the same with Dumbledore, too, he told me he did just about the same thing with his sister. But there you were different. You faced up to it. You didn't hide from it like I did. I don't know where any of us would be if you hadn't had the strength to do that. When I realized that... you faced up to your mistakes better than I or Dumbledore did. I knew I needed to do that too. I mean, I'm still working on it. It's bloody worse than

facing Voldemort, because it feels even more alone.

"You don't realize when you're in the middle of it. You're just fighting for what you think is right, but somehow every day the things that you have to do are worse than the last. And one day you cast Crucio on someone you *know* deserves it... because they are the kind of person who casts Crucio on people they think deserve it. And everyone says you're right because they had to be stopped and they did it first and... and how can you come back from that? I know why they call them Unforgivables now, because even when everyone says you're right, you can't forgive yourself. You *know* that part of you is no better than the worst of them. For years I've wanted to talk to you, except you were dead. I even wrote a stupid letter and burned it. Because you did it. You came back from it somehow. I just wanted to ask how you did it. That's why I had to come and talk to you. Maybe you can't even tell me. But at least I can try to tell you that you're not alone. Nobody ever is. I know you don't want to face me, I just wish you would. I don't want to leave you for dead. Not again."

"You think I came back from it?" I said in the silence.

"You're *here*, aren't you?"

The landscape rolled past quietly above the mantel.

"For several years, your mother was my closest friend."

Potter looked up in surprise.

"At one point I imagined that I was in love with her, in a typically dramatic sixteen-year-old manner. I mucked it up, of course, since I tend to wreck everything I touch. When she died, I felt horribly guilty for giving the Dark Lord that idiotic bit of prophecy that he was so obsessed with – "

"Idiotic?"

"Yes, *very*. But it wasn't the only reason. I'd had reasons for a while before that. I had other close friends. Ones who stood by me through some hard family times and got me out of some very tight spots. And they were all Death Eaters. My closest friend was Evan Rosier. He had joined very young and was in far over his head, and he wasn't any killer. Just a stupid political radical who wanted boy-

cotts and maybe some light sabotage. But then it became clear we were all going to be turned into killers or be killed ourselves. He trusted me enough to tell me that he couldn't do it, but if he tried to escape he knew his family would be targeted. He told me the only way he could get out was to go out fighting. Suicide by Auror, we called it. He wasn't the only one. Before he did it, he told me to find some other way out. I didn't at first. I – "

I stopped. "I did things. I thought that maybe Evan was wrong. That what we were doing would get easier. Or that the world would get better because of it. It took me so long to realize it would only get worse. That's when I went to Dumbledore. Trying for a job at Hogwarts was my first attempt to get out, but Albus tossed me out with half of a useless prophecy, and it was becoming ever more clear that the Dark Lord had lost the plot. I thought that I might turn directly to Albus for protection, but I knew that what happened to Rosier and everything I'd done would give me no leverage whatsoever. I needed an explanation for my turn that Albus would accept and something of value to give him. And that's where your mother came in."

"She was an excuse?"

"She wasn't the only one by far who had to die before I turned against the Dark Lord, but she was the only one of my reasons that Albus would have accepted. All of them, all of my friends who died, and all the ones we killed, *all* of them were my reasons, and you fucking think I came back from that?"

They were gaping at me.

"Oh, for fuck's sake, I'm not your bloody professor any more, I can swear now without getting my pay docked." I wiped my eyes.

Draco laughed, thank god, and I felt like I could breathe again.

"Why – why do you keep calling the prophecy worthless?" Longbottom asked. Potter looked at him sharply, but I felt absurdly grateful for the change of topic.

"Because it's rubbish."

"No," Potter was flushed. "No, look, I know you might feel, well, guilty about it, but it all came true."

"What are you talking about, Potter?"

"Look, the seventh month – "

"Seventh month from when? What year?"

"He marked me – "

"He marked his followers too."

"But it *worked*. He died. Just as it said; neither can live while the other survives."

I stared at him, bewildered. "Potter. You were there. I clearly recall a span of years when the both of you were simultaneously living and surviving here, on this earth, together. It's patently false."

We all stared at each other in silence.

"No, it... it meant when we faced each other. It must." His anger was truly gone now, only quiet desperation left.

"You faced each other more than once."

"But it *worked*."

Yes, it had worked. Just as Emmeline's replacement had worked, just as so many of Albus' plans had worked, despite all odds and at such great cost.

"After a fashion," I said. "And if Voldemort had won, you could say that it worked just as well. But I don't think the prophecy had anything to do with you. I don't think it had anything to do with Voldemort either. There have been other dark lords before. If it is a true prophecy at all, it probably has to do with some future dark lord. It may only be relevant centuries from now."

"Then why did you follow it? The whole plan – "

Ah, yes, the damned plan. "For years I thought the prophecy was only important in that it was Voldemort's obsession. I believed that Albus properly saw that we could use that obsession to strategic advantage. By presenting you as bait. By drawing him into reckless actions. By exploiting his vulnerabilities. It wasn't until years later that he told me the second half of the prophecy. And worse, that he *believed* it and it was almost the entirety of his plan. You might remember from my memories that I had some objections."

"Then why did you go along with it?"

"By then, it was too late to change course. Albus had a habit of controlling people by controlling information."

Off to the side, Draco gave a strange cough.

"He did not give me enough of the other pieces that I could start working independently. The only contingency plan I could develop was that if you failed, I had to try to keep my cover and bring Voldemort down from the inside. He didn't tell me about the horcruxes, the most important part, and there was one not more than a ten-minute walk from my office. But he... he didn't quite trust me enough to release his control over the plan, and because of that, people died." *Vince died*. "No, he had to leave it all your very capable hands to make a hash of it alone!"

He flushed again. "Look, I know you don't like me. You've made it perfectly clear. And... it's not like we have to be friends. Just... it was all so awful. I still have dreams about it. And sometimes I think what it might have been like if we all could have just worked together. And, and I know I had my part in it, in not working with you. But you had your part in it too. I don't know what might have happened if we had managed to work together somehow, but I think it would have been better. It all went wrong somewhere. Probably long before I was born."

I knew the feeling.

"But Albus did tell me all he knew, in the end. He was just doing what he thought best, and it worked! Sometimes that's the only thing I can hold on to. In the end, it worked."

Dear lord, what to say. I could tell him that everything Albus fed him groomed him to compliance with the plan, that I suspected that his blind adherence to the prophecy led Albus to allow the death of his parents and the sacrifice of so many from my House... but what was the point? I looked at his desperate face. He thought it was all for the best and he had been willing to die on that basis. Part of me wanted to tell him, as some sort of vengeance for all the grief he had caused me, every reckless act that had put my life at risk, or maybe some hope that he would go and shout at Albus' portrait. But what would that be, except more destruction? Did I have to wreck him too?

"There are some of us it didn't work for. There are those who are

dead or in prison or with ruined lives because of the role I had to play. There might have been another way, if we had tried.” I said, finally.

Draco was looking at the floor.

“Harry,” said Longbottom, quietly. He had seen it too. “Harry, come on.”

Potter stood reluctantly and they headed for the door. Draco was easing along behind them. I put out my hand to stop him. He huffed, not looking at me, but he stopped.

The door closed behind the others, finally.

“I’ve got a note to deliver,” he said shortly.

I rummaged in my jacket pocket and pulled out HELTER SKELTER. Draco looked down at it, bewildered. “I found this helpful, before.”

He turned the book over and around, frowning at it. Perhaps it was a mistake. Lord help us all if Draco Malfoy ever decided to try LSD. But the book had been a help to me once. Neither of us were the only ones who had fallen for a monster. And it was so much easier to fall in than to climb out.

He was looking at me strangely. “Look, sir. Madam Lubin said you’re in a Ministry safe house. I was in one for a while; they’re pretty miserable. Your name will be everywhere in the papers now. Do you want to stay with us at the flat while we wait?”

Why on earth was he asking me? So we could all be miserable together?

He took my hesitation for caution. “It’s all right; it’s secure, I saw to that.”

I couldn’t quite divine his purpose.

“I’ll see,” I said finally.

“You have the location, sir.”



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Art by Mottsnave

DELIBERATIONS

Proudfoot returned a few minutes after Draco left the holding room. We flooded back to a waystation, then he apparated me back to the safe house. I was left alone in the weighty silence. I made myself a pitiful meal in the kitchen then went back to bed. For a while I let my exhaustion take care of the burden of empty time that stretched out before me.

I held out until four in the afternoon. No news and too bloody peaceful and I didn’t know what was happening. I paced for a long time before the floo before I broke down. I glamoured my face to

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be less recognizable and flooded out.

A few apparitions took me to the Malfoys' flat. I checked the area carefully, but no one was about. I moved close to the door, dropped my glamour, and knocked. The door's viewhole clicked open and shut and a second later Draco opened the door.

"You came." We were both equally surprised by that.

He led me into the sitting room. Narcissa stood abruptly from the sofa when she saw me and went straight out towards the kitchen.

"She loves you dearly as a friend and is extremely grateful for everything you've done for the family and she is *very* furious with me for inviting you and you'd best avoid her."

"Draco, I should –"

"– Sit down and have some tea; you can't leave, I *need* the distraction."

I sighed.

"The papers are on the table, if you can stand to read them. Or if you can't, you can read them anyway, which is what I've been doing. I don't recommend it, exactly, but they... they could be worse."

I sat and tried to not let his nervous energy eat at me. He tried to pour me some tea. It did not go well.

"Put it *down*, Draco."

I pulled the cup over. The tea was stone cold. I cast a warming charm on the cup and picked up the papers. They were soggy. I looked at Draco.

"Sorry, sir," he said.

The first sensational headline made me wince: SNAPE ALIVE! MINISTRY AGENT! The article itself was more staid, concentrating on Shackbolt's press conference of that morning. There was some ridiculous speculation about my survival. Could anyone really think I had been living in secret tunnels below Hogwarts? But then there were Shackbolt's words:

Mr. Snape has been cooperating with the Ministry to recover bodies of Voldemort's victims. With his help, we have been able to retrieve and identify thirty-four individuals previous listed as missing and an additional twelve will be named after their families are notified. Mr. Snape has also been providing valuable testimony on previously undisclosed

Order actions during the war.

The article concluded with a list of names, some of which I recognized.

I pushed the paper away and pulled over the next. MALFOY: SPY? I sighed. The article was as sensationalized as could be expected from the PROPHECY, but part of that was the reporter playing up the danger of Lucius' and my positions. It could work in our favor.

The last article was not what I expected. EMMELINE VANCE: THRILLING ESCAPE! I couldn't get more than a sentence or two in before I threw the paper down in disgust.

I could see what Draco meant; even if I couldn't stand to read the articles, they could be worse. The question was, how much of an influence would they be on the sentencing board? They weren't supposed to be influenced by such trash at all, but the Ministry judicial system had never made more than pathetic handwaves at impartiality.

Draco had finally stopped fidgeting. He was watching me carefully. "Do you think it's enough, sir?"

I hesitated.

"Never mind, I'm not sure I want an answer."

I answered him anyway. "The articles will help, and the testimony should help. There's nothing else we can do at the moment."

"I know."

He picked up the teapot as if to pour himself more, then set it down again.

"I think Madam Lubin was pleased with the note. She only said that neither of us had ever seen it. I suppose that means she had it delivered before they went into deliberations."

"Did she say what she thought of the prospects?"

"She never promises anything. Are you... are you working for the Ministry now?" he blurted.

That damn article. "I do *not* work for the Ministry. I wouldn't... the bodies – that wasn't for them."

"That was for my father, too?"

"In part."

"How many favors did you call in for us?"

“Draco – ”

“Never mind, I’m not supposed to know, right?”

I sighed.

“And what if it doesn’t work, sir?” His nervous energy was back. “And you’re out of favors, and we ran out a long time ago, and we’ll all be even worse off – ”

“No, you won’t, Draco,” I cut him off.

“How can you say that? Father could be killed!”

“*Draco.*” My glare stopped his spiral of doom. “You will not be worse off. Your family will be considerably better off with this story out. It was part of the bargain I made with your father when he agreed to cooperate with me. He made his decision knowing it might put him in harm’s way, but it would help his family.”

“But if – ”

“If the sentencing board doesn’t release him, the story is still out and it will help your family’s reputation considerably.”

“If it’s believed.”

“Do you really think that anyone believed your father’s Imperius plea at his first trial?”

Draco didn’t answer.

“I have done this before. Your father has done this before. The whole House has. You *will* recover. It will take work, but you’ll manage it.”

“*You* don’t have to work at it this time.”

“I *did*, it’s just that I did the work over the past two decades.”

“Two decades,” said Draco weakly.

“How you manage it is up to you,” I said firmly, “but you *will* manage it.”

“But we didn’t really recover the first time, did we? They never really trusted us.”

“*Should they?*”

Draco looked uncomfortable and broke my gaze, looking up at the window across the room.

“They gave you a memorial service, you know. The, uh, Prince family funded it.”

“Oh, *now* they want to claim their bastard.”

“There were some Aurors there undercover, whom everyone

spotted straight off. I suppose they thought they might pick up stray Death Eaters. We played along and fed them all kinds of misinformation. And there were some very pretty speeches – ”

“Draco, stop.”

“– About how we hardly knew you and how you were ‘in a better place.’”

“*Draco.*”

“And once the respectable citizens left, the rest of us got rat-arsed and traded stories about what an utter conniving bastard you are. It was perfect. You would have hated every moment.”

“What a treat. The Ministry let you attend?”

“I got special permission. I *needed* to be there. I had some of the best stories.”

He was finally looking at me again. “I just don’t know what I’m going to do now.”

It was an effort to get the words out. “Neither did I. You just go through the motions until you can find your own purpose. It’s enough that you’re alive.”

He looked at me with something like shock.

There was a knock at the door. We both flinched.

Draco brushed against the table as he stood, almost upsetting the teapot in his rush to get to the door. He checked the viewhole, then let in Madam Lubin. She looked blandly cheerful.

“Madam Lubin, are the deliberations over?” Draco looked terrified.

“Yes, Mr. Malfoy. If your mother is available, perhaps we could go over it together.”

“Yes, she’s – yes.” He made for the kitchen.

Madam Lubin turned to me. “Mr. Snape. Thank you for your help this morning. And as for any other help, I know nothing about it, you can count on that.”

Did that all mean good news? Draco and Narcissa were hurrying back in.

“Madam Lubin,” said Narcissa breathlessly, “please have a seat. Draco, get all this cleared away – ” She tried to gather the abandoned cups.

Madam Lubin sat. “There’s no need.” She was unfolding a parch-

ment with an official seal. "The sentencing board has not rescinded any of the fines or *reversed* the sentence and the conviction will remain on his record. However, your husband's sentence has been reduced to time served. He'll be released to you tomorrow."

Narcissa sat and put her cup down awkwardly on the table, some of the contents sloshing over into the saucer. She began to weep noiselessly. Draco was over to her in an instant with his arms around her shoulders, saying something that I couldn't catch. Madam Lubin continued laying papers out on the table.

"Now, we have a few documents to review and sign, but you take your time, my dear," she said evenly.

I couldn't be here for this. And I certainly could not be anywhere remotely nearby when Lucius was back. I would need to let him cool down first. Perhaps for a few years. I slipped out of the flat and down the street; I doubted they would notice my leaving.

I was walking. I had been walking for a few hours. I needed the knot of tension I had been carrying for days to unwind, and the desolate stretch of coast by Port Mulgrave was slowly doing the job. I was settling into the steady rhythm of the crashing waves in the long dusk when one of the protean notes in my pocket shifted. I expected that it was some message from Shackbolt, but it was Emmeline's note that had writing spreading across it.

Heard the news – I'm glad for you and your friends. He was a sort of a member of the Order, even if the rest of us didn't know it at the time.

I came down with a slight attack of reporters today. I could use a break. Care to get a drink? Someplace muggle if you know one.

Oh, I knew several muggle places; they had been useful to me over the years when I could have no indiscretions in the wizarding world. The question was which one? A very important matter had to be settled first. I fumbled in my pockets and finally came up with a pencil stub.

Who's paying? I wrote.

You are, came back immediately. Some of us have taken unpaid leave for a month.

Fine. I wrote her the name of a cheap pub near the main train

station in Sheffield. It catered to travelers and students and was nicely anonymous. And the ales were decent.

An apparition took me to town, a short walk to the pub. I had secured a table near the back and a couple of pints by the time Emmeline walked in, looking credibly muggle and a bit flustered. She spotted me and slid into the booth across from me.

"Oh, what a day. Thanks, Mark, I needed this."

I was pleasantly surprised that she thought to use my alias. I gave her a nod.

"I knew going back to my name would get me hounded by reporters, but I thought I had been through the worst when it all first came out back in Canada. I suppose with the hearing this morning and the press conference on the bodies... one of them called it 'a resurgence of interest in your case.' They wanted me to tie it all up in a nice package for them: me, you, the Malfoys, my escape. I mean, I do understand in a way, everyone likes a happy ending."

"If there is such a thing."

"A little closer to it for your friends now."

I remembered Narcissa's tears of relief.

"Have you been having any trouble with them? Reporters, I mean," she said.

"I've had my name warded for years. They won't be able to trace me or send owls. I'm staying out of it. I won't let them find me."

"You know, if they can't find you, they'll just start making things up."

"Oh, have you read Skeeter's biography of me?"

"What? You're not serious!"

I nodded.

"Hell, I hadn't heard of that. Is it too awful?"

"I haven't read it."

"I don't know that I could stand that. Are you going to?"

"It has taken me many years, but I can finally recognize a terrible idea when I hear it. My pardon only extends to crimes I committed in the past, not to anything I do to Skeeter in the future."

She laughed. "They would come after you straight away if anything happened to her."

"Oh, yes."

She took a drink of her pint.

"Look, if I'm being too much of a reporter, just tell me off. I saw the articles about the hearing, how Mr. Malfoy was helping you. Did he help in my escape too?"

I paused.

"If it's something you can't tell, that's all right."

"He watched the corridor for me, but I didn't tell him what I was doing or let him see that I was bringing in your replacement," I said quickly.

"And it wasn't mentioned at the hearing."

"Too much potential to be damaging rather than helpful."

"Yes, I can see that. Look, if you think it's all right, you could give him my thanks for –"

"No."

She looked taken aback by my vehemence.

I leaned in and spoke low and distinctly. "Emmeline, you do *not* hand Lucius sodding Malfoy any reminders of potential debts. He does not know for certain exactly what I did and he *never* needs to know."

She chuckled. "I'm being a fool, aren't I?"

"Yes, *very*."

She reached past her pint and her hand brushed mine. I flinched it away.

She looked down, fumbled with her pint for a moment, then put it down and crossed her arms.

"All right. I – sorry," she said.

I sighed.

She looked away in silence for a moment.

"Can I ask? I thought, well, I felt *something*."

Damn it all, but whatever I felt or not, I couldn't, there was no way.

"Your face," I said finally. It came out like an accusation.

"Oh, *really*?" She had a bright brittle offended tone.

I always managed to put my foot in it. I didn't really want to explain, but now I would have to.

"Not like that. You know I was there. I had to watch, and I couldn't show anything. So your face... I've seen it –" I stopped.

"All right," she said quickly.

"It took a while, but I got that memory down."

"And here I am dredging it up." She gave a little bitter laugh. "And there's nothing I can do about that."

"No."

"You know, I don't have the best memories of you either."

"Shall we not borrow trouble then?" I thought I was agreeing with her, but she went on.

"I just don't think – for *me*, burying the memories down doesn't help. They can never get better if they're all shoved away. It doesn't have to be borrowing trouble."

I felt a flash of anger at her. As if *I* didn't know how to handle bad memories? I had handled them for years, bled them of emotion and hidden them where he could never see any of them. I had been good at that, perhaps the best, he had never known, despite all his power. It had kept me alive and *useful*, and in her very expert opinion, it didn't *help*? It did help, it had helped me for years. I had done it before and I could do it again, no matter how the flashbacks seemed to be coming through now.

"Speak for yourself," I said nastily.

"I thought I was." She looked down at the table. "And at any rate, that wasn't my intention, to cause you any pain."

She stood, not offended, but perhaps regretful. "I'll destroy the protean note if you want, but I'd rather not. There's not very many people I can talk to about all of this that really understand. Maybe it's the same for you."

I didn't reply or look up at her. I wasn't sure what I wanted at that moment.

"It does get better, Mark."

Speak for yourself, I wanted to say, but I didn't want her pity.

"I'll keep it, then," she said.

She left. I paid.

It was long after last call when I arrived at the Hog's Head. I dropped my disillusionment when I came in the back. Aberforth

was in the kitchen standing over a pile of glass shards on the counter. With each *Reparo* he cast, a cloud of shining slivers coalesced back into a pint glass. The crackling noise set my teeth on edge. He stopped when he saw me. "Oh, bollocks."

"I'm leaving. I'm done here. I'm just getting my things."

"Good riddance to bad rubbish," he said mildly. "That *Minerva*'s left a note for you."

Oh had she? Probably horrified over what I had managed with *Lucius*' contract.

"It's up in your room."

My room, was it?

The note was lying on the pillow of the bed. I viewed it with distaste and pulled my bag from under the bed. I couldn't imagine that it was anything good. Well, it wouldn't read itself.

Severus —

Filius just informed me that he's had some important findings through his research and he would very much like to discuss them with you. In fact, he says this may have some ties to some research he was conducting on his own before we had any knowledge of the ghost. I'm very hopeful, but he won't give me any details before discussing his findings with you. He is being quite stubborn on this point. As I think the matter properly concerns all Hogwarts staff and I believe we can use all our minds on this problem, I've called a general emergency staff meeting for Tuesday at two in the afternoon and I would be most grateful if you would attend. I don't believe Filius will broach the matter if you are not there, and we must address this problem as soon as possible. We will meet in the staff room. I have sealed the Great Hall, and since you have met with no interference on your last visit, I believe there should be no risk to you as long as we avoid the Great Hall.

I do hope you won't worry about seeing the staff. Many of them already guessed at your survival, as I had, and the rest now know from the papers. Many of them are quite eager to see you again. As are the reporters, who I have banished from the grounds, so you needn't have concern on that point.

As for myself, I can't accept having matters rest with you on such a sour

note as we left it at our last meeting. Surely our decades of both professional and personal friendship are worth more than this petty bickering. I know they mean quite a bit more to me, and I hope you feel the same.

Minerva

Damn it, why did she have to go and appeal to our friendship? I scrawled '*very well*' over the last paragraph and carried the note back down to the kitchen.

That bird was on its perch in the corner, scratching vigorously at the back of its head. Small flakes were drifting down to the counter below. I shoved the note at it. "Make yourself useful for once."

Fawkes gave an offended squawk and promptly ate the note. He began rhythmically thumping his head against the window pane to be let out. *Aberforth* stomped over and wrenched the sash up with an annoyed grunt. The bird flapped off.

"Still here, are you?"

"Bloody staff meeting tomorrow."

He pulled out what remained of his whiskey stash and poured a couple of glasses.

"You're staff now? Hired you back on, did they? Some people never learn."

"I'll be leaving directly after."

"You filthy liar."

STAFF MEETING

I found *Minerva* in the staff room a quarter hour ahead of the meeting time. She had expanded the central table and was levitating chairs into place. *Bulstrode* was at one side setting out paper and quill. She gave me a nod.

I headed straight for the bust

Chapter 23 of **THE GOOD FRIEND**

BY MOTTSSNAVE

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of Roger Bacon to retrieve Filius' flask. No sense letting anyone else get to it first. Minerva made a disapproving noise when she saw what I was doing. If she thought she could get through a bloody staff meeting without alcohol, she was welcome to try. I poured a measure into one of the teacups on the sideboard.

"Did you meet with Filius?" she asked. "I think he was hoping for a word with you before the meeting."

"No." I had no intention of meeting with Filius privately. The last time I had seen him, he had been sending some rather nasty curses in my direction. Of course, perhaps I had started it when I knocked him out with a stunner the year before.

"I have briefed everyone about our problem, of course. Well, everyone I could reach. You know how Horace is about his holidays."

I knew.

The door of the staff room opened. It was Trelawney. *Oh, hell.* Why on earth had Minerva kept her on? I hurried Filius' flask back to its hiding place. Letting her get to it would be as bad as pouring it down a drain. Thankfully, Trelawney was pointedly ignoring me.

Poppy and Pomona weren't far behind; they often holidayed together. Pomona made a beeline for me. Worse – her arms were open.

"Severus! You're all right!"

I turned sideways at the last second and managed to evade the embrace. She caught my hand as a consolation prize and held it possessively.

"I did catch on at last that you weren't – *well*, but one still *worries*, you know."

I was rescued by Irma Pince, of all people. She had oozed her way in at some point and was hovering over Pomona's shoulder, eyes locked on me.

"Yes, Irma?" I said pointedly.

Pomona gave a start and released my hand.

"You."

"Yes, Irma?"

"*Didn't return your books,*" she hissed.

Poppy muttered something I didn't catch.

"Oh, didn't I? How careless of me."

"Ministry sealed your quarters for a month."

"How distressing for you. Did you ever get them back?"

"A month."

"What a pity. Do I owe you late fees?"

"Now they have Auror inspection stamps in them."

"Did I bleed on them too?"

"They are *damaged*."

"Why don't you collect the damages from Minerva out of my back pay?"

"Damaged."

"She's right over there. Go on."

Irma huffed and floated towards Minerva on a cloud of indignation.

Hooch tromped in and went straight for the bust. Filius was next, and with him a former student, Sarah Fawcett, my one eye in Ravenclaw. What was she doing here? She didn't take any notice of me, helping Filius lay a towering stack of parchments out on the table. Probably she hadn't broken her cover.

"What have you been up to, Severus? Are you working?" asked Pomona.

Oh, dear lord, now I was going to get pumped.

Minerva had come over to our group. "As I understand it, he's been infiltrating and destroying criminal organizations," she said.

"I wouldn't call that work; I don't get paid for it, Minerva. It's more of a hobby."

"Didn't you tell me once that hobbies are for weak-minded individuals with no sense of purpose?"

That *did* sound like something I would say. "Since my last sense of purpose destroyed the lives of all my friends, I decided to give hobbies a go."

"Sweet Merlin, Severus, you ought to join our drama club," said Pomona in disgust.

"Rather pluck my eyes out," I muttered.

Filius looked like he was trying not to laugh. Hooch walloped me on the back. "We've missed you, Snape."

The rest were crowding in now, though Horace and some of the others were missing. There were several I didn't know as well. Dear

lord. I gulped my 'tea' and found a seat near Bulstrode and Minerva.

Hagrid stomped in last of all. "Sorry! Sorry ter keep yeh waitin'. Elwedritschen got out, had to hunt them up again." He took the settee near the sideboard. It groaned ominously as he sat. I felt like doing the same.

Minerva was beginning. "Thank you all for interrupting your holidays. I wouldn't have asked except that is a matter of the greatest concern, I think we can all agree. Now, you all have been briefed on these alarming occurrences. Professor Flitwick has been conducting some research which he will present, and then hopefully we can all come up with a solution. Filius?"

"Ah, yes, thank you. And some of you already know my research assistant, Miss Fawcett. Now, Minerva, when you approached me about this problem, you described it as a visitation of a ghost. However, I do not believe that is the problem. A true ghost or apparition would have been sensed by the other school spirits, and Miss Bulstrode had the foresight to check that possibility years ago. On questioning them again now, they still report no new spirit activity. I visited the location myself in the past few days – yes, with precautions, Minerva – and ran the Hardinge-Britten test. No trace of residual energy as would be left by a spirit. No, we are dealing with something quite different."

That couldn't be right. No matter what Filius' test said, that thing had known me and spoke to me just as *he* had.

"Now, I must ask for all of your patience, for this is tied to an ongoing issue that I have been investigating over the past three years, and to lay the groundwork we must go back several centuries." There were several badly concealed groans around the table. Fawcett was pushing a large stack of papers to Filius. I was wishing I had poured myself a larger measure of 'tea' from Filius' flask.

"To explain, well, I believe I found a connection through a very old legend. A fragment of poetry no longer extant in any written form, but partially remembered by some of the oldest portraits in Hogwarts;

*"Bifor that eard in erber grene
Mid spryngende wortes schyre ond schene
Ic saege into a slepyng-slaghte
Fast in glemande sweven..."*

A general clamor arose.

"Stop."

"Oh, Merlin."

"Filius, *please*."

"What's a slepyng-slaghte?"

Minerva's voice rose above the rest. "You know the rules, Filius, no Middle English at staff meetings!"

Filius looked put out. "The original text is very illuminating."

"A summary will suffice, Filius."

"Ah, yes, well, in summary then. The narrator describes falling asleep in a garden near the 'vale of the boar' which some of you may recall is the very old term –"

"Hogwarts, yes."

"Well, in this dream, the narrator sees a holy spring cared for by an old hermit, a wise man. A woodcutter passing by the place while the hermit is asleep wants to drink at the spring, but he is stopped by a lady in white who arises from the spring. She explains that she is in thrall of the old man and if the woodcutter helps her he will be permitted to drink from her spring and transform into a being of great knowledge and power."

"Drink of her spring, eh?" said Hooch.

Filius flushed. "In any case, the woodcutter is besotted with her and agrees. He cuts off the hermit's head and brings it to the lady. She, ah, drinks the blood and is transformed – or revealed, it's not quite clear on that point – as a 'loathly wyrm.' The wyrm withdraws back into the spring."

"And?" asked Pomona sharply.

"And, I'm afraid that's all, the portraits couldn't remember the rest."

Hooch gave a snort.

"Well, they are really quite old."

Hooch looked unimpressed. "So?"

"It may seem a bit obscure."

"Oh, it *may*," said Hooch.

"It may, but of course all these types of poems were highly symbolic. Stories of holy springs inhabited by powerful spirits are very

common of course, but in modern magical theory we understand them not as spirits or goddesses, but as a symbol of a source of power. Long before wizards and witches developed wands, or even spells, a place that held a powerfully pure symbol of an element, such as water, would have allowed them, by Frazier's three principles, to effect their environment."

"Principles?" asked Hagrid.

"Well, in this case it would be primarily the first, that the part may stand for the whole, and a symbol for an object, and the second, that all power must have a source. The third..."

Happily, Pomona cut in and saved us from a basic magic theory lecture. "So at the heart of it, the story is indicating that the spring was corrupted."

"Yes. At some point, long enough ago to fade into legend, the spring was set on a sort of cycle of sacrifice and metamorphosis. In this cycle, the spring wants to effect a transformation, to become well, beastly, and to power that metamorphosis, it uses other people. It may have been a single event such as the story suggests, or a series of actions over a long course of time, where the power of the spring was used for destructive purposes."

"Well, what of it?" asked Hooch.

"There is only one holy spring anywhere in the vicinity of the 'vale of the boar,' and it is currently several floors below us and behind a secure door. By the time the Founders set up the spring as Hogwarts' Source, it's likely it had been corrupted for a long time."

"But Filius," said Minerva, "the spring, if it even is the same one, is not all of Hogwarts' Source. The eternal flames, the power of the foundation stone, the inspiring wind, are all important aspects –"

"Oh, indeed, indeed! And the strength of those symbols may mitigate some of the effects. Of course they could have been subtly corrupted by proximity as well. Perhaps that's why no one has noticed the imbalance. But a corrupted and imbalanced Source is very problematic. By our system of sorting, we associate some students with each element, rather than with the Source as a whole. And then we additionally place them physically close to their ele-

ment. That close to a powerful Source... it may affect them."

What had Draco said? *It was hungry.* And hadn't I felt it pulling at me?

"But you said it's symbolic," said Hooch stubbornly. "What can a symbol do?"

"Beyond being potentially a powerful source of magic, it can affect the mind. A symbol can influence the way we see ourselves and others. It can affect both our characters and our actions. Take... water. Water as a symbol can be rebirth, healing, growth, renewal, creativity, and purity. But it can also be stagnation, sorrow, suffocation, cyclical actions, a snake eating its own tail."

I shifted uncomfortably. I wished the old windbag would get on with it.

"If, for example, the symbolic meaning of one of our Houses is constantly reaffirmed in only its negative aspects, it can affect how those students view themselves, and how others view and treat them. Further, a symbol that constantly communicates a story of a sacrifice that leads to a powerful transformation or purification could have a disastrous effect on those who are vulnerable to it. And of course most vulnerable would be the ones associated with it and placed in its close proximity. And their association is constantly reinforced by House rivalries and solidarity. Perhaps once a generation there is a student or staff member who is particularly vulnerable, due to a lack of a secure home life, personality or mental issues, and the symbolic narrative could influence their own personality and desires to the extent that they choose to act out the narrative."

Filius cleared his throat and turned to the next page in his stack.

"Historically, Hogwarts has been the site of quite a number of disturbing incidents. Several are well known to us now, such as the incidents of the recent war, the tragic death of Myrtle Warren, and of course the beginnings of the rise of the dark lord John Stearne in the 1600s. However, many incidents were unfortunately covered up to protect the reputation of the school or dismissed as freak occurrences. For example, in 1710, the body of the groundskeeper, William Tolmie, was found on the shore of the lake. His throat had been cut. The culprit, a seventh-year Slytherin student by the name of Andrew Kelso was found wandering in the Forbidden Forest

in a semi-catatonic state with a bloody knife in his hand. It was determined that he was in something like a sleepwalking state. He was eventually revived, but with only a partial recollection of his actions, which he thought were a dream. He had been having a series of escalating dreams, which culminated in the murder. He was remanded to St. Mungos, where he died in 1728.

"Filius, that is quite tragic, but I would hardly call that – "

"More than a freak occurrence, yes. It has long been speculated that repression, corruption, or misuse of magical powers could lead to mental illness. However, I am *not* relating this as an isolated incident. It *is* not an isolated incident. I have uncovered quite a few more, and they are all connected to Slytherin." He riffled forward through his pages.

So, for years Filius had been researching what was wrong with Slytherins. *Bloody marvelous.*

"To go back to the earliest occurrence I was able to find, in 1477 a Slytherin Arithmancy professor, Elizabeth Medorem, killed a seventh-year Slytherin student, Camille Whitford, and ate part of the corpse – yes, I'm afraid so – and disposed of the rest in a disused well on the grounds. It's since been filled in. At the time it was chalked up to another, well, another dark witch from Slytherin. I think we've all heard the saying, that all dark wizards come from Slytherin."

Oh, certainly it was a fine saying, if one had never heard of confirmation bias.

"And there were others of a very similar nature. For example, in 1854, a pair of Slytherin sixth-year students, Henry Lewis and Samuel Langford, were caught luring a first-year student, Billy Fingal, to an unused room in the dungeons, where they had stockpiled several, ah, tools. Under questioning, Lewis broke down and confessed that Langford had convinced him to help murder the boy. They planned to dispose of the body down a drain in the dungeons."

"Filius – " began Minerva.

Filius went on quickly. "Now, I know these occurrences are not very pleasant to hear, and they may seem tangential, but they are quite important and have been covered up for far too long. There are connections, I'll come to them, I'll – if you please."

He paused, but there were no interruptions.

"Finally – " He turned to the next page. There were several sighs of relief.

"Finally, later in the same year as the Lewis and Langford incident, a Slytherin professor of Divination, Branock Trenowden, committed suicide by drowning himself in the lake."

"If these are connected, the frequency is increasing," said Sinistra.

"But I still fail to see that they are connected," said Minerva.

"And even if they are, how do we know this is the influence of a corrupt Source, and not simply a string of wizards and witches who have, well, gone bad in a similar way?" asked Pomona.

"I don't know if there ever could be definitive proof, but there are certain indications..." Filius paused, cast a quick glance at me, then shuffled his notes. "Of course we don't have much in the way of detailed records before the Elizabeth Medorem case, but since then there have been certain commonalities. After her capture, her jailers reported her as ranting about a black pool, and there were similar references in some of her writings. And Andrew Kelso, when he was revived from his sleepwalking, described being in a waking dream where he thought himself in the forbidden forest before a dark pool. A creature was rising out of the pool and he struck at it to defend himself, only..."

"Only, it were the groundskeeper, weren't it," Hagrid finished.

"Yes. Now the Langford and Lewis case is more complicated. After they were captured, Lewis told Aurors that he knew he had to follow Langford's lead because he had seen him, 'rise up, a glorious beast, out of a pool of power,' and that the power of the pool spoke through him."

"Oh, Merlin," said Poppy.

"And as for Professor Trenowden, there was a note he left with his robes at the edge of the lake. It read, 'If something must be transformed, let it be me; if something must be given, let it be no other life but mine. If there must be a pool, let it be this one. May God forgive me and keep me.'"

There was silence around the table.

"Not to, uh, not to mention stray remarks of various heads and

members of Slytherin house in letters and journals recounting, well, similar dreams and visions. Now, it's not proof, of course, but if any of our current members of Slytherin House have experienced similar..."

Filius glanced towards me and Bulstrode and stopped speaking. He may have noticed the looks on our faces. Bulstrode, for her part, had gone stony and stopped the quill notation.

"Not necessary, not necessary at all," Filius said quickly. He flipped forward a few pages. He was almost down to the last.

The question wasn't if I'd had those dreams, but how many, how bloody many, and for how many years...

"Filius, I can see, that this all points to a disturbing pattern, but really, it's nothing more than a legend, a series of dreams with certain similarities, and incidents that have been covered up over the years. Look, no institution with a history as long as Hogwarts will be free of its share of ugly incidents."

Filius shook his head and looked at Minerva sadly. "We have known nothing else for so long. All wizards and witches in Britain have attended Hogwarts for centuries. We may have become inured to it, but this level of violence and divisiveness in a school is not normal. Not remotely. And there are others, though the records were not complete enough to find all the details. And there may be more that were covered up more successfully or never discovered. Now, by repeating these incidents, I am not suggesting that Slytherin House is predisposed to evil of violent acts. The fact that these incidents form a repeating and predictable pattern suggests strongly that there is an outside force triggering these events. And if it is an outside force, then it must be very old, and very powerful, and it is not weakening over time."

"Filius, are you suggesting –" began Minerva. I didn't like where this was heading.

"Perhaps no one knew or understood. But many people have long held, rightly or wrongly, the belief that all dark wizards come from Slytherin. So perhaps it was, an, ah – an *accepted* price. For the rest of our students to be free of some dark influence, that we would give that quarter freely to it. A sacrifice, should they choose to follow it. And that would feed into its symbolic cycle as well."

"The question, Filius," said Minerva in the chilly silence, "is how this relates to the appearance of his ghost in the Great Hall, after all, that is the problem we are trying to resolve."

Was it?

"But Minerva, it's not a ghost."

"Bulstrode, please continue with the notes – what?"

"No, a ghost would be detected by the other school ghosts, and my Hardinge-Britten test would not have been negative. It cannot be a true spirit. I believe it's a fragment, a manifestation, an unresolved bit of the narrative that the pool tries to carry out. It seems to be a fragmentary form of the same sort of magic that allows the school to produce the headmaster portraits. I would surmise that since only one of the elements is producing this apparition, it can only be of an incomplete and fragmentary nature."

He turned to me. "Severus, I'm sorry, I think your presence as part of the symbolic narrative triggered the apparition. As we've seen, the pool has a cycle, a narrative that it tries to complete, then a period of dormancy, then it begins again. When Tom Riddle attended Hogwarts as a student, he may have been so susceptible to the pool and so well suited to the narrative that he began repeating it over and over. The period of dormancy has been reduced or eliminated."

"Bulstrode, is there a problem with the quill?" asked Minerva.

"No, ma'am."

"Instead of going quiet for a few generations, it seems that it is trying to remain active and constantly repeat. It is attempting to communicate much, much more directly than in its usual dreams and visions."

"Are you suggesting that we – that Severus – resolve this cycle somehow? That we –" Pomona looked as horrified as I felt.

"No, no, no, that's out of the question," Filius said quickly.

"Bulstrode, we will need a record," cut in Minerva.

"No." Bulstrode made no move for the quill.

"But then, what do you suggest?" said Pomona.

"That we close the school. The risk to our Slytherin students – to all our students – is too great."

"Filius –" began Minerva.

"Now, it may not be a permanent measure. If we can find a way to replace the Source –"

"That's all very well, Filius," said Minerva, "but I'm afraid the board of governors will never agree to such a course without much more definitive proof."

Filius sighed. "Yes, I believe you're right, Minerva. Which is why I've prepared my resignation." He pushed forward the last of his papers across the table to Minerva and turned to me. "And Severus, I really must advise you to *get out*."

"Filius, I'm not going to accept –" said Minerva.

Bulstrode stood up. "No, ma'am, it's not right. The board has to –"

"Miss Bulstrode, please don't interrupt." Minerva turned her flustered irritation on Bulstrode.

"No, ma'am, you can't have us here when you know what it's been doing to us!"

"We don't *know*."

"I *know*, and I'll advise the House not to return."

"Miss Bulstrode, that is not acceptable!"

"It's not acceptable for us to be here with that thing!"

I used to enjoy it when staff meetings erupted into chaos, and instigated it whenever I could. But this – I could see Bulstrode getting ready to scuttle her own career. She had been laying the groundwork to run this place from the shadows in a few years, I was sure of it. And now she was going to throw it all away, her career in a place that wanted to destroy her and me and all of us... I felt ill.

Minerva's anger was rising, I could see that, but she made an effort to speak calmly. "Miss Bulstrode... *everyone*. I am not suggesting that we take no measures to protect our students, if the Source is having a negative influence on them."

A negative influence, using us, trying to destroy us. But why should it want to do that to its own House, aligned with its own element? I had to think.

"But I think we can all reasonably agree that the governors will not condone such drastic action without –"

But Bulstrode's blood was up now and she was in no mood to

be reasonable. "They'll agree, they'll *have* to agree if we go public."

"Miss Bulstrode, that's enough! You've been highly disruptive!"

"If you won't, then I will!"

"Oh, you will *not* – may I remind you that by your contract, all staff meetings are strictly confidential –"

Bulstrode slapped her hand down on the table, smashing the tip of her quill into an inky mess. "Fine then. Screw my contract. I'm giving my notice."

Minerva's voice was thin with icy rage. "Miss Bulstrode. I had high hopes for you. Well. As you are no longer on staff, you are no longer allowed at this meeting. You'll need to leave the grounds immediately."

Bulstrode gave a short bark of a laugh. "Kick me out, *again*."

She didn't wait for a response, but went, closing the door behind her with a thud. Minerva looked stricken. The awkwardness of the silence ranked almost as high as at the staff meeting years ago when Hooch had turned up plastered and and made some very loud and interesting suggestions to Sinistra.

"Perhaps," ventured Pomona, "perhaps we could adjourn for a day or two to consider this, uh, rather overwhelming amount of information. And then we might come up with a reasonable course of action."

Minerva didn't look like she wanted to be reasonable.

"I concur," said Poppy, quickly.

"Very well, very *well*." Minerva stood. "As that part of the meeting was not officially recorded, Filius, I am not accepting that at this time." She eyed his resignation notice, untouched in the middle of the table. "You may wish to reflect and reconsider once we decide on a course."

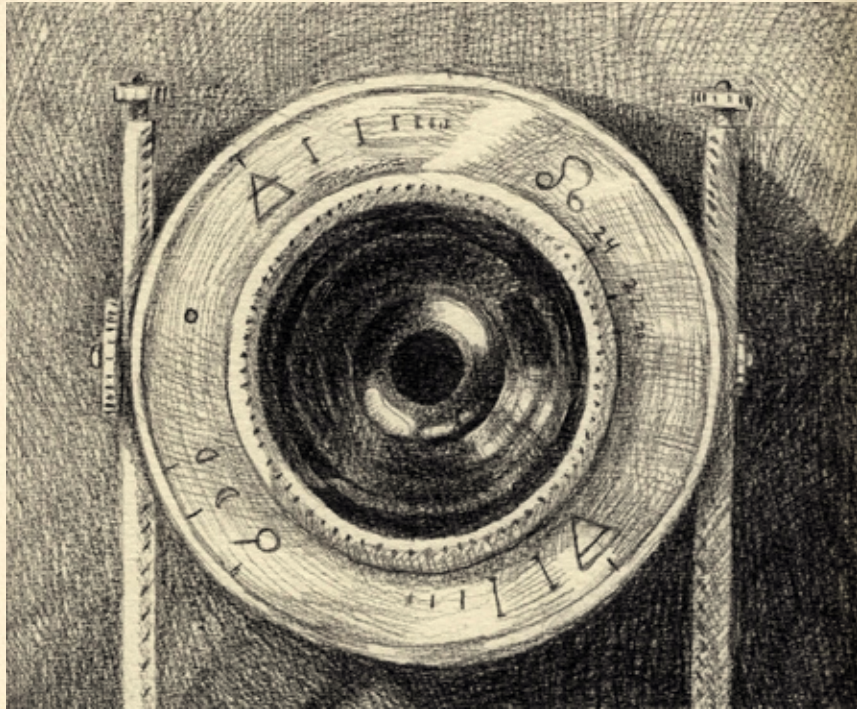
I very much doubted she would extend that same courtesy to Bulstrode.

"We will adjourn until further notice."

Everyone was getting up now. I didn't want to speak to any of them at the moment. I headed for the door. Somehow Filius was at my elbow, trying to shuffle his parchments into some sort of order.

"Severus," he said in a low voice. "I am so sorry. But I really must advise you to get out."

Fine, that would be fine. I headed out the door.



Art by Mottsnave

NOTHING

Bulstrode was waiting for me halfway down the east corridor.

“Sir,” she hissed at me. Her eyes glittered with anger. Why was she still here? It didn’t seem like her to stick around when she had already made a dramatic exit. Hanging about in the corridor pulled the rug out from under it a bit.

“I need – ” she began, but her timing was off. Minerva wasn’t far behind me and her anger was as fresh as Bulstrode’s.

Chapter 24 of **THE GOOD FRIEND**

BY MOTTSSNAVE

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“Miss Bulstrode. I was under the impression that you are no longer employed here.”

“I’ve given my notice. I’m getting my things.”

“I don’t see any of your *things* in the corridor.”

Bulstrode gave me an intent look, then walked away without another word. Of course. She had to get her things.

“Severus.” Now Minerva was making an effort to mask her anger. “I hope you – ”

“Excuse me, Minerva.” I didn’t want her trying to manage me, just then, and I very much didn’t want to stand around in corridors chatting, when something was pulling at me a few floors below. What I wanted to do was take Filius’ advice and get out, but there was the look that Bulstrode had given me.

“I have to think.” It would do for a lie. Why change the tenor of our relationship now?

Minerva looked at me, not quite believing, but she didn’t challenge me directly.

“*Think*, then.” She swept away.

Finally. Now, where would Bulstrode’s *things* be?

I found her in the administrative offices in front of the secretaries’ Floo, whispering furiously into the connection. Theo Nott was standing nearby, looking uninterested, as usual, and brushing ash off his trousers. Bulstrode glanced at me, to make sure I wasn’t Minerva, I supposed, then turned back to the hearth.

“You’ve been droning on and on about that camera, and now you ‘need a minute’? Get it *now*, Lovegood, if you want an exclusive.”

“I was just – ” answered the infuriatingly vague voice I remembered.

“*Now*, or should I call the Prophet instead?”

The Prophet? What did Bulstrode think she was doing?

“But they don’t have a spirit camera,” said Lovegood, her voice muffled as she stretched the connection. “I was just using it on some bog lights and they came out *beautifully*.”

“Come *through*, or you can sod off!”

“If you want me to bring my camera, I do have to pick it up first.” She finally sounded a bit focused.

Bulstrode gave a frustrated grunt.

"You in, sir?" asked Nott. He was idly flipping through a mass of papers on one of the desks.

In? Up to my ears as usual, I supposed.

"Do you have a brilliant and carefully-laid plan, Bulstrode?" I asked. She gave another grunt and didn't bother looking my way.

"She's become very high-handed since you've been gone, sir," said Nott.

"So, she's one of us, is she?"

Lovegood was coming through now, hefting a very unlikely box-like contraption with several lenses all held together with rods and screws. I had a feeling that Bulstrode's plan might be half-baked.

"Lovegood, what do you need to get a shot with that thing?" she asked.

"Oh... just a minute to get the legs set up and adjust the focus. And to put the plates in. And expose them. It just takes a minute."

"Ten minutes," said Bulstrode briskly. She turned to me. "How long can you hold him, sir?"

It slipped into focus then, her plan. "Oh, I'm to be the goat, then?"

"I don't see any other goats here, sir," said Bulstrode without a trace of sympathy. She was giving the assignments now, and calling in the debts, all of them.

"I've spoken to him for longer than that, before." Perhaps I was reassuring myself. It didn't look like I was backing out now.

So we were going to destroy it all, bring the whole rotten heap down. Well, wasn't that the Slytherin way? And didn't I always wreck everything I touched? No sense trying to change course now.

Lovegood was adjusting some complicated strap system on the camera. "Professor Snape? I didn't know you were alive. Did you get out by being an animagus?"

"What?"

"Your goat form. I suppose it would let you slip away unnoticed."

I stared at her. "Yes. That's exactly right. I've turned into a goat."

She beamed at me. "I love goats! Did you know that goats –"

"Shut up, Lovegood, we're going," snapped Bulstrode.

They had me walk first, as the only one who Minerva wouldn't

challenge on sight. I was to be the first into the Great Hall too, as Lovegood wouldn't know where to set the camera for the best shot until *he* appeared.

When we came to the West courtyard stair, I could hear some of the staff above, it sounded like a heated discussion. They were coming down.

I took two quick paces back into the corridor and waved my hand back at the others. "Are we –" began Lovegood, but Theo turned his wand on her and her eyes went wide.

"Quiet now," he whispered.

Bulstrode was already turning back to the nearest cross-corridor. She tugged on Lovegood's sleeve. We hurried to the rear service stair and down one floor as the voices began to fade behind us.

"This won't get us anywhere, Bulstrode," I whispered.

"Yes it *will*. We can cut through the kitchens and come up into the Great Hall from the service corridor."

"Not that way, Bulstrode."

She didn't stop walking, herding Lovegood ahead of her. "It will get us –"

"No, I can't."

She gave me a look.

"There's... a house elf who would like to kill me."

"Oh, that's nice," said Lovegood, "I didn't know they had it in them."

Bulstrode ignored her. "Look, sir, we're going through. He would never manage it, but if Kob tries anything I'll crack his little skull."

"Or, he might just raise the alarm with Minerva."

That stopped her. "Oh, bollocks."

Lovegood set down her contraption and was rooting for something in her pocket.

"You go through the kitchens," I told her. "I'll go up by the courtyard stair and meet you in the cloak room off the main entrance. Minerva won't stop me."

Nott nodded. "Go on, then."

"But –" Bulstrode began.

"Don't worry, Mil, he's in with us. He won't duck out."

"All right," she said grudgingly. "Cloak room."

Lovegood picked up her camera and they headed on to the kitchen portrait door. I went back to the service stair and up, but I paused before I came out on the landing at the administrative offices level. There were voices above again.

"She's not there, Pomona, she's gone already, and it's my fault –"

"No, Minerva, there were two of you in that argument." They were heading up and back towards the West stair.

"I *knew* it was a mistake the moment I said it. And just another reminder to him too, of how he was thrown out –"

"*Stop*, that's no way to go on. You and I, we'll have a cup of tea and a talk –"

They were well away now. I hurried on. I'd have to take the long way up to the main entrance. When I finally came up, I saw that Bulstrode and the rest had beat me, but they hadn't made it to the cloakroom. No, they had been joined by Potter and Longbottom before they could make it across the entrance hall. Dear lord.

Longbottom was addressing Bulstrode. "I got Luna's call that something was up." He brandished a small gold coin. *Those damn galleons.*

"And so we thought perhaps – oh, good!"

Hell, he had seen me.

Lovegood looked excited. Bulstrode and Nott looked miserable.

"We were just about to –" Lovegood began.

"Be on our way," finished Nott. He had his hand behind her and I suspected his wand was at her back. In any case she didn't continue.

"Look, sir, we just wanted..." Potter began.

"I don't have time to chat, Potter," I snapped. But they were going to be trouble, I recognized the dogged looks. Stubborn fools, but of all the fools, there was none more stubborn than Bulstrode.

"You two can sod off; you will *not* get in my way," she said. She yanked Lovegood around by the elbow and headed towards the service corridor. *Idiot*, now they would be sure to come. "Be look-outs or something," she called back as she swept past.

Nott and I caught up quickly. I could hear Potter's voice behind

us. "Look out for what?" They were *not* sodding off. Sending hexes would only raise the alarm.

"For a... we're setting a trap," said Nott lamely.

"But –" said Potter.

"And we need a lookout in the East service corridor –"

"A trap for what?"

"There's a... fugitive Death Eater... and he's after Snape..."

"*What?*" said Potter.

I could see Bulstrode up ahead working on the locking charm Minerva had put on the doors of the Great Hall. She must have already ferreted out the passwords.

Nott was nattering on, digging us a fine hole. "And we're setting a trap... but we need a lookout, it's the most dangerous position –"

"But –"

"Thank goodness you came! Now we've got an Auror-in-training –"

Bulstrode had the doors open and was hustling Lovegood through.

"So you two stay here and give a shout if you see anything." Nott whipped the door shut behind us.

"Do you think they bought it, sir?" he whispered. I glared at him.

"Uh... I'll seal the door."

Bulstrode and Lovegood were crowded next to us, no one wanting to step out across the hall. There was another figure with us in the hall, I realized. The Baron was leaning against the wall, watching us disinterestedly from his post. I gave him a nod and he shimmered out. As yet, the hall was empty.

"Nott, if it comes to it, you'll drag him out," Bulstrode said.

"Sure," said Nott. He was finishing the locking spell. Very reassuring.

"Lovegood, get those legs set and I'll help you carry it." Bulstrode was speaking in a hushed voice. We all were.

"Where was he last, sir?"

I looked out at the cavernous space. Still empty.

"Center aisle. About three-quarters across."

Lovegood was extending three long metal legs from the box.

"We'll flank him. Lovegood, ready?"

Always have to be ready.

Spoken to him before, and worse, for longer.

Forgot to bring my bank balance.

They were waiting. I stepped out into the center aisle and started across.

You'll do what you always do; find the script and feed him the answers he wants...

He wasn't there, and then he was, just the same. Or was Filius right and it wasn't him at all? White face in the dimness, mouth opening. I couldn't think...

"Severus, my friend, I knew you would return to me."

"Yes, my lord."

That was the script, wasn't it? And then he would say –

"Severus, stand before me."

I was dimly aware of the frozen forms of Bulstrode and Lovegood off to the side. Damn them, they needed to start taking pictures. I took a step forward.

"Come to me."

I felt for the edge of the table next to me and held on. He hadn't said to kneel. He hadn't the last time either, in fact. In fact it was just the same words, just the same.

"Turn to me."

Why would it be the same?

"Severus, do you know the penalty for one who turns against me?"

He knew, of course he knew now. And I knew too, of course.

"Yes, my lord."

The smile.

Yes, why not? I felt if there had been one noise from those idiots behind me I would collapse in tears or laughter, and why not, after all. I had forgot to bring my bank balance, so there wasn't much else in the way of going off the script.

"It is death, my lord, that's why I arranged to have you killed."

Nott made some choking noise behind me.

"Turn against me," he said calmly.

"You betrayed me, and I had you killed." I said. I felt like I was seeing the Great Hall from a very long way off. Bulstrode holding the legs of the... thing... Lovegood leaning over it and flipping a lever.

"Turn against me," he said.

"We've been over this, do try to keep up," I said.

"Severus, my friend..."

Was I dreaming? Could I finally tell him? "You broke every promise, you used all of us, you *preyed* on us..." I was short of breath, but I had to tell him.

"I knew you would return to me."

What?

"You fucking nutter."

"Severus, stand before me."

I felt giddy. We were turning in circles.

"Come to me."

"Lovegood, does that thing get sound?" I looked away from him, and the hall came back into sharp focus. Lovegood was shaking her head at me. Bulstrode was staring in shock

"Turn to me."

I could say anything I wanted, but it was all nonsense and nothing.

"Why don't you sod off?" I asked him.

"Severus, do you know..."

"The penalty for one who turns against me?" I asked.

"The penalty for one who turns against me?" he asked.

I could finally tell him the truth. I could tell him anything I wanted, I could tell him over and over again, and he would never hear me. Now that I wanted to tell him, I couldn't. I was speaking to thin air, to nothing, and none of it mattered.


I sat at the table and put my face in my hands. I didn't want to look at that thing anymore. It was nothing, it was all nothing. "Tell me when you're done," I said to everyone. I didn't want to play anymore.

There were some metallic noises from Lovegood's thing, and then Nott was taking my elbow. "Come on," he whispered. I let him pull me around and back towards the door. Somewhere behind us, no doubt, nothing was fading back into nothing.

I shook off Nott's arm. "It's all right, it's not him."

"What?"

"He wouldn't have answered me like that. He didn't think like that.

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Filius was right; it's something else."

Lovegood and Bulstrode had the contraction hoisted between them.

"Anyway, sir, anyway, let's go."

Perhaps I shouldn't have shaken off his arm. Nott looked like he could use the contact.

I got the door open and Bulstrode and Lovegood piled through. Nott and I almost ran straight into them. They had stopped dead in the corridor. Longbottom and Potter were standing rather

shamefaced in front of Minerva and Pomona. Fine lookouts they were.

Minerva cast a weary glance at us. "All done, are you?"

She turned her gaze back on Potter. She looked...

"Mr. Potter, Mr. Longbottom, I wouldn't expect to find you two involved in a plot to destroy the school."

"No, we... what?"

"Didn't they tell you? Typical." Her voice cracked a bit at the end.

Bulstrode's anger was building again. "Think I'm going to sit by and let the kids get exposed to *that*?"

"No, Miss Bulstrode! And if you'd just stop and listen, you'd know that I don't want that either!" Minerva said. Pomona was holding her elbow. "I would take this place apart and rebuild it stone by stone if that's what it took."

She had been crying, I realized, and she was trying hard not to start crying again. *Minerva, crying.*

"But there has to be another way than to just rush in and destroy everything," she went on.

Wreck everything you touch.

"Can we please not destroy everything?" Minerva said, almost pleading. *Minerva, pleading.*

"Yes," I said.

"No," Bulstrode said.

Pomona gave Minerva's arm a pat. "Minerva is right. We've been

discussing it. We can't do this anymore, when a crisis comes and we all rush off our own way. If Filius' research is right, this thing, it's been working on all of us and it comes out in the worst of all our Houses. Ravenclaw floating along with its head in the clouds, and us hiding down in our den, and you two going at it hammer and tongs. We must be better than that. If we really can't come together and *work* together for a change, it will destroy all of us."

Minerva had got hold of herself again. "And Miss Bulstrode, don't, *please* don't quit on me. Don't you understand that I need you here? You are holding your House together, with precious little help, and I know that's the hardest thing just now. But they need you too, and if Slytherin falls apart, we will all fall apart. Please don't leave us. Please help us, instead."

Bulstrode regarded her in silence.

"I'm not, I'm not kicking you out. I can't make that mistake again. One of the worst I ever made."

She turned on me. "And Severus, I did the same to you, I turned on you and attacked you. And since you've been back, you've hardly said one word about it, so I know how much that hurt you. But I wish you would, because we can't speak for five minutes without fighting, and if we can't come together now... I'm so frightened about what will happen to all of us. We can't keep doing the same things over and over, it will never work, never." Minerva couldn't hold her voice steady.

"Yeah, all right then," said Bulstrode resigned, "but I'm keeping the photos in case."

"Uh, photos?" asked Longbottom.

"Oh, yes, I think they'll come out *beautifully*," said Lovegood. "We've been taking spirit photos of Voldemort's ghost."

"*WHAT?*" said Potter.

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THE PLAN

“Because, Potter, it’s *not* his ghost.”

We had adjourned to the Hog’s Head. Filius had met our little group in the school entrance hall and strongly suggested we would be better off discussing things ‘away from this place and its influence,’ and there wasn’t any dissent. Hagrid, Hooch, Poppy, and Sinistra joined us as we crossed the grounds to the service gate. Aberforth had taken one look at us dragging in and said, “back room.” Hagrid, bless him, bought the first round as we settled in at the various tables. Hooch was trying to get a food order together.

“How do you know?” Potter demanded.

“Because I went off script and he didn’t.”

“What?”

I sighed. “I always had to be ready, *always*, for anything he could ask me. Whenever I spoke to him, I was always on script. I decided to try going off the script. He asked me if I knew the penalty for one who turns against him, and I said yes, that’s why I’d had him killed –

“You –”

“Which I *did*, but he didn’t react at all, and as you can imagine, that’s not like him.”

“That’s your proof, it wasn’t like him?”

Oh, a couple years of Auror training, and *now* he was interested in proof?

“It was *very much* not like him. And further, no matter how I went off the script, he just kept going around in circles. And when I looked at him, he wasn’t there. There was nothing there. It was just like, a, a little loop.” A snake eating its own tail.

Filius was listening to us intently from across the table. “Severus,

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do you think I could be correct that it’s a fragment from the Source? That it’s trying to communicate through the words of the last, ah, *thing* it was attached to?”

“It’s possible. Whatever it is, it’s certainly not him. Though if it is only the Source, that doesn’t explain why it’s appearing to me in particular.”

Filius looked skeptically at his pint, then sipped at it carefully. “Well, if the Source was particularly well attached to Voldemort, and his last thoughts may have been, ah, directed towards you in some way, that might have set you up as a trigger.”

Potter looked down quickly at his glass.

At the table just to my right, Longbottom had cornered Nott, who was working on his pint and trying to look bored. “So, you were one of Snape’s eyes?”

“His what?”

“You *know*.”

“No, I don’t think I do,” said Nott innocently.

“What exactly did it say to you?” asked Filius.

I tried to separate his words from the memory of his face and voice. “It calls me its friend, and says it knew I would return. It says to come to it, to turn to it.” I took a drink. I could have done with something stronger. “It, it asks if I know the penalty for one who turns against it. Then it just starts repeating itself. ‘Turn against me.’”

“That’s... well, I can’t say it’s what I was expecting. I mean based on the historic dreams and visions experienced by others.”

“It wants something, but I’m not sure what.” *Why would it call me its friend and tell me to turn against it?*

“It leaves us with the same problem,” said Filius. “Short of closing the school, what do we do about it?”

Longbottom pressed on at Nott. “You know, helping Snape and Bulstrode keep students away from the Carrows.”

“I’m not a traitor.”

“But you were helping him, just now.”

“I dropped by to pick up my transcript. Just wanted to see what all the fuss was about.”

“Hmm.”

Lovegood was sliding into the seat next to Filius. "Professor, from what Millie told me, it sounds like there's a dementor swarm under the school that's planting ideas in students' heads. Is that right?"

Millie?

"On a symbolic level, you could be quite close, Luna," said Filius. If he was encouraging her delusions that would explain a great deal.

Hagrid tromped over and set another brace of pints on the table, then squeezed Potter's shoulder. He winced.

"Good to see yer, Harry! Yeh don't get up to the school much. How's yer trainin'? Are Ron and Hermione still off honeymoonin'?"

Dear lord, they probably deserved each other.

"Filius," I said, "this cycle the Source is playing out. How would you describe it? A period of dormancy, then some sort of trigger, such as a suitable personality becoming available, and if they follow through, then a sacrifice, a metamorphosis – you called it 'becoming beastly'? And then a period of dormancy again."

"As a general description, yes."

"Did yeh get yer pint, Minerva?" bellowed Hagrid across the room. "Look like yeh could use one." I saw Minerva wince.

"Like lycanthropy," I said. I traced a circle on the tabletop in the little pool of condensation that had dripped from my pint glass.

Filius considered. "There is no mention of werewolves connected with the incidents I've been investigating, but if you are referring to a symbolic affiliation, yes, I could see the pain and burden of the condition as the sacrifice, and then the transformation, becoming a violent beast. Yes, it is much like that."

"And you think the cycle is compressing?"

"A cycle?" said Potter. "But it's over, it's all over, we're all right now!"

"Of course, Harry," said Hagrid, "but we've still got that problem of all the dark wizards comin' out of Slytherin."

He *would* see it that way. Trelawney was weaving her way between the tables. "Yes, there is a dark force rising, I have seen it!" When had she caught up with us? And how had she managed to get pissed already? This might be a record, even for her.

Longbottom was making another go at Nott. "No, you were

helping him today. And you were helping him then too, I *know* it."

"You don't know anything."

Neville dropped his voice. "Back when we were setting up the resistance, I saw you a few of times, round a corner, down a hall. You never *seemed* to notice us."

"Yeah, I didn't."

"And there was the time the Carrows almost got us, except that we could hear you talking to them very loudly as they came up the stair. I've never heard you talk loudly before."

"Amycus always was a bit deaf in his right ear."

"Ok, you're right, I don't know anything, particularly why your eyes are so dead set against getting thanked," said Longbottom.

"Oh, *thanked*, is it?"

"Yes, that's all!"

Nott sighed. "No, that would not be all."

"Look, I'm not going to publicize anything against your will. I'm just sitting in front of you, Nott, trying to thank you."

Nott rubbed his forehead. "You know my dad's in Azkaban."

"Yeah, uh... "

"All right, listen up," he leaned in close to Longbottom. "I might hate that sodding bastard, but I'd still rather he *not* get stabbed as a traitor in prison on *my* account. *Do you understand me?*"

"Oh."

"*Oh*. So you have *nothing* to thank me for, right?"

Longbottom paused. "All right. So, uh... thanks for nothing, Nott."

"Yeah. All right."

"Uh, if you ever don't need anything, make sure not to call on me."

"Won't."

As if a Slytherin would ever go to an outsider and openly ask for help. Or else would we just speak in opposites and hope that someone could read between the lines? "Filius, what if we do complete the cycle?"

"You cannot be suggesting – "

"Not like that, symbolically."

"What do you mean?"

Bulstrode joined Nott at his table with her own pint. "Piss off,

Longbottom.” Her expression was still stony.

“You were going to pose a question to us at the meeting. All right Filius, I’ll answer it. Yes, I’ve had those dreams. If I tried to tell you all the dreams I’ve had of a black bottomless hole and a white thing rising up... and I know I’m not the only one. It’s talking to us, Filius, the only way it knows how. And we understand what it’s saying. It’s a bottomless hole, and it needs to be fed. And some of us... many of us choose the wrong way to feed it. We need to try feeding it the right way.”

“But the danger, the *danger*, Severus, is reinforcing the cycle and making it more powerful. You are so close to its influence, so you see feeding it as a solution, but that is not the only way. We could not feed it at all. Shut down the school and the Source.”

Close to its influence. It could have been feeding me ideas for years, for most of my life. But what of the others? There were many that had been at the school longer than I had. And a headmaster had special access to the Source room. And wasn’t it the headmaster who came up with all the plans, all those merciless, impossible plans? The ones that required that I let the students of my House come under Voldemort’s influence without opposition, in order to keep my cover? I found I was breathing hard.

“Severus?” Filius was looking at me with concern.

And hadn’t I agreed to those plans?

“Right, and what if it’s not the Source, Filius, what if the black hole is in us? What if we’re the ones that influenced *it*? That we’ve been sorted that way because of the flaw in us? That what it wants and what we give it are two different things, and all we’ve been giving it is death?”

“Oh, come now.”

“No, I mean it. It’s Frazier’s third principle. The caster may affect the spell and the spell the caster. We could have influenced it as much as it us. To destroy it and leave is no solution. If you are correct, the cycle has been reinforced in a destructive way for centuries. You talk about sacrifice and metamorphosis, but those are not inherently destructive. You said it yourself; water can stand for rebirth – ”

“ – But if we start to feed it and it becomes more destructive – ”

“Filius, you are familiar with Paracelsus, yes? ‘Poison is in every-

thing and no thing is without poison.”

“ – It is the dosage that makes it either a poison or a medicine,” Filius completed.

“How can poison be medicine?” asked Potter.

Filius addressed me. “In theory, in theory, yes, I agree. But it’s been poison for centuries.”

“I don’t think it wants to be. I think it’s been *made* into poison.”

“If that poem I found is any indication, it seems that it actively chose that role at first.”

“Does that really matter? If it wants to change now and we want to change it, why not try? I think it wants to be medicine. And why else would it be appearing and saying that it’s a friend, except that it’s asking for help? That it wants to turn... it keeps saying *turn*. For god’s sake, Filius, we’ve always been the House of medicine. Just look at our alchemical meaning; wasn’t it Abraham Eleazar* who said that Python is the ‘king of nature’ who will heal the whole world? But first, the poisonous body must be dismembered and the volatile spirit fixed. Nobody has even tried to fix the spirit. And this obsession with so-called purity. What if it doesn’t want to purify others but wants *itself* to be purified? So that it can be the thing that heals instead of destroys? But it’s been reversed, turned outwards, or turned inside-out. So let’s not make it poison for once, let’s make it medicine.”

He stared at me. “But how?”

“Very carefully.”

Filius didn’t look satisfied with my answer. Minerva sat at our table and leaned in. “Severus, Filius, I hope you have some ideas.” She still looked exhausted.

“Perhaps, but I need to think about it further,” I said.

“Well, please don’t take too long. When I think about that *thing* in there – ”

“He says it’s not Voldemort’s ghost,” Potter broke in.

“Whatever it is, I can’t have it.” She leaned in closer to me. “Look, I’m worried about Bulstrode. I don’t want to leave things as they are, but I don’t think she’s up to any more meetings and she certainly

*Paracelsus was a Swiss alchemist of the 14–1500s, and Abraham Eleazar wrote the alchemical text *Uraltes Chymisches Werk* in 1760.

doesn't want to talk to *me* at the moment. Will you talk to her?"

"Yes."

"And Filius, I just can't think of taking your resignation before we try every avenue –"

"Resignation!" said Potter.

"Mr. Potter," said Minerva, "why don't you come with me for a moment, I believe I can clarify some things for you." She ushered him out, finally, Longbottom hurrying behind.

Filius stood as well. "Whatever our course, Severus, as you said, we will have to proceed very carefully."

The back room was clearing out now. Lovegood stopped at Bulstrode and Nott's table on her way out. "Are we still on for dinner at your aunt's on Friday, Millie?" she asked.

Bulstrode grunted and didn't look up. "Have to see how the pictures come out."

"Oh, yes, I'll bring them along." She maneuvered her contraption out the door.

Nott was staring at Bulstrode. "*Millie?*"

"What."

"*Really?*" He had a bemused look on his face.

"Piss off, Nott."

"Oh, come on, Mil."

"Piss. Off."

He sighed. "Be seeing you, Mil. All right?"

She didn't answer. Nott gave me a nod as he left. I took his seat at the table. Trelawney was the last to go, collecting someone's half-finished pint as she wove her way out the door.

We sat with our empty pints and empty table and empty room.

"*You* can piss right off, too." She wasn't looking at me.

"I could."

"Been handling it all alone since you've been gone."

"Yes."

"And if I delegate any of it to the others, they need *managing*."

"Oh, yes."

"Sluggy needs the most managing."

She wasn't wrong.

"And there's all the talk."

I nodded.

"And now there's something been *gnawing* at us all this time."

"Yes."

She paused. "Get *tired* sometimes."

"Yes."

She wiped her nose on a stray serviette.

"You got some rubbish plan, then?"

"Yes."

"Well, why don't you piss off and get on with it?"

"*We* are going to need to lay the groundwork first, Bulstrode."

"Oh, bollocks."

"And for that, I'll need a contract."

"Fine. I'll get Sully."

A few minutes later she was talking at him through the floor, using her most delicate persuasion.

"Come *through*, Sully, or I'll bash your precious little skull in."

"Threats like that *are* legally actionable, Bulstrode."

"Don't you want to earn a fee?"

"Well, certainly, but I'm –"

"Then come *through*, or should we get that swot Granger?"

"Oh, lord no, she'd leave all sorts of loopholes – I'll get my case."

A few minutes later I had sealed the door and Sully was through and laying out forms and quills and inkwells on one of the tables between the empty pints.

"Now, sir, my rate for contracts is forty galleons per hour with a one-hour billing minimum and one-hour increments. There is a rush job surcharge of –"

He caught my look.

"– But that is entirely waived as a 'friends and family' courtesy," he finished smoothly. "Just a standard contract form?"

"No. Bulstrode, are you still sending acceptance letters?"

"Second quarter birthdays go out this week, sir."

"We want her to sign without reading it."

"Right," said Bulstrode, "letterhead, then."

Sully shrugged. "Certainly I can put it on letterhead." He drew out a form and started on the header. "The parties?"

"Myself and Minerva McGonagall in her capacity as Headmistress."

"And the terms?"

"I want the right to remove and use material from Hogwarts' Source without interference."

"For what uses?"

"For any uses."

"Sir, I can make the contract as broad as you wish, but vagueness doesn't protect you. If you can give me a starting point of what you need..."

"Very well. Extraction, research, development, licensing, distribution, and sale."

Sully was scribbling furiously. "By this contract, the undersigned grants Severus Snape, (hereafter 'Designee'), all rights pertaining to physical or magical materials of Hogwarts' Source, (hereafter 'the Source'), and their extraction, research, development, licensing, distribution, and sale, and any and all processes pertaining or necessary to the above, at the Designee's sole discretion."

I nodded.

"Now as to interference... I think, yes." He was writing again. "Access to and extraction of the Source will be aided and abetted by all Hogwarts' staff as required for the above purposes, to all extent allowed under their employment contracts with Hogwarts' School of etc." He paused. "We don't want to conflict with any existing contracts or you'll be tied up in the courts for simply ages. Now, what about transference?"

"Transference?"

"If you ever want to assign someone that role or sell the rights away."

"Yes."

"The above rights exist in perpetuity and are fully assignable and transferable at the discretion of the Designee, or his heirs or assigns. There! Now just a paragraph or two of definitions and tying up loopholes..." He was scribbling again. "And signature lines, date..."

"We only have one signature line on the acceptance letters, sir."

"Sully, if we start with her signature, which Bulstrode can witness,

can mine be added after the fact?"

"A bit irregular, but it shouldn't invalidate the contract. The first signatory does not need to witness subsequent signers. It would be best for the second signature to come as soon as possible after the first, and the same witness, of course."

"Of course."

"Now, when it's signed and complete, just call me to certify copies and record the original. My copy and recording rate is ten galleons per document – here, I'll write it on the back of my card."

"Not done yet, Sully, we need another contract," said Bulstrode.

We did?

"Oh, you do? Now then..." Sully pulled over another parchment.

"Snape's paying."

"Oh, I am?"

"If you want me as witness, you are."

"Go ahead, Sully." I said. I could see I had miscalculated with Bulstrode. I had expected her back on her old footing as head of my eyes, where I gave the orders and she followed them. But as she had just said, she had been managing on her own for years and she considered herself an equal now. I couldn't just order her to cooperate with my project. And then I had made the critical mistake of letting her see the terms of my contract before she had committed herself to help, so now she had leverage. And there she was, cracking her knuckles, preparing to pry.

Sully looked at Bulstrode.

"Between me and him. I'll be his witness, and I'll get the signature for him, but I want ten percent."

I sighed. "Ten percent of *what*, Bulstrode?"

"Of your proceeds from the Source. Distribution and sale, you said. So, you want my work on this? Ten percent."

It would be an insult to Bulstrode not to try to bargain. And ten percent was ridiculous.

"Your witnessing the signature is a minor component –"

"A crucial component."

"It is nowhere near ten percent of this project. One percent at most."

"Pfff. It's a hundred percent if you can't proceed without it."

THE SOURCE

Chapter 26 of **THE GOOD FRIEND**

BY MOTTSSNAVE

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Sully was sitting back and watching the bargaining with interest. "You imagine you are the only one who can get McGonagall to sign something without reading it?"

"I'm the best placed to do it anytime before term begins and you won't let this drag out that long. You want to move now."

"And you do not understand the scope of this project."

"Don't need to. You need me. McGonagall feels so guilty that she'll sign anything I put in front of her."

"In light of the aid you've given me in the past, I would give you three percent as a courtesy."

Bulstrode gave me a look. "If this goes tits up, you just walk away. I'm out of a job."

"A job you quit two hours ago."

"Headmistress begged me back. You remember, you were there. Eight percent."

"And didn't that just go to your head? Six percent."

"Gross."

"Net, you bint, or you'll be running into my other contracts."

Bulstrode smiled, there was a disconcerting sight. "Done."

"Get on with it, Sully," I said.

He got on with it, happily. While we were signing Bulstrode's little goldmine, Sully said, "oh, and sir, I'd like to collect those references from you at your earliest convenience. I've got my position at Farnsworth, Frobisher, Fotheringham, and Khan lined up, but it never hurts to have references ready."

"I have your card. I'll send them."

"Excellent! Make them glowing, sir! Now, the two contracts, copy and recording fee for the second, that will be ninety galleons, sir."

I sighed and went to get the pounds to galleons exchange rate from Aberforth. They were both looking quite smug when I returned to count out the stack of bills for Sully. They could probably tell that the footing had changed, they had bargained with me as equals.

"Before the next staff meeting, Bulstrode," I said shortly as I countersigned Sully's receipt.

"Of course, sir."

I had my own groundwork to lay over the next few days. I closed myself in Aberforth's spare room and churned out potion variant charts for my repeating process until drifts of parchment covered every flat surface. It helped that I had already been banging my head against the concept for the past few years, even though I had been failing miserably without an external source of power. Three days later I had two solid theoretical variants. Assuming the collection of the material was even possible. Assuming Minerva agreed.

Bulstrode had delivered the signed contract the day before, very smugly informing me that Minerva hadn't even glanced at it. Well, the only thing left was to present it to her and manage the fallout.

I found Minerva in the administrative offices. Bulstrode at her desk saw me first, and when she spotted the contract in my hand, she stood without a word and headed for the door. Minerva turned from the file cabinets. "Bulstrode? Oh, Severus! All to the good – I'm quite keen to hear your idea. You do have an idea?"

"Yes." She wouldn't be nearly so cheerful when she'd heard it.

"Here – " She summoned a chair and sat at Madam Malocchio's desk. I sat across from her and pushed the contract across the desk. "Your idea?" she said. Her lips thinned as she read. I was reminded forcefully of my last year as Headmaster.

"Oh, Severus, how *could* you?"

I didn't answer, just waited.

"Why didn't you just ask? You thought you had to trick, to, to *force* me – and I hoped we were beginning to..." She ran down.

"You are being forced into nothing. You are being tricked into

nothing. It is simply that I won't debate my terms with you."

"Your *terms!*"

"Yes. Those are my terms."

"Is this it, your revenge for us attacking you?"

I sighed. "Minerva, those would my terms no matter who was sitting across from me. That it's *you* is only responsible for the fact that I'm here at all."

"Don't try to tell me that it didn't matter to you! I *know* it hurt you and –"

"You, and the others – you thought that you were protecting the students. You thought you *had* to attack me. That you were put into that position was part of my choices, not yours. I knew my role and that it would destroy our friendship, but it had to be done. I just hoped that someday you would know."

"And I could hope that knowing would change something between us, but then you go and force me into signing *this!*" She waved the contract.

"I *arranged* for you to sign it –"

"And Bulstrode had a hand in it, no doubt, the way you two –"

"I arranged it," I said firmly, "because, Minerva, as you said, we can't seem to talk for five minutes without fighting. And I will *not* debate the terms. But you are not being forced into anything. That is the only copy of the contract. It hasn't been recorded yet. If you don't wish to proceed, you can burn it and we will both walk away."

"Walk away?"

"Yes."

She studied me. "You would walk away from this? You have a solution and you would withhold it?"

"*Absolutely.*"

"You –"

"I have no debts to this place, Minerva. I may have my debts to my students and my friends, but not to this place. Anything on that score I paid long ago. If it weren't you in that chair, I wouldn't be here at all. I will not work for Hogwarts again, except on my terms. And I will never work for *anyone* again without looking after me and mine."

Her look softened. "Severus, I wouldn't have forced you into doing anything you didn't want to, I didn't mean that."

"I didn't believe you would, but your intentions, or mine, are beside the point. *Those,*" I said, tapping the contract, "are my terms."

"If you are serious, this contract, it's about removing materials from the Source. It could destroy the school! The whole building could come down around our ears!"

"It could. You said yourself that you would tear this place down and rebuild it stone by stone if that's what it took. But if you decide to burn the contract, you always have Bulstrode's solution."

"Bulstrode's solution is to destroy the school through bad publicity or blackmailing the governors."

"Yes. She does get destructive when her blood is up."

"The governors would have my head," she muttered. She was rereading the terms of the contract. She was wavering now.

"Tell them I held you at wandpoint."

She snorted. "They would believe it." She placed the contract back on the desk, exactly between us. "Do you really think that removing the Source from the school will work? And how on earth would we replace it?"

"No, I don't believe we need to remove the Source, only a small amount of the water element. We are not going to replace it, we are going to heal it."

"You think it can be done?"

"I hope it can."

She sighed. "I must be a fool."

Minerva insisted we consult with Filius before moving forward. "He has done more research on the Source and the founding of Hogwarts than anyone else. And you haven't exactly explained how we may safely remove a portion of the magical core of Hogwarts."

Well, no I hadn't.

I was a bit surprised that Filius was still on the grounds, what with his intended resignation and all his talk of the Source's influence, but Minerva said he was still compiling his research in his

office. We traipsed up together. As usual, Filius' office door was open. Inside, we could see him organizing stacks of parchments on his drafting table, sorting them into files to be packed away.

"Filius, Severus has a proposal of how we might correct the Source."

I began unrolling my variant charts, Filius hastily clearing his drafting table from the other end as I went.

"As we discussed, Filius, you believe that the Source is engaged in a destructive cycle and has been for centuries. Rather than attempt to interrupt or stop the cycle, I believe we can redirect it to constructive purposes. I think we can reverse it. As you know, by Frazier's first principle, the part may stand for the whole and a symbol for an object. If we extract a part of the Source material – some of the water from the spring – and use it in a healing potion, that part along with the symbol of the healing potion, may affect the whole Source."

Filius was looking over the variant charts. "The theory is sound, but I see two main issues. The first is the extraction itself, which I'll come back to in a moment, but my main question is: is this enough?"

"Enough?"

"A single instance of healing to offset a single destructive act? Certainly. But this is centuries of destruction."

"It will not be a single instance of healing. Once it's tested and distributed, it will be thousands of instances of healing, monthly and ongoing for the foreseeable future."

Filius picked up the chart of the variant I was describing. My altered Wolfsbane, with the delay process added, and now with the repeat process that had been eluding me for years. He frowned over the formula.

"It's taken once, then it remains dormant in the body until it's needed? I saw the announcement of the Paracelsus award for the new delay process, but surely it's under patent."

"The patent holder will not give us any trouble." Well, not any more than I usually did.

"And you theorize that through the addition of this material from the Source, it will renew itself and continue to recur every month."

"Yes, the water will be added to the potion at the catalyst stage. The

Source is extremely powerful, and by the cycle you described, it's already carrying out similar actions. It is extremely well-suited to this symbolic purpose. And most importantly, I believe this is what it *wants*."

Filius put the paper down carefully. "This is essentially a permanent cure for lycanthropy."

"Well, a permanent treatment, yes."

"*What?*" Minerva whisked the paper up from the table.

Filius took no notice and pulled my other variant chart forward. "And this, Severus?"

"I think we should test the plan immediately. The other formula will need several days to brew and it's over two weeks till the full moon, even if we were able to quickly find volunteers and be cleared for testing. First we will need to test if the principle is sound. For that – " I tapped my variant of Blood-Replenisher. "It seems that it already has a taste for blood, so we have a symbolic link. And testing this will be much more efficient."

Filius gave me a deeply suspicious look. He probably guessed how I planned to test it.

"Poppy can stand by," I said.

Filius looked at the page in silence for a few moments. "The theory may be sound, but however we may guess at what the Source wants, we can't fully predict how it may react. Minerva, I can't guarantee it wouldn't destroy the Source or the school."

"Filius, if you don't have any other ideas yourself, I don't know what choice we have," said Minerva. "I'm not afraid to take the chance if the alternative is to give up or intentionally destroy the school."

"And the governors?"

"I'll face the governors. They can be presented with a *fait accompli*."

"Well, that leaves the practical issue of extraction. I can definitely tell you that if we don't proceed with the utmost caution, whether or not this theory will work will be a moot point. The whole place will come down. With us in the foundations."

"Us?" I asked.

"The Founders devised the Source very cleverly. Without all four elements being in perfect balance, Hogwarts will not stand. If we

are going to extract a portion of the water element, we will need to extract part of each of the rest as well. All together.”

“I’ll get Pomona,” said Minerva.

When we presented it to Pomona, to my surprise she was the most confident of us all. “Yes, of course. As long as we’re all together, it will work. Of course it will. I’ll get my trowel.”

“Your... trowel?” asked Minerva.

“Well, I’ll need something to get a bit of the Source, won’t I? My trowel will do.” She bustled off to the greenhouses.

“Now?” said Minerva faintly.

“Well, we had better evacuate first. And it wouldn’t be a bad idea to have Poppy stand by,” said Filius. “But yes, if we want to proceed with this plan, I believe we should do so immediately. The Source is only getting worse.”

While Minerva got Poppy on the Floo, I raided the potions’ stores for ingredients. I would need to be ready to brew as soon as we got the materials. *If* we got the materials.

There wasn’t any bloodroot in the stores; I didn’t think much of Horace’s inventory management. I would have to get it from the greenhouses. I found Pomona in greenhouse number three on her hands and knees, half-inside a cupboard under a potting bench, next to a growing pile of gardening tools.

“Bloodroot,” I said.

“Sanguinaria canadensis, yes, it’s very nice.” Her voice was muffled. She tossed a mulching fork and a weeder onto the pile.

“*Do you have any?*”

“Oh, I suppose. Near the ice anemones. You can go ahead – ” Her voice cut off abruptly. She shuffled backwards out of the cupboard, cobwebs festooning her hair. She was holding a battered garden trowel and looking determined. “No,” she said, very firmly.

“*Not* by the anemones?”

“No, I – no.”

“You don’t have any.”

“No, I do, but you can’t have it.”

I stared at her. She had never denied me ingredients. Not even

that last year.

“I want something.” It came out like a guilty confession.

“Are you trying to bargain?” I asked.

“I am bargaining. I want something first. Then you can have the bloodroot.”

I waited. “Well?” I said finally. She really wasn’t very good at this.

“Dr. Stoltz. I want Dr. Stoltz.”

“I don’t own him, Pomona.” She had never quite got over the fact that I knew an eminent herbologist better than she did.

“Get him to come here again. You can do that can’t you? And – ” Her eyes got a steely glint. I had only seen it a few times before, a badger sinking its teeth in. “Get me a visit to his lab.”

“What, now?”

“No!”

“He’s a busy man, Pomona.”

“At a time that’s convenient for him.”

I supposed I should counteroffer on principle, but neither of her demands cost me anything. “I will *ask* for you.”

“The bloodroot is next to the ice anemones.”

I could have just got it the first time she told me. I was still digging roots over in greenhouse four when I heard them tromping in. Hagrid had to duck and turn sideways to get through the greenhouse door.

“I don’ like it, Minerva.”

“I don’t suppose any of us like it, but it’s either this or close the school.”

That first part wasn’t strictly true; Bulstrode was coming in and it looked like she was enjoying herself immensely. Poppy and Filius behind her were not.

Poppy headed for Pomona. “I said I would consent, but only if there are some safeguards. Minerva told me you’ve been perfecting your conjuration of a Wayland Shield. Do you think you can cover all of us and hold it?”

“Yes, I can.”

“Well, then I want your word. If there’s any sign of collapse, you will cast it and hold it until *those two*,” she indicated Bulstrode and Hagrid dubiously, “can summon help.”

"I will. I can hold it," said Pomona confidently.

"Thank you, Poppy," said Minerva. "We'll use the greenhouses as our rendezvous point. Miss Bulstrode and Hagrid can clearly see the castle from here without being in immediate danger." She turned to them. "If you see any collapse, you will not enter the school, but summon help immediately. And Poppy, you will come with us in case of emergencies. After we extract the materials, we'll meet back here for the brewing. Filius believes that the closer proximity we keep the materials to the Source, the better," she explained to me.

It made sense. I left my ingredients on the potting bench with the bloodroot. Filius passed me a glass collecting jar. He had one himself, I saw.

"Well then," said Minerva, "if we are ready."

The stair twisted down into the foundations. Somehow the journey seemed longer than when I had come here with Draco. At least the thought of *his* ghost above wasn't weighing on me now. Now that I knew that it wasn't him... it only left the question of why it was appearing to me in particular. Well maybe when we had finally reached the room I could just ask it. The flippant thought fled immediately when I thought of any form of communication the Source might use to answer.

"It is essential that we all take our material at the same time," Filius was saying. "Since I can't, ah, collect the wind until it picks up, I suggest we all act on my cue. When you see me take one of the cloth strips, then each take your part. Poppy, as we must remain balanced, only us four as representatives of the elements, ah, Houses, should enter. We will exit together as soon as we each have our material, and then leave the building as quickly as possible."

We were entering the deep parts now, where the niter clung like ice to the walls and the faint sounds of water were around us. None of us replied to Filius. The deeper we got, the less inclined we were to speak.

At last we reached the door, the wood gleaming and new under Poppy's Lumos. The rest of us began dropping our spells. "Take care," Poppy whispered. Minerva opened the door.

The room was more still than the last time I had seen it, when the wind was running in circles. Now the pool was dead flat, dimly reflecting the scraps of cloth hanging from the dead branches of the tree above.

Pomona moved first, pulling out her trowel and crossing to the base of the rock. For the first time, I wondered how she could possibly get a piece of that enormous stone off with her flimsy garden tool. Too late to do anything about that now. Minerva was pulling out her taper and approaching one of the torches. I hastily unscrewed the lid of my jar and knelt at the edge of the pool.

I had never been so close to it before. So black, I couldn't see into it. So still, I couldn't imagine breaking the surface of that water. I was so close...

I tried to pull my eyes away, but I couldn't quite. It almost had

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me, once. Its glassy surface reflected the room in perfect detail, upside down. Filius was climbing up onto the stone, his reflection angling down into the pool. In the reflection, I could see one of the torches flicker. The wind was starting. Filius reached for one of the scraps of cloth. The wind came around the room and the surface of the pool broke into a shivering mass. I could see nothing but darkness. I dipped the jar down.

I was in another place.

I was floating down – or was it up? – away from myself. I could see a bright circle of light slowly dwindling away. I tried to reach for it, but my hands seemed very far off. They only twitched.

I wasn't breathing.

My neck arched back. Somewhere, far, far below me – or was it above? – there was a shape moving in a glimmering river. It was changing, wavering. It had a slow turning dance. I couldn't look away from it, it was the only thing, and always turning.

It wanted me and it had me and it had me before and hadn't I always wanted it too and had I ever really left it? It was always, always —

A narrow dark shape was obscuring my view. I tried to look around; I had to see the only thing, that beautiful thing. But the narrow shape was bent across it, at strange angles like a letter from another alphabet. The narrow shape bent, the angles turned, and I could see it was an arm, a hand.

There was a withered hand. It opened slowly, very slowly. Between the fingers I could see a small circle of light – or was it darkness? – like a coin. *Yes, it was mine, I had paid that already.* The circle grew larger and larger, swallowing up everything and –

Fingers dug into my shoulder. I took a breath with a gasp. Pomona was clutching my shoulder painfully tight. I was kneeling over the pool perfectly dry. My hands were gripping the jar, full of water. The surface of the pool moved. It was starting to roil from the center.

Minerva hurried to the door, lit taper in her hand. Filius jumped down off the stone, the scrap of white cloth in his jar fluttering like a moth. I fumbled to get the lid on my jar, hands shaking. Pomona pulled at my shoulder again. Her face was streaked with tears. She

held a large wedge of stone in her other hand. That trowel must be stronger than it looked.

I got to my feet. Minerva and Filius were struggling with the door. Couldn't they manage it? When Pomona and I reached their side, I could feel the focused blast of wind that was holding it closed. They heaved again and it opened a crack. I got one hand on the edge and pulled. Another inch. The wind beat at us. Minerva's flame barely clung to the wick of her taper. Pomona pushed in next to me and set her shoulder against the frame and shoved. The door sprang open. We staggered back as the wind swept past us out the door. It hit Poppy square and knocked her back. Her cry of surprise was drowned out by an enormous crash somewhere far above. We scrambled out, gripping our bits of the Source, and the door slammed behind us. We stood gasping as Minerva's flame steadied. Whatever the crash was above us, at least the building didn't appear to be coming down around us; everything was dead still again.

"What on earth – " Poppy began in a hushed voice. Minerva put out her hand to stop her. She had just noticed what I was looking at: the door wasn't new any longer. The fresh gleaming wood was now dried and cracked and yellowed.

"Get out," I said. No one needed any urging. Minerva started up the stairs, the warm light of the taper glinting on the niter. Poppy was ahead of me trying to cast Lumos. It wasn't taking. I could see her wand movement again and again. Something was very wrong. It wasn't getting any warmer as we ascended, our breaths still puffing white as Minerva led the way out the foundation door.

The corridor was pitch black. We gathered in the feeble glow of the taper. "I can't cast," Poppy said faintly. Filius tried his own Lumos while we watched. Nothing. I didn't feel any need to try myself.

"Well, at least it's not coming down, is it?" said Pomona. We all stood still, listening in the darkness. Dead silence.

"Perhaps not," said Filius, "but we need to get out as quickly as we can."

"Main stairs, said Minerva tightly.

When we got to the main stairs, we saw what had caused the

crash. The floating staircases were down, all of them, a wreck of splintered wood and rubble at the bottom of the stairwell. We could hardly take a step in, and just as well; a flight was resting on two others above us at a precarious angle.

“Oh, the governors...” Minerva muttered, holding her taper high to survey the wreckage. The governors weren’t important. I had just caught sight of the portraits. They were all dead, every one. An empty suit of armor was jumbled in a heap in one frame; another was ghastly blue and unmoving, eyes rolled back.

Filius was trying a levitation charm on the wreckage. Nothing.

There was a portrait of a skeleton, a mummified cadaver, and another nothing but small heap of ash and teeth. Just like Vincent.

“We need to find another way out,” I said quickly.

“Kitchens,” said Pomona, “we can go through and up the back stair. It’s not a floater.”

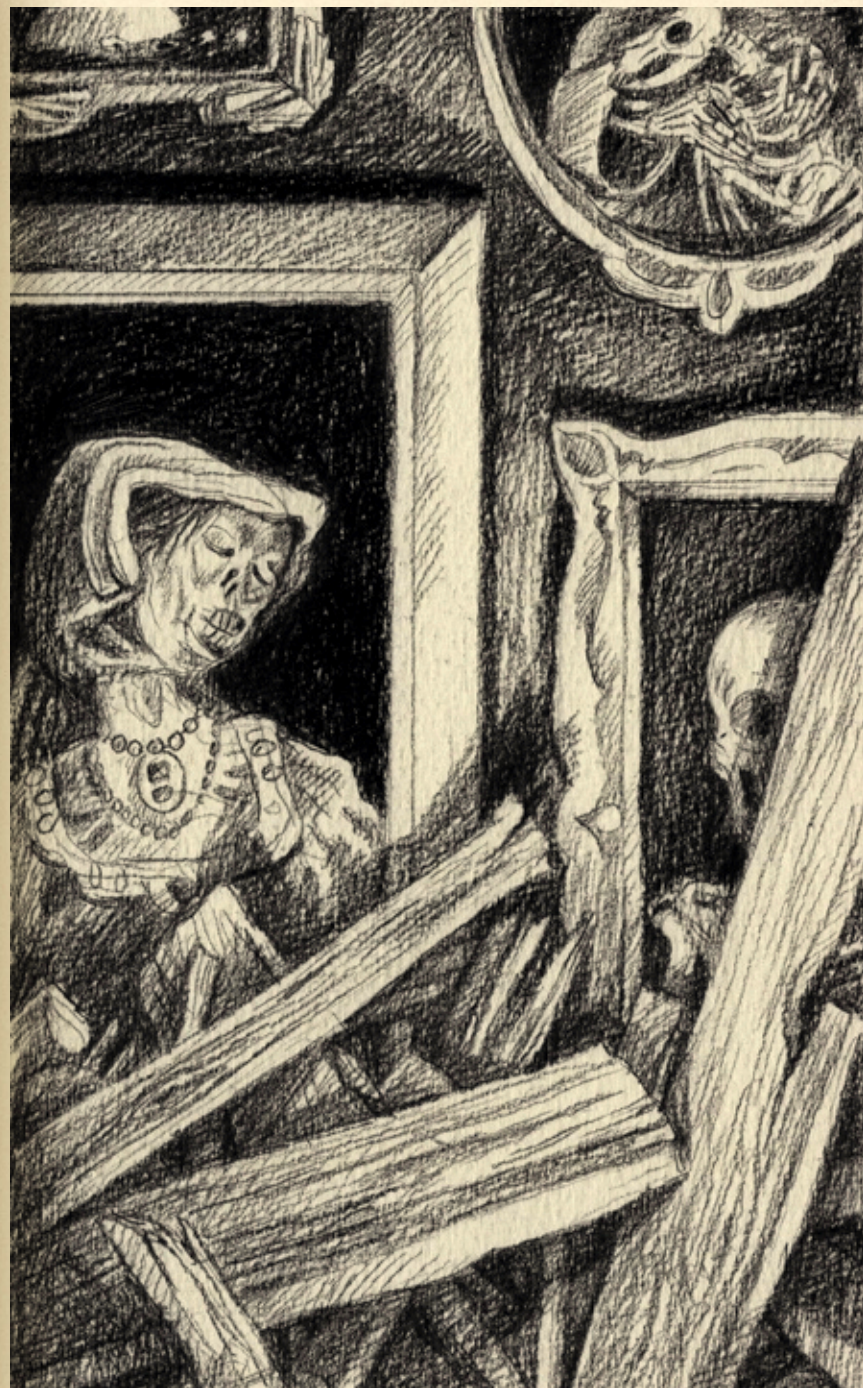
I winced, but Kob was hardly my greatest concern now.

“Yes, quite right,” said Minerva, gathering herself. The one light of her taper bobbed down the corridor and we followed. I brought up the rear in the darkness.

I had hoped, briefly, that the kitchen portrait would still be operational, but the painted fruit was now moldering, falling in on itself and collapsing in its own decay. At least a painting couldn’t stink. Minerva very reluctantly reached forward to try to tickle what had once been a pear. Part of the paint sloughed away in viscous slime. Minerva drew her finger back quickly in disgust. Poppy was trying to cast something. It wouldn’t work, of course.

I managed to get my brewing knife out of my pocket one-handed and sliced the canvas away from the frame, careful not to touch any of the former fruit. I kicked the oozing canvas away from the old wooden door that stood behind. There wasn’t any knob; it hadn’t needed one with the portrait. I stuck my knife in the crack between the door and the jamb and pried. I was probably ruining the point, but at last the door creaked open.

The kitchens were as dead black as the hallways. All the fires were out. Minerva’s candle lit something in the center of the floor, near



one of the prep tables. I had a bad feeling that the elves might be free.

Minerva pushed one of the shreds with her foot, then looked up sharply, holding the taper high. There was a flash of movement from the largest fireplace. The elves were there. Or rather, what had become of them. A mass of furry pelts heaved and shifted. Some of them were burrowing into the ash. I saw a long tufted tail whisk out of sight, a glint of very sharp teeth in the candlelight. They muttered and hissed. They were like nothing I'd ever seen, but at the same time they were incontrovertibly *themselves*, as if they had evolved backwards into some ice-age version of their forms.

A low growl started from behind one of the ovens. Minerva headed for the back stairs, the rest of us hard on her heels.

We came out rather breathlessly into the short service corridor behind the Great Hall. Here at least there was a little light from the narrow windows set in the wall above us. Minerva was already heading for the door to the East wing; we could get to the main entrance that way.

"Help me with this." There was a knife edge of panic in Minerva's voice.

We crowded in. The door was stone. Solid and grey and all of a piece with the frame. Ice cold to the touch; I pulled my fingers back quickly. Poppy was trying Alohomora. It wouldn't work, of course. Neither did Minerva's attempts at transfiguring it. My knife trick wouldn't work either.

"No, we need another way," I said.

"There's the Great Hall," said Filius. Minerva looked at me.

"Fine, I'll be fine. Let's get out of here."

All Minerva's seals and spells locking the doors were gone now, of course, they swung open easily at her touch.

The light of the taper didn't carry far in this vast space. And for some reason, the windows weren't helping. The sky had gone out. It was nothing falling into nothing forever. I looked away quickly from the dizzying blackness and hurried to catch up to Minerva's lonely light.

We were almost directly above the Source room here, I realized.

The air was dead still.

I had never thought of it before, but the Great Hall could be seen

as a reflection of the Source room below.

Our steps echoed in the vaults; we were picking our way carefully now.

All the elements were usually here, after all: sky, fire, stone... only water was missing. And no, we weren't quite directly above the Source room, not yet. That would be about three-quarters of the way across, just where he would appear to me and say, "Severus, my friend..."

I rushed forward to catch Minerva, but I was too late, I was always too late. It was welling up from the spot. Not *him*, but then again, it never had been. Water, a black column of it, rising and growing and building on itself. As tall as him, now taller.

Minerva had stopped dead, the others behind us. I took her by the shoulder and pulled her back. "Not this way," I whispered. The water roiled. Minerva began to back away. "This is what you want," I said to the water, stupidly, "this is you *winning*." It mounted higher, beginning to twist like a waterspout. Perhaps it wanted to go in circles forever. *Weren't you a healing spring, once?* I wanted to yell at it, but what was the use of that? How could it possibly understand something like words when all it knew was turning in circles and wrecking everything it touched? I had been so sure it wanted to heal, but it was resisting with all its might. No matter that it had been destroying us and itself for centuries; it didn't even want to lose one tiny part of its rotten, maladapted core. A snake eating its own tail, and all it wanted was one more swallow. And all it had to do to be free was *let go*.

"Can't you just let go?" It took no notice of me. It never let anything go, did it?

If it never let anything go, were they all still there, deep within it? And was part of me with them, too?

It was still growing. I backed away a few steps and turned to the others. By some unspoken agreement, we ran. I could hear a rushing noise building behind us.

Back in the service corridor, Poppy slammed the doors and leaned against them. "Did we just break Hogwarts?" she asked. Her eyes were wild.

THE REVERSE

Chapter 27 of **THE GOOD FRIEND**

BY MOTTSSNAVE

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"It's been broken as long as we've known it," Filius said with unexpected calm. "I'm more sure of that than ever."

"Fine idea of yours, Severus! Filius said you were sure it would cooperate!" Poppy gingerly released the door. It held.

"Yes, well, I thought it would be *intelligent* enough to act in its own self-interest." I aimed this at the jar in my hand. The water sat there wetly.

Minerva was holding her taper white-knuckled. Pomona stalked up and down the corridor in its wavering light.

"Of all the rotten, bloody, cunt, buggering –"

We all stared at her. If we ever got out of this alive, I was going to remem-

ber this for the rest of my life.

"– minging, sodding bollocks! – this is going to work! We *are* going to fix this!"

Pomona didn't pause in her pacing, but swerved and headed for the nearest window. She hurled her piece of the foundation stone and smashed it. Bits of lead and glittering shards of glass rained down. Clean air welled in from the early evening, summery and alive.

"Right, then," she said. "Leg up, Severus."

It wasn't nearly so simple. I had only one arm free, not being willing to put the jar down for even a moment, and Pomona wasn't any lighter than she looked. "Bloody hell, woman," I muttered as her heel dug into my collarbone and Poppy gave her a final shove in the arse to get her over the sill.

We all ended up scratched and bruised as we helped each other out, though we were getting off cheaply, at that. Poppy ended up being the most help, lifting Filius bodily through to the rest of us outside, then nearly dislocating my shoulder as she pulled herself out by my arm.

We were out.

It seemed almost unreal to be out in a balmy summer evening, swallows skimming over the fields and birdsong from the forbidden forest. Our spells were working again, as we found when Poppy began healing our cuts.

Pomona had retrieved her wedge of the Foundation stone from the mess of broken glass at the base of the wall. It seemed none the worse for wear. And strangely enough, as seen from the outside, Hogwarts seemed peaceful also. Well, perhaps it had always seemed that way, to those who didn't know it.

The illusion was shattered as we rounded the corner of the castle and came in view of the lake. The shallows at the far end were teeming and roiling with every form of life the lake held, all wanting to be as far from the Source as possible. I didn't blame them. A long tentacle of the squid broke the surface and moved lazily in the sunlight before submerging again.

I glanced at my little part of the Source. "Filius," I said. The water was choppy and churning. It wasn't happy.

"Yes, well..." Filius answered. I supposed he didn't have any more idea than I did.

When we came in view of the greenhouses, Hagrid caught sight of us at once. "All righ' then?" he boomed, starting towards us up the slope. Bulstrode was leaning against the greenhouse wall, arms folded, looking very put out that Hogwarts hadn't the decency to fall in on itself. She might get her destruction yet. The further we got from the castle and the Source, the more restless the water became. We crowded in through the door to greenhouse four, Poppy reassuring Hagrid, Bulstrode glaring at everyone's backs.

I put my jar on the potting bench next to my ingredients. The surface of the water was a dark slate grey. There were waves and whitecaps. It looked like a tempest at sea that had sunk a hundred ships and would happily sink a hundred more. And by Frazier's first principle, no doubt the pool was just as bad. I didn't like to think what the Source room would be like at the moment.

Filius put his jar next to mine. His little scrap of cloth lay resting peacefully on the bottom. "Minerva, Pomona, put yours here too, maybe we can calm it," he said. Pomona's rock sat there like a lump and Minerva's taper burned clear and steady. The water raged. I sighed. Slytherin always had to be trouble.

How on earth was I going to brew with that? I stared at the waves. They were almost hypnotic. Pomona's hand gripped my shoulder and I turned with a start.

"You need to stabilize that," she said.

Stability... stasis.

"I need to step out," I said, heading for the door. Pomona might get her bargain sooner than she thought.

"What – " Minerva began.

"I'll be back," I said as I left.

I skirted the lake carefully, out of tentacle reach. There was no telling how panicked the residents of the lake were by now. By the time I got to the service gate, the evening light was painting the castle in the distance with a rosy glow. I needed to hurry.

Once I got past the wards, I apparated to my point just outside my back gate at the End. It wouldn't hurt to pick up a bit of brewing equipment while I was here. The brewing was going to be difficult enough; I may as well give myself every advantage I could.

I let myself in through the wards at the back and headed for the cellar. The rickety wood steps creaked in all the familiar places as I descended. My Lumos threw the brewing bench and my equipment racks into sharp relief. My mother used to brew there once. I would sit on the steps and watch. And Dad... he had sat there too sometimes. Before everything went to hell.

To my surprise, looking at the cellar filled me with a sort of

queasy sorrow. It had been so long since this place had been any kind of shelter to me. But why on earth was I thinking of that now? I had no time for this. I shoved my set of knives, a spare cauldron, a dropper, and my good scales in my bag and headed out the back.

I walked the five blocks up to the slick pub, but didn't bother going in; I went straight around to the pay phone on the side. What day was it? Saturday? Dick would probably be in the lab in Brazil. I hoped so, it would make things a bit quicker. I picked up the receiver. The phone let out a complaining steady tone. I fumbled in my pockets for change. One of my protean notes was moving. I pulled it out. It was Shackbolt.

Thank you very much for your help recovering the remains. I know the cost to you was high, and I can't overstate how important this has been for the families of the dead.

But goddamn it, Snape, would you please do us all a favor and stop wandering around outside of wards? And especially not visiting your old house. You are most definitely a target; you might not go out of your way to make yourself an easy one. I will happily get you back to a safe-house, or a portkey home, or to anywhere you please.

And you call me an adrenaline junkie.

No doubt he had been alerted by the Ministry wards on my house. I stacked my coins on the top of the phone and got out my pencil stub.

Yes, mother, I wrote across the note and shoved it back in my pocket.

I fed in more coins than last time. Valeria, the receptionist, came on the line, announcing the lab in Portuguese.

"Is Douter Stoltz available?"

"Oh, Dr. Ramson," she said, switching to English, "Yes I can get him. And how are you? We haven't seen you in so long!"

"Valeria, Dr. Stoltz please, it's – "

"Oh, yes, yes, keep your pants on." Who had taught her that phrase? There was a click as she transferred the line. She must have been practicing her English with Grossman.

"Cyril!" Dick's bluff voice came on the line. "Good, good, I was hoping to hear from you soon. Not too much on the variants, I'm afraid. Benji says there was an interesting interaction in number

12c, but it's not exactly what we're looking for – ”

The phone's recorded voice came on the line and asked for more money. I fed in coins. Dick's voice came back on.

“Cyril, are you at that pay phone again? Are you all right? I can call you... listen, I saw in the papers in Arkham that you came forward – ”

“Dick, I'm all right, but I don't have time to get into that. Right now, I have the repeating element – ”

“You what?”

“I have it, Dick, but I need to stabilize it immediately. I need some of those metamorphoses we use in the delay process, and I need Zosimos' stasis ring.”

“Well, if I ship them by albatross – ”

“No, Dick. Immediately. Today. I need you to bring them.”

“But Cyril, I have a student defending their thesis, and a trustee meeting this afternoon...”

“Call in sick.”

Dick gave a short laugh. “Didn't you tell me about a student you caught malingering to get out of one of your classes? You had him gut flobberworms until he threw up.”

“Call in sick and we can arrange the punishment later.”

“Look, Cyril, I can send them express, they should be to you by tomorrow.”

“No, Dick, I'm serious, we need them today.”

“I just don't think...”

“Dick, I... I need your help.”

There was silence on the other end of the line. “Is it like that?”

“Yes,” I said.

“Right...” he said, planning aloud. “I can take the vanishing cabinet to Arkham, apparate to Boston, and get a portkey from there. Where am I going?”

“To the school, but you can't portkey directly, the wards won't allow it. Get a portkey to the Hogsmeade station, I'll send someone to meet you and bring you in.” That would cost him; even legitimate international portkeys were expensive. Well, he could take it out of my salary.

“I'd better get started, then.”

“And I need...”

“Cyril?”

“Did Zosimos ever manage to distill that symbol of stability that he was after?”

Dick laughed. “Don't worry, I won't tell him you asked for it. I'll be there as quickly as I can.”

I found a kebab shop on the way back to my apparition point and picked up some food. No use trying to brew all night on an empty stomach. I apparated through a few points up to a secluded spot just outside of Hogsmeade at the edge of the forest. From there, I could see down to the main gates. There were a few figures milling there, perhaps the reporters that Minerva had driven off. I disillusioned myself and took the long way around, skirting the back of the Hog's Head to the service gate. None of them had found that yet, thank god.

I crossed through the wards quickly then made my way along the edge of the forest to the greenhouses. The shadows were settling in now along with the evening chorus of birds and insects.

The atmosphere inside the greenhouse was not so peaceful. Minerva had been pacing. “Where on earth have you been, Severus? You've been gone more than an hour and the water has not been getting any better.”

I could see Filius over by the potting bench, watching the elements carefully.

“I've been getting some equipment. And there are still a few pieces to be delivered shortly.”

Minerva didn't look satisfied.

“Bulstrode,” I said. She came around the bench where Poppy, Pomona, and Hagrid milled in an anxious clump. “Dr. Stoltz will be arriving by portkey in Hogsmeade station shortly with some equipment. Get him up here without getting spotted by the reporters at the gates, understand?”

She was nodding, but Pomona had overhead and was storming over. “Dr. Stoltz is coming here? *Now?*” Her voice careened up an octave. “I'll go down and meet him.”

I could see it wouldn't be any use arguing with her. “Bulstrode,

take Pomona, but *you* are in charge of tactics and evasion.” Pomona couldn’t sneak her way out of an empty room, and Bulstrode would enjoy being the one giving the orders. She nodded her head, satisfied, and headed for the door, Pomona fairly running along.

I began setting up a brewing station on a separate bench. If the jar of water or my potion went pear-shaped, I didn’t want to cause a chain-reaction.

As I began to prep my ingredients and lay them out in brewing order, I felt a chill as the last sunlight left the brewing table. Surely it wasn’t night already? I looked up; the trees at the edge of the Forbidden Forest were cutting off the sunlight. Hadn’t they been further away from the greenhouse when I arrived?

“Minerva, Filius,” I called, “is the forest getting closer?”

Filius looked up sharply from the elements and out at the encroaching trees. They didn’t seem to be actively moving towards us.

“They *may* be,” said Filius cautiously.

“Yeah, they’ve been movin’ in all evenin’. Started while yeh were still in the castle,” Hagrid said cheerfully.

I bent back to my work. The sooner I could brew the better.

By the time they arrived I had all my prep work done and the trees were definitely closer. They never moved while I was looking, but each time I glanced up from my cutting board, they were nearer. Whatever we had done to the Source, it had affected more than just the castle. Was it some sort of attack? Somehow it felt more defensive, like it was drawing its own time back in around itself, back to when it could wear the forest like an enfolding cloak.

Pomona came sweeping into the greenhouse first, brimming with excitement, and announced what we’d all been watching. “The forest is walking in! Incredible! Dr. Stoltz is very keen to examine it, he has he’s never seen anything like it!”

“Fine, Pomona. Where is he? I’ll need his equipment –”

I was interrupted by his entry along with Bulstrode. He was helping her pull a grasping vine off the hem of her robes. She gave it a fatal stomp. Dick made a regretful noise. “Ah, well.” He caught sight of me and came over with his hand out. “Cyril!”

I made a short chopping motion with my hand.

“Ah... Severus! So good to see you. It’s been... so many years.”

I sighed and shook his hand. Dick was one of the worst liars I had ever met. “Dick, you remember my colleagues –” he made as if to go and pass more handshakes all around. I caught his sleeve before he had a chance. “– but we have an urgent situation, so if you have the equipment..”

“Yes, of course.” He set a leather case on the table. Inside was Zosimos’ modified stasis ring, a metal circlet about half a meter across, with a control knob on the side. Filius was coming over to see.

“And the other?” I asked.

“I didn’t tell Zosimos a thing,” he said as he pulled out a small paper bag. Inside was a single pink gumball. *Of all the...*

“What on earth is that?” asked Filius.

“A distilled symbol of stability,” said Dick.

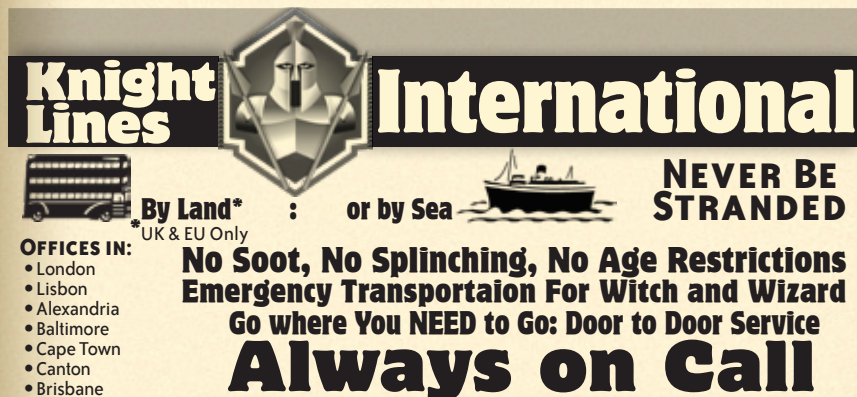
“A gumball?” said Minerva, who had joined us as well.

“Ah, the inventor describes it as ‘a simple joy of childhood with a glue-like consistency.’ It may also be a symbol of superficial contentment; he hasn’t quite narrowed it down, they are very similar,” Dick explained.

Well Slytherin could never be content with anything, so perhaps a dose of that wouldn’t hurt.

“How are you going to put them to use, Severus?” Dick said.

“We have an element we need to stabilize.” On the other bench, the water was still roiling angrily.



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"Ah, I see." He looked at the jar doubtfully.

"Perhaps if we keep all of the elements together," Pomona said.

We moved them as close together as possible and slipped the ring over the top to rest on the bench. Minerva had the rest stand back as I activated the ring. Happily I had long practice using the stasis ring controls from when I was developing the delay process. I turned the knob carefully, slowing by degrees until the water was moving like treacle on a cold day.

"Dick, I'll need to reach in to give it the symbol and extract some for my potion. If anything goes wrong, I'll need you to turn off the ring, so I can pull out, yes?"

"Yes." He put his hand on the dial. "Ready"

I picked up the gumball and a dropper.

Reaching into the stasis felt like reaching into the pool, cool and remote. I felt a wave of aching tension pass across my hands. I had to watch my hands to see that they were still moving steadily towards the jar. When I reached it, it vibrated under my fingertips with a slow profound shudder. Removing the lid was excruciatingly slow.

Pomona cast Lumos as the last of the evening light faded away.

When the lid was finally free it slid slowly off the jar and came to rest against Filius' jar of wind. The water, freed, gave a shake like an angry beast and heaved upwards. I willed as hard as I could for my fingers holding the gumball to let it go. It floated down from my fingertips and met the crest of the wave as it broke. It held for a moment suspended on the surface, poised between the air and the depths.



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The wave began to suck down and invert itself, curving inward. It was a maelstrom, running anti-clockwise, reversing down to the bottom of the jar, the gumball at its heart. I felt my breath go out. I hadn't realized I'd stopped breathing.

The current in the jar was running in a smooth regular spiral, sucking down to the heart and rising on the edges to the surface. If it liked going in circles, perhaps that was contentment for the moment.

I moved my right hand in with the dropper and slowly extracted a measure of the water. In the tiny glass tube I could see an even smaller maelstrom forming. Every little part just the same as the whole.

"All right, Dick." He eased up on the stasis and I pulled my hands free into the warmth. I was breathing hard. The current was running faster, but smoothly. I had it.

"Leave the stasis on for now, we don't want it losing stability."

"And now?"

"And now, brewing. It may take until morning, so you may as well get some rest."

"Nonsense, it's only early afternoon for me with the portkey-lag. Now, Mrs. Sprout, I'm very eager to see this extraordinary moving forest of yours. Do you have any collecting sacks?"

Pomona made a noise like a distant steam whistle and ran for the storage cupboard. The rest moved off towards the other end of the greenhouse. I set the dropper carefully on the brewing bench and lit my cauldron. I would have begun, but Minerva was suddenly at my elbow.

"Cyril?" she hissed.

"Minerva, I would like to start brewing before dawn."

"Filius told me that the patent holder for the delay process you're using in these potions is a Dr. Cyril Ramson."

"How interesting."

"And that he won the 1999 Paracelsus prize in potions."

"How nice for him."

"Severus, *you do not* have a doctorate."

"Well, I *ought* to."

"Should I offer my congratulations?"

"I suppose you might be able to send a card to him through the

Paracelsus committee.”

She leaned in closer. “How much is the Paracelsus prize again? Fifteen-thousand Galleons?”

“I’m sure I don’t know, Minerva.”

“*Look after me and mine.*’ I am *never* signing any contract with you ever again.”

“Ought to read what you’re signing, then,” I muttered.

“What was that, *Cyril?*”

“I don’t believe I *need* any further contracts with you, Minerva. Now, as I have some very delicate brewing – ”

“Fine, *Dr. Snape.* You go on with your little research project, go and win your awards, and I’ll be over here wondering if my career is in shambles and my school is going to collapse. *Fifteen-thousand!*” She moved off in a huff. *Finally.*

I had already brewed Blood-Replenisher with the delay process many times during my research, so for that part I could let my hands take over most of the work and relax into the pattern.

As I worked, I was occasionally conscious of the forest surrounding us more and more thickly. Dark flying shapes brushed by the glass panes of the greenhouse and a scrap of song sung by many voices floated by. Colored lights glowed dimly away deep in the trees. It stirred some faint memory of dream in me, but I couldn’t raise it.

Once I looked around and saw that someone had transfigured some of the benches at the other end of the greenhouse into beds. Poppy was apparently sleeping on one, Minerva and Filius were sitting on another and speaking quietly. Hagrid and Bulstrode must have gone out into the woods like Dick and Pomona, though I hadn’t noticed them leaving. Some time later, I heard a noise at the door. Pomona and Dick were coming in to deposit their collecting bags and pick up fresh ones. I could see Bulstrode outside where the light spilling out of the greenhouse met the trees. She had what looked like a heavy wood club in her hands and a predatory gleam in her eyes, looking out into the darkness of the woods. A moment later and she disappeared soundlessly into the forest. She was letting her blood up. The sooner I could finish this potion, the better.

At times I could see shapes between the trees, the ghost of a squirrel, a pack of white dogs with red ears chasing a white stag, a woman with a hollow back, a long grey horse.

I would need to add the water shortly.

From somewhere deep in the trees came a mournful bellow. A long-traveling gust of wind shook the trees overhead. I picked up the dropper. It was almost dawn. The rest of the potion was as it should be, at a slow roiling simmer and a very deep red. Inside the dropper, the tiny maelstrom was running steadily. I gave the dropper a single squeeze and let the drop fall. A small white circle sinking into the darkness. Or was it rising? I stirred clockwise, then took the cauldron off the flame with the current still running. Stable. I looked back at the elements on their bench. Stable.

I leaned heavily on the bench; I felt like I had been holding myself up for far too long. Now I only needed to vial it up. Then –

The door was opening again, Dick and Pomona coming in with happy exhaustion and loads of collecting bags. “Oh, I thought it was extinct too,” Dick was saying. “Now, if there’s a breeding population...”

I had a store of empty vials in my coat. I began to fill and rack them. The current in the cauldron was still running. That was... unusual. Slower than the maelstrom, but a steady spin. We needed to find out, and there really was only the one way. I looked down at the vials and picked one up, turning it over in my fingers. It was spinning too, every little part, just the same as the whole. At the other end of the greenhouse, Poppy was stirring, but Minerva and Filius were asleep. As good a chance as any, I thought.

Dick was watching me. “You’re done? Oh, it’s the Blood-Replenisher variant.”

I nodded at him. He leaned forward on the bench and spoke quietly. “Do you know what you’re doing?”

He must have a good idea of what I was planning. “I think so, Dick.”

I thought of the water in the pool roiling from its center. There was the kind of fear that masks itself as anger, and the kind of despair that was a bottomless black pool at three in the morning. And all of us who had it inside of us, who walked out into the water

until we drowned. Or who went out fighting. Or took dreamless sleep and lay down in a bath. Or did anything, any desperate thing to try to change ourselves –

“We’ve talked about this before. Nobody is making you do this? This is what you want to do?”

I had spent so many years wrecking everything I touched, and now I was standing on that knife edge between creation and destruction. I wasn’t even sure I could tell the difference, they could be so much alike. But if we never tried to change...

“Yes,” I said.

“All right,” he said.

He waited close to me, watching. I knocked the dose back quickly and set the empty vial back on the bench.

A cry came from the other end of the greenhouse. “What are you doing?” Poppy must have seen me. “That hasn’t been tested!” She headed over from the beds where Minerva and Filius were waking with a start.

“It’s being tested now,” I said.

“What’s going on?” asked Pomona.

“He drank it, he just drank it!” said Poppy.

“Severus, that was very reckless!” said Pomona.

Poppy was in front of me now. “What did you mean, ‘being tested now?’”

“Just that: I’m going to test it and see if it works.”

“Of all the – ! Minerva, will you talk to him?”

Minerva was watching us, arms folded. “It wouldn’t do any good; you know he’s a stubborn fool.”

“Poppy, I have safeguards,” I said. “I have a vial of unaltered Blood-Replenisher on hand. In case of emergency, a simple healing spell – ”

“If you think *I* am going to participate – ”

“ – a simple healing spell could be performed by *anyone* here. I do not intend to let myself bleed out.” And if this worked, I would never bleed out again, certainly not with a bunch of ungrateful brats standing around watching.

“That’s not the point,” said Poppy.

“Dr. Stoltz,” said Pomona, “can *you* talk to him?”

“I’m not in the business of telling Severus what to do,” he said calmly.

“The point,” said Poppy, “is that if Filius is right, you just ingested a substance that has been influencing people to, to become violent criminals for centuries! You might...” she trailed off.

“Become a dark lord? Well, if that happens, you can all turn on me and drive me off; you’ve already proven yourselves quite capable.”

Minerva snorted. “Oh, *now* he’s taking his revenge. I knew he’d come around to it.”

“I don’t know why we *all* don’t just join the drama club,” said Pomona.

“In *any* case,” I pressed on, “we won’t know until we test it. Pomona, perhaps a bucket?”

Poppy stormed out into the woods where the morning sun was just lighting the highest branches.

I took care to be sitting down, remembering what happened the last time I cut my arm open. My vial of unaltered Blood-Replenisher was on the potting bench next to me in easy reach along with a large glass of water conjured by Filius. I scourgified my brewing knife and used it to open a vein in my left arm over the garden bucket. And then, we waited.

Poppy came back in almost immediately and spoke to Filius near the door. “I have an oath, Filius, and whether or not I approve, I never stop being a healer.”

My hand throbbed in time with my pulse and my blood dripped without any great urgency. Perhaps I should have cut a bit deeper.

Bulstrode arrived at the door, no club now, but dirt on her hands and a deeply unwholesome expression of complete satisfaction on her face. She barely glanced at my dripping arm and went straight to the beds at the other end of the greenhouse.

I was just feeling a bit nauseated when the dry heat of the potion swept over me. The blood welled out of my cut with renewed pressure.

“There’s one,” I said.

Poppy shooed Minerva out of the way and performed the healing spell on my arm. “You are a fool, you know.”

I drank Filius’ water and stood to give it a proper test. No dizzi-

ness or nausea.

"It works?" said Pomona.

"The delay process works, but we knew that. The question is: will it repeat?"

We had a short break while I drank more water. Bulstrode began to snore.

I cut a bit deeper the second time and my blood ran freely into the bucket. Poppy clicked her tongue in disapproval. This time the change came more quickly. There was a wrenching dizziness. I gripped my knees as my vision went grey. For a moment I felt suspended, weightless. I couldn't see light or dark, but the sensation cleared as quickly as it came.

Poppy seized my arm, wand drawn. "Are you all right?"

"Yes, Poppy, give it a moment, I think it's taking effect."

I held Poppy off as long as I could as my inexhaustible blood streamed into the bucket.

"That's it! Not one more second!" She pulled my arm closer and healed the cut.

Dick was beaming. He leaned in over the bench. "You, my dear, have a working repeating potion."

I began to laugh.

"Stop that and drink the water immediately!" Poppy was having no part of our triumph. After I drank, I stood gingerly. No dizziness.

"Three years!" I said to Dick.

"Just a blink of an eye," he replied.

"Is that what you've been up to?" said Pomona.

Hagrid saved me from having to answer that. He was ducking through the door, hand on the haunch of an enormous hound. Its coat was short and wiry, bristling up over its shoulders and yellowish-white except where it darkened on its ears to the deep red of old blood. It was the size of a pony. Its head was low and swinging side to side. A very faint growl rumbled in its chest. I could feel it through the soles of my feet.

"There, now, darlin'," Hagrid was saying.

I took a step back and ran into the bench behind me.

A hound of the Wild Hunt, what was he thinking?*

Fang was slinking in behind, trembling and whimpering. He slunk off to the furthest potting bench and tried to hide behind a jumping geranium. I wished I could join him, but I didn't want to make any sudden moves.

"Ah, Hagrid," said Minerva carefully, "what have you got there?"

"Oh, hello Minerva! Just found this poor girl lost out in the woods. I 'spect she's a mite hungry."

Lost, the Wild Hunt didn't get lost.

Hungry, they were always hungry.

Its head dipped lower. I could barely see the red eyes. It sniffed.

"Tha's right, darlin'," Hagrid said.

I couldn't press myself further into the bench. It didn't matter, it had found the bucket. They could smell blood. And guilt. It dipped its jowls in and drank. God, I could see the blood level dropping. It lifted its head from the bucket, dripping.

A small sound escaped my throat. Well, if it did decide to go at me, I wouldn't bleed to death. Still, I tried not to move or breathe.

"For goodness sake, Hagrid, get the beast out of here!" said Pomona, "I won't have it digging in my beds."

"Quite right," said Minerva briskly. She had a hand on my shoulder.

"Oh, righ', sorry, Pomona! Come on then, darlin', let's get you a treat. Mind, now!"

They edged out the door. Fang stayed with us. I slowly loosened my grip on the bench.

"Ah, Severus?" Filius' voice came from across the room. "Perhaps you'd better look at this." He was watching the elements again.

They seemed just the same, until I approached the table. The water was running clockwise, smooth and steady. I looked at Filius.

"I think we may be seeing some changes here," he said.

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We crowded around the jar. The steady slow clockwise spin of the water was mesmerizing. Pomona gripped my shoulder. “Is that it? Is it fixed?”

“Well, it appears to have reversed,” said Filius. “Considering its previous destructive course, I can only hope that it indicates a more constructive outlook.”

“In any case,” said Minerva, “we won’t know until we check.”

“Well, we’d best leave the elements here,” said Filius.

Chapter 28 of **THE GOOD FRIEND**

BY MOTTSSNAVE

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God, were we going back up now? The weariness from brewing all night was dragging at me, and Bulstrode sleeping in the corner looked like she had the better idea. But of course, we wouldn’t know until we checked.

It was decided that Dick should remain and keep an eye on the elements and the stasis ring. Poppy would come along as before in case of emergencies. We stepped out of the greenhouse.

“Remember now, all together,” said Pomona cheerfully.

The dawn light just touching the top branches didn’t reach into the blue depths of the understory. The trees were packed thickly, with moss-covered bark and wide-splayed roots as though they had here for centuries. Minerva raised a Lumos and began to lead the way.

We straggled along in single-file, struggling over logs that sometimes gave way with a squishy sigh into their own decay. Ahead, Pomona was chuckling as she tried to untangle her hair from a low-hanging branch.

There was a flash of pale movement off to my right between the trunks. I stiffened, thinking of ‘Darlin.’ There it was again – much too small to be that great hound, and running upright. It was a boy, a young boy in some kind of pale shirt. He stumbled and hauled himself up against a tree, looking around wildly. His eyes locked on mine, staring at me in mute terror. He turned and darted away through the trees.

Dear lord, a student? But what on earth would a first-year be doing here now?

“Poppy – ” I began. But she wasn’t next to me any longer. I hurried ahead around the next trees. She was nowhere to be seen, none of them were.

“Poppy – ” I began to call out, but I cut myself short, letting the sound die out in the muffled tangle of the trees. I held myself still, listening. Far overhead, some of the branches moved in a breeze. There was no sound of the others ahead, no Pomona laughing, no dawn chorus of birds. They weren’t here.

Somewhere deep in the trees behind me I could hear steps. Irregular, but coming closer. I moved. I went as quickly as I could without breaking into a run. Running would be worse than useless

if it was that hound behind me, and it would only feed my fear. I was able to move faster now; the going was getting easier. I had stumbled on something that almost seemed like a path. The trees were thinning, and the way dipped across a small stream on some flat rocks, then began to climb again.

It should have been lighter by now, but everything seemed suspended. There wasn't any dawn light on the trees. I was coming out onto the lip of a wide hollow, mostly in shadow from the rocky hillside behind. I strained to see. There was a figure below near a scrap of reflected sky; it must be a flat surface of water.

I couldn't see the figure properly, it flickered like it was a reflection itself, blurring as when the wind ruffles the surface of water. The figure cleared again, kneeling now, then flickered and blurred.

No, no, I thought vaguely. I tried to take a step into the hollow. An aching cold passed over me and I could barely move. It was like trying to wade through treacle on a cold day. I pushed myself in. My chest strained.

Of course, I was a bloody fool. The part may stand for the whole and the whole for the part, and we had our sample of the pool sitting in Zosimos' stasis ring slowed to a crawl. I forced another step. I had told Emmeline that I could finally recognize a bad idea when I saw it, but recognizing it and not doing it were two entirely different things.

I got a breath and dragged myself closer to the pool. The kneeling man had flickered out. Another figure shimmered into view: a man holding a goblet. He dipped it towards the surface of the water, then blurred and faded. Apparently I wasn't the only bloody fool. And what the hell was I going to do anyway? Shout at it to stop?

The man had come back into view on his knees, lifting the cup. I heaved myself forward and gripped his shoulder –

I was in another place. Again. I was suspended, drifting slowly down, or was it up? The wavering dancing shape in the light was beyond. It was wonderful and terrible, just like everything in the world. I wanted to see it, to watch it, but it was obscured, somehow, I couldn't see it properly. There were dark angular shapes in front of it. It was crowded here. I wondered if I'd ever really left this

place. As Dick had said, it had been just the blink of an eye.

As I came closer, I could see the shapes were figures with their backs to me, eddying and jostling slightly around the light. It was hard to see a pattern to their movement. The light was rising beautifully, but I couldn't see it clearly between the figures. The hunger was stronger here, drawing me like a current. The light was mesmerizing. I let myself be pulled in, a relief. There was a small gap between the two figures ahead of me. If I fit myself in there, perhaps I could get a bit closer, between the withered hand and –

No, no.

I had been moving forward without much conscious thought, but now I shoved myself back. If I fit myself in there I would never come out again, I knew that with a deep certainty. I backed away as far as I could from the crowd, we were a whole bloody fool reunion, but I couldn't bring myself to stray too far from the light.

What on earth could I do? It was so hard to think with it pulling and drawing on me. I sidled closer to the gap. He was here, after all, and if he could just *tell* me what we might do...

I caught the withered hand in both of mine and pulled. He moved slightly from the shoulder, bending at an awkward angle. I could see part of his face, eyes fixed on the shape in the light, expression drained and gaunt. *Listen to me*, I wanted to say. I had a hard time keeping my grip. My hands were slick with the blood that was now coming slowly and steadily from my left arm. *Please listen to me, there has to be another way.*

He didn't seem to be listening. His eyes were fixed on the *one thing* and all the debts between us had been paid the last time I was in this place. He didn't move. I pulled again. The figure on the other side of the gap turned and looked at me. I wouldn't have recognized his face, he looked so young, but his eyes; those I recognized. His gaze burned into me with absolute malevolence.

Mine.

I dropped the hand and staggered back. No use, no use trying that at all, I'd better leave him. I was shaking from the *mine* as I backed away. I moved away from the gap, around the outside of the circle.

I just wanted to get away from them both. I didn't know if the *mine* meant me, or Albus, or the Source. Perhaps it didn't matter. By the first principle, if the part stood the whole, we were all part of it now.

Now... but perhaps I had been part of the pool for a long time. When had I been given to it? At my sorting? Or was it the first time I had almost died in the shack? Maybe *given* wasn't quite right. After all, I had consented, hadn't I? I played that role, and more. I had agreed to Albus' plans, and then of course played another part in giving Albus over to it in turn. I had been a very good friend to it over the years. And now I had chosen to drink it, like a fool, and surely I belonged to it more than ever now, part to the whole.

I moved along the wall of figures, jostling together, shifting in and out. I wasn't sure if I would recognize anyone else in the bloody fool reunion. I didn't think I wanted to. I still couldn't bring myself to move very far from the rest of them and the light. I saw two women standing together, an older and a younger, clasping hands like sisters. There was a young man staring down at his own hands in horror. I turned away.

There were a few glints of light separate from the group, moving along hesitantly below us. They were hard to focus on. I went after one, sinking down until I could see it properly. It was tricky at first, but I finally managed to get my hands on it. It was a light dry scrap of something like skin or thin parchment. It was hard to make it out, shifting between light and dark. Some kind of writing in another alphabet. No, it was in English, but reversed. I strained to read it, picking out the words one by one.

by calling on his promise, he induced him to sacrifice

I let the scrap fall. It drifted away into the darkness, words fading. There was another, swirling slowly clockwise. I grasped at it.

began to arrange events

There were more I could see from the corners of my eyes. They might only be nonsense, but they distracted me a bit from the pull of the shape and the light. The words were drifting around to the right. I followed them. They eddied in a little swirl and clustered below a figure standing a bit back from the rest. As I neared, I could see a brief flash as some scrap of words left its hands and

drifted down. It was making them somehow.

I directed myself to the figure, the only one not clustered to the center like the rest. It was a man. I could barely make out the planes of his face. He wasn't actively writing, but a scrap drifted free of his hand. *How?*

Manifest, he responded.

Whatever that meant. Some quality of concentration, perhaps. But it was hard to think at all with that steady dragging pull behind me, *and what was the bloody use?*

He must have caught that last; I could feel the irritation in his *use of anything? We belong to it.*

He was right, we were just little parts of a whole. Of course, *He* didn't agree, I remembered his vicious *mine*. But what if he was right for once in his miserable existence? After all, by the first principle...

I tried to focus and that pull behind me... no, by the principles, I was pulling it. I directed myself at him.

No, it belongs to us. First, the whole is the part. Second, we are its source, and it is ours. Third, we can affect it.

No words drifted from his hands. *How?*

Heal it.

There was a long pause. *How can you heal anything?* I could feel the scorn in it. Blood was still flowing from my arm. 'Physician, heal thyself,' was it?

It was a decent question. How could I when I had stopped trying? When the memories rose up and it was all I could do to push them away again? When all I had been able to do for so many years was just bury everything and keep going? When it had been taking me apart from inside? And now it wasn't just my own destruction I was faced with.

The idea of healing was awful and exhausting. It would have been easier to lie down and bleed out as I had been doing an eyeblink ago. It would be so much worse than that peaceful fate, it would mean working on it every day for the rest of my life. Damn it all, but I would probably agree to that too, the worst plan of all. I had told Minerva I didn't want to wreck everything for once. If I wanted to change...

One by one.

He gave something like a nod. There really wasn't any other way, there never was. Where in the world did I even start? Probably with the ones I was responsible for. I headed further around the outside of the circle, looking for my place again. I could see the writer approaching one of the other shapes: The young man looking at his hands. The note writer was reaching over his shoulder to clasp the hands. I went along.

Finally, I came full circle. My gap was waiting for me, of course. I didn't want to approach. Those eyes of his were a problem for me, and that *mine*. Well, if I was his, then by the first principle, he was surely mine.

Of course he was mine. Just an arrogant asshole who thought he was superior, who thought he could control everything, who thought the way to protect himself was to destroy himself, bit by bit.

I touched his shoulder. It felt light and dry, like a bit of shed skin. There probably wasn't much of him left now. No, not a skin, he was like a sweets-wrapper that gets discarded on the shore. Something that tasted wonderful at first, but turned out to be awful for you in the long run.

He was turning to me, with those eyes. *Mine*.

Yes, of course you're mine.

I folded the head down. It went easily, he was very light. Just a stupid, mean little boy. I folded him again lengthwise. I had seen that he was destroying himself for a very long time. I hadn't said anything to him about it, such a good follower. I was too afraid too, of course. He had told me in a dream a few years ago that a real friend would be honest with him. I had let him down there, just like so many of my friends. And perhaps it had been the Source talking in my dream.

I took several quick folds to bring him to a more manageable size. I should clean up my litter, after all. Left here, he would just poison the place. He did tend to wreck everything he touched. He wouldn't be so hard to dispose of now.

The way to the withered hand was clear now. I picked it up.

Albus was still looking in at the light. I hadn't made much progress healing that hand while he was alive. Perhaps he had already been too attached to the idea of dying.

That hand... he had been responsible for so much, so many terrible plans. And I had agreed and placed myself into that hand, his willing tool. How much easier it had been for me to place myself into the hands of another master than to than to fully face my devastating responsibility and to try to fix things myself.

And by the first principle, if I was his willing tool, then he was mine. He let me put the responsibility off myself, to externalize the self-loathing and self-destruction I liked to carry around as a badge of honor. He carried his own self-loathing, I thought I could recognize the signs.

It was a kind of self-indulgence, I saw, to carry around that pain like a withered hand and refuse to heal. It had prevented me from ever being close to anyone, from being a proper advocate for my students, it saved me from being honest with them or myself. It had allowed me to agree to Albus' plans for martyrdom, the ultimate abdication of responsibility. Of course I agreed and carried it out, because I had wanted that too, in a way. It was so much easier than having to do the real work of healing oneself and rebuilding the world.

We don't get out of it that easily, I told him. *We'll have to do it bit by bit.*

I pulled him down to sit next to me so I could work on the hand. It had been very hard to forgive him, because that would mean acknowledging how much we were the same. The hand was responding, slowly. I could see it a bit better as well, the light spilling over us without obstruction. I looked up; nothing stood between us and the light now, it...

Pomona gripped my shoulder. We were in the Source room, looking at the pool. It was welling up slowly from the center. A breeze was making the torchlight play on the walls. The others were with us, watching it. I wiped my eyes.

I didn't see the changes at first. I went back out to the greenhouse in a bit of a daze. I made my excuses that I needed to start immediately brewing several rounds of Wolfsbane for testing. I didn't leave

again for several days. I wanted to be very sure that there would be no chance of my running into 'Darlin' in the dense stretch of forest that now stood between the greenhouse and the castle.

Pomona let it slip four days later, as she delivered another armload of ingredients for my latest batch. "Poor Hagrid, he's inconsolable."

"About what?" I asked hopefully.

"Darling took off last night. He said he heard her baying far off into the mountains."

I had heard the baying myself as I was brewing, and doubled the wards on the greenhouse doors. I let out a sigh and sank into a chair.

"Where do you want these?" She hefted the ingredients.

"I don't. I have enough batches for testing." I'd probably had enough days ago.

"Of all the –"

"Where's Dick? I want to get these to the lab."

"He's in the woods gathering specimens, which is where I would be if I weren't harvesting ingredients that you don't want."

"Fine. If you would tell him –"

"Oh, yes, yes," she said disgustedly.

I took the path through the woods that Hagrid had been clearing for the past few days, still rough with fresh stumps and stray logs. The debris reminded me unpleasantly of the clearcut I had visited a few months ago. The verdant woods around did soften the impression. Despite the enormous size of the trees, heavily hung with moss, it seemed fresh and new. I didn't recognize some of the trees and plants along the trail. Dick and Pomona had samples of them all, no doubt.

Birdsong drifted in the air. An obsick bird flew clumsily through the trees, landed swaying on a sapling, then took off again with a squawk.

I had dreamed of my death the night before. Perhaps it was that deep baying in the woods that triggered it. I was on the floor of the shack, watching the pool of my blood stretch and grow around me until I was in a dark pool. There were shadowy figures standing just out of my view, watching. My consciousness left my body, in the way of dreams, and sank slowly through the warped floorboards, following the turning passages of my blood. At length I

was through the floor, floating near the top of a vast dark space. I could see the pool below me, shining and welling. It was still beautiful. I was a drop falling through that vast space. No, not falling, rising. A drop leaving the surface of the pool up through that vast space, working its way up through the floorboards like sap rising through a tree in the spring. My consciousness returned to myself. From my vantage point on the floor I could see the figures standing around, all those who had been lost...

The trail wound into a bright glade of young birches and ferns. I stopped short. This place seemed familiar somehow, but of course that was impossible, this part of the woods was all new. But I remembered some place like it – what was it? It must have been my fourth year. Avery and I were playing the hunt and looking for a place to set up an ambush for Walden when we came across an open glade. Of course, that had been in the springtime, there were tall foxgloves bobbing among drowsy bees... but that was a long time ago now.

The trees thinned as I ascended towards the castle and ended at a small swampy pool lined with willow-shrubs and reeds. A grey horse head submerged itself in the dark water as I followed the path around the edge and out onto the field.

The castle itself didn't look any different from the outside, at least. I came through the entrance hall to the main stairs. I had to step back quickly as a flight of stairs came spinning slowly up through the air. It ground into place at the west wing third-story cross-passage above. The portraits shied away from the impact.

The portraits were alive again, but they weren't quite how I remembered. In place of Ortaire d'Pinchemont was a dog-headed man in an Elizabethan collar. Genevieve Cadwallader was now sprouting flowers from her head. The group portrait of the 'York Guild of Barber-Surgeons of Wizardly Lineage, 1754' was now a dinner party of crows. Madame Molyneux was much herself, but was now on a wild seashore instead of her usual stuffy drawing room. There were others that seemed mostly unchanged, but for some indefinable shift in their expressions.

As no more staircases were flying at me, I leaned over cautiously

into the stairwell and looked below. Filius and Hooch were in the base of the stairwell in a warded circle. Filius' jar of air and Pomona's piece of the foundation stone were in the circle with them. They must be resetting the charms. Hooch gave me an expansive wave. The staircase above bucked.

"*Careful, Rolanda!*" said Filius.

"Oi, Snape!" Hooch called up. "I hear you've been bleeding into buckets! Awfully sorry I missed it!"

"Filius," I said, "Where's Minerva?"

"Up in her office, I think."

"You'll have to go round the back," said Hooch. "Oh, and if you ever come up with a repeating potion to treat cramps, I'm all ears."

Filius' wand wavered and the stairs jolted askew. "Rolanda, *please!*"

I left them to their repairs. It wasn't a terrible suggestion; there could be quite a lucrative market for that sort of potion.

'Round the back' meant the Great Hall again. I paused before the large double doors. There was no seal on them now, so it was probably quite safe. And if not, well, I had been through several times when it wasn't so safe at all. I opened the doors.

The hall was quiet, peaceful again. Benches upended on tables, everything in order. The ceiling sky was a mixture of blue and scattered clouds, moving slowly across, pushed by a distant steady wind.

About three-quarters across was a cordoned-off area. There was a small clear pool about a meter across between the tables. It was still, reflecting the sky above. Perhaps that was contentment.

I went out into the service corridor, and up the back stairs. On the fifth floor landing, I met a house elf bustling past with a pitcher of water. She took no notice of me. I thought I saw a glimpse of tail peeking from below her pillowcase as she disappeared into the east service corridor.

Minerva was up in her office, as Filius had said. Bulstrode was standing by her desk as she signed letters. She was reading them carefully, I noticed.

"Come in, Severus." She handed the completed stack of letters to Bulstrode. "Do you think you can send those off without sabotaging anything?"

"We'll see, ma'am." Bulstrode gave me a nod as she headed out the door. I took the seat in front of the desk. Albus' portrait was not in his usual pleasant slumber. He was looking down at us. It had also changed in a way, I saw. A faint cast of sorrow clouded his face. Maybe that was better, in a way.

"I'm glad you've finally come up. Done brewing?"

"I have enough for the first round of testing. And enough of the water for quite a bit more. Further testing should go through the lab; I'll be going there to set up the protocol as soon as possible."

"And the water is stable?"

"It appears so."

She sighed. "It's all we have to go on. Have you been in the Great Hall?"

I nodded.

"Certainly there have been profound changes in the school. It's so... indefinite, but nothing seems negative or malevolent, at least. I went back to the Source room again yesterday. And again, nothing definite, but it feels so much clearer than before. I'm not sure it's enough to go on for opening for term as usual, to be honest. Filius at least is very encouraged. He thinks we may be safe enough if we watch carefully for symptoms. Or nightmares. Maybe it will be well enough, for now."

And by the third principle, the caster may affect the spell and the spell the caster. If my dream was any indication, we would be working on affecting the Source for a long time, day by day. Working on affecting ourselves too, if it came to that, even if it was just a personal decision to heal, rather than destroy. We were part of it, after all, and every little part could stand for the whole. We all had to have that determination to heal, now.

Minerva went on. "There is still so much work to do! I do wish Horace would get off his rear and answer my letters! We will need him on board now more than ever."

If I knew Sluggy, he would evade Minerva's letters as long as humanly possible.

"Now, I wanted to talk to you, Severus. Minister Shackbolt Floo-called me yesterday. He said he had word you were here."

I sighed. "Aberforth."

"Very likely. Minister Shackbolt wanted to make sure that the school was secure, now that your survival is public knowledge. He was, well, a bit alarming. He said that there might be attempts on your life. I, I think I do owe you an apology. You had good reasons to cut off contact, however it may have felt personally.

I wasn't sure what to say to that.

"In any case, he wanted to make sure that you didn't have any unsecured personal effects here that could be used in tracking or location charms. The only things I could think of were your contract and some of your old papers. I'm afraid Horace has completely overhauled your old quarters."

She turned and opened Albus' portrait. There was a thin stack of papers, my old contract on top, with the signature in blood. Of course, such a signature could be used in a tracking charm. She picked up the stack. A small folded note was left in the cavity. She paused, and reached to close the portrait. I put my hand out to stop her.

She looked at me. "Severus?"

"Might we go somewhere else?"

We went to the same arithmancy classroom as before. No portraits. We sat on either side of the teacher's desk with the note between us. I looked at it, feeling hollowed out.

"Severus." Her voice sounded strange in the long silence. "You don't have to... I can keep it in a secure location."

Perhaps she could, and perhaps it would gnaw at me from afar as the Source had been doing all these years. But still, I couldn't quite move to pick it up.

"I remember when the news came," Minerva said. "It was your seventh year, wasn't it? It was horrible. As a teacher, you always remember. *You* know; you've had to give news like that to your own students."

And here it was, more than twenty years later and I still couldn't face it or talk about it. All that silence. And what good had it ever done me?

"I stopped speaking to her. I hadn't spoken to her for months. Ever since Dad walked out on us that summer. I was furious with her."

Minerva didn't say anything.

"For him walking out. For her being the sort of person who gets walked out on. For her staying with him for so long. For, for the fact that I hated him and I missed him. For her not being good enough to keep him. I saw myself the same way, and I blamed her for that. I sent her letters back unopened all autumn. Until *that* came."

We looked at it. I didn't move to pick it up.

"She had been isolated for a long time. I don't know exactly what happened with her family, but they cut us off when I was very young. She never got on with the neighbors. They could tell we were different. To them, she must have seemed like she thought herself above them. So it was only me and dad. And then he left and I stopped speaking to her and she had nobody. I knew she was..."

"What?" Minerva asked gently. Managing me, but the thought didn't come with the usual irritation.

"She was ill." If that was the word. I wasn't sure what else to call that special mix of depression, isolation, and anger festering into self-destruction. "We all were, the whole family. Sometimes, what she would say or do, it wasn't her, it was the illness. It got worse over time. There was less and less of her left."

I moved my hand towards the note and stopped. "I have some good memories of her. Before the illness completely took over. Those are the ones I want to keep. If I read *that*, what if there wasn't anything of her left, just the illness talking? Then the last words I would have to remember her wouldn't even be her. Or if she offered some excuse, would try to tell me I would be better off. Or if she did what I was already doing and blamed me. Then forever, that last memory..."

We were both silent for a while.

"I don't blame you; I wouldn't want to read that either," Minerva finally said.

"Listen, Severus, what if I... Let me read it for you," she said.

I didn't refuse. She picked up the note and opened it.

I wished I couldn't read the look on her face as she read. For a long moment she didn't do anything. Then she tore a strip off the bottom of the note, and touched her wand to the rest. The light of

the Incendio burned my eyes. I turned away.

Minerva was pushing the scrap of paper across the desk towards me, past the small pile of ash. "But you knew that already," she said.

I love you always.

Mum

We sat for a long time.

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EPILOGUE: LETTERS

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MISKATONIC UNIVERSITY
HERBOLOGY DIVISION

November 6, 2001

Stolz Reasearch Labs
Potions Division
Manaus, Brazil

Cyril,

I'll be stuck in Arkham for the rest of the week, but I wanted to drop you a quick note; I just received the third month results from Sao Paolo. Cognition, control, and behavior, all excellent! I'm enclosing the full results. The 'wrench' sensation of the repeat taking effect seems to be less than at the first iteration. So far, very encouraging.

I'm afraid I still have no good news with our application for human trials in Chicago. They say they can't approve us for testing until the repeating element has been cleared as 'fit for human consumption.' My explanation as 'water from a historically active healing spring,' has not been accepted.

Now, we may have a few possible courses. Perhaps a certification from your colleagues at the school would help, or if we can provide the committee with a sample for testing. I know you have concerns about how the spring may react to being tested. If you could meet with the committee and explain, I think it really might help.

In the meantime, I suggest that we set up human trials in Prague. Generally speaking, a few well-placed donations to the university there and a willingness to spit on the Russian flag and you can get most testing approved. The sample size will be smaller than Chicago, of course, but the more successful test results we can show, the more likely we are to have testing approved in the States. We can always start with applying for licensure in Brazil and Europe first, then expand later.

I know you have concerns about travelling back to the States at this

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time, but I'd hardly describe you as 'a known former terrorist,' *really*; Cyril. Whatever your experiences you have with your own government, I think I can assure you that the US won't start rounding up and detaining people without due process or a trial. And I really think we'll see this current fearful climate die down quickly. In any case, surely your friend Mr. Shackbolt could help you with your immigration status if you would only *ask* him. In the meantime, yes, I'll be happy to check on your house for you if you give me the location. You said you have some instructions about your neighbors' goats?

Now, I know you won't be thrilled by this, but I have decided to accept Mr. Longbottom's application for a RA position in the Herbology division in the lab. You did say he was adequately qualified in that field. If it makes you feel any better, we can make the Potions lab and all equipment strictly off-limits to him. In any case, it's only a six-month position and it doesn't begin until June. I'm confident that the situation in the States will be much calmer by then and you can work remotely again, if it's a concern. Of course, we will keep your involvement with the lab strictly confidential.

I'll see you in the lab next Tuesday, keep the RAs busy!

Yours,
Dick

HOGWARTS SCHOOL OF WITCHCRAFT AND WIZARDRY
ADMINISTRATIVE OFFICES, Clerk

20 December 2001

Stoltz Research Labs
Potions Division
Manaus, Brazil

Sir,

Reference requests enclosed for Montague, Braddock, Daphne, and Theo. Montague still can't work indoors, says the walls close in on him. He's up for a job monitoring selkie migrations in the Hebrides. Think Daph's going into healing. Braddock won't tell me what he's up to, doesn't want it to get back to you. Daph says it's pest control. Theo's going into the portkey business, always good with tinker-

ing, should be useful. He told me that Mingus says he doesn't need a reference. Probably true; he's making a name for himself on the market, Phelps running protection. Specializing in papers and visas.

Zabini's got a request in, but it's different. His gran's deeding him a warehouse in Shoreditch, he wants to turn it into a nightclub. He says the Ministry building commission is holding up all his permits for magical construction in muggle areas, wants you to lean on them or something.

Year's almost up. Expect my first 6% cheque in the first quarter. You can send it to this address.

– B.

HOGWARTS SCHOOL OF WITCHCRAFT AND WIZARDRY
OFFICE OF HEADMISTRESS

4 Jan 2002

Dr. Cyril Ramson
Stoltz Research Labs
Potions Division
Univerisad Federal do Amazonas
Manaus, Brazil

'Cyril,'

Since your Miss Bulstrode insists on controlling all correspondence with you, you leave me little choice but to contact you here. She's become very high-handed in your absence. I do believe she thinks that she runs the school. She may *try*. She refuses to say when you'll be back to collect more of the Source water, but surely you'll need to replenish the stock at some point. Not that I expect you to be forthcoming with any information, but I would appreciate adequate notice before we attempt any more extractions. Now that we know a bit more what to expect, I believe I can devise some safeguards to avoid damage to the stairs.

Pomona informs me that she has made arrangements to visit the lab in Brazil in over the spring holidays. I don't know what you're playing at to extend an invitation to her but not to me. I'm making

my travel arrangements, and I expect to see you there. If you try to hide, I *will* find you.

That is a promise,
Minerva

MINISTRY OF MAGIC OF THE BRITISH ISLES
OFFICE OF MINISTER

18 February, 2002

Snape,

I have received confirmation from the USDM that your immigration status as a permanent resident and your work permit under the name of Cyril Ramson have been finalized. The documents are attached below. Somehow I feel I might need to repeat that this only applies for the identity of Cyril Ramson and you are not authorized to use any other aliases or identities. If you do and you get caught, it's on your head.

Inspector Hoke contacted me about calling on you to testify at the trial of those elf-parts dealers in Canada. I didn't promise him anything yet. Frankly, I have concerns about security and how much hostile cross-examination you might be subject to, particularly in regards to how you came about some of your information. I'll need to meet and speak with you about this once I have more information from Hoke.

On another note, sentences were up this week on some of the low-level collaborators and five are now out on probation: Rantin Earnshaw and Cornelius Ormerod of the Snatchers, and Eliza Loveday, Stephanie Coates, and Ellis Tansley of the Muggle Registration Committee. I didn't expect any trouble from this lot, but last night the alert wards we have on your old house went off, and Stephanie Coates was apprehended in the vicinity. She of course denied all knowledge. We are assuming this was a clumsy attempt at getting some personal item for tracking your location. Unless you know of any specific grudge that she might hold against you, she may be motivated just on general ideology. However, there is also the possibility that she may be a cat's paw for someone who is still in custody. Please inform me immediately if you know of any connection she has to you or how she may have discovered the

location of your old house. We can only hold her for questioning for so long. *On no account* are you to take any action on this yourself.

Keep an eye out,
Kingsley Shacklebolt

HOGWARTS SCHOOL OF WITCHCRAFT AND WIZARDARY
Administrative Assistant

PO Box 69568
Undercity Postal Division
Seattle WA 98154.01

4 April 2002

Sir,

Got your cheque. It's not any bloody 6%, as you well know. Don't make me put Sully on you.

Reference requests enclosed for Warrington, Harper, and Pritchard. Poncy Pritchard thinks he's got a shot as a legislation clerk in the Ministry. Load of bollocks. Told him if he lands it he'd better bring the place down from the inside.

Zabini's calling his club 'Helix.' Going to be rubbish, I can tell.

Idiot Potter keeps trying to get me to send you some bloody letters he's written. Can't seem to get it through his head that he'd have to bloody well *pay* me first.

Snake all right. Moves more than Maxwell. No pool dreams. Quiet.
– B.

*C/o Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardary
Office of the Administrative Assistant*

18 April, 2002

Dear Sir,

We're still on the continent, in that quaint farmhouse outside of Collioure, you remember the place. I've been continuing my studies here at the Institut Occitanien. It's been a relief to have the routine, but father says I must think about returning to England soon to rebuild the family name. I don't know how he plans for me to proceed, and frankly, I'm not sure I

should agree. It all seems impossible. In any case, I may request a reference from you in the future.

Greg's being released in a year, if all goes well. He was going to be up for parole last fall but I think he got in some sort of altercation and it was pulled. I know Nott's worried about him, but since he isn't speaking to me, I don't know how much I can do. I spoke to father about him staying with us on the continent for a while, but he wouldn't have it. I suppose it wouldn't be an 'advantageous association.' Well, it probably wouldn't have worked in any case, he doesn't speak French and he doesn't speak to me. I might be able to pass along the book you gave to me, if Nott can get it to him.

Mother sends her regards.

Draco

P.S. What is LSD? Is it like a confounding concoction?

PO Box 69568
Undercity Postal Division
Seattle WA 98154.01

28 April, 2002

Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry
Office of the Administrative Supervisor

It's 6% net, you bint. I have legitimate business expenses. Go ahead and put Sully on me if you like, but the contract does not limit my business expenses. One of which, by the way, are my licensing fees to Dr. Cyril Ramson. He can set his fees as high as he likes, so let me advise you not to push it.

References enclosed. You may as well have Pritchard report to you while you're at it. He could make himself useful.

No dreams. Quiet.

— S

On no account are you to forward any letters from Potter, for fuck's sake.

Allright, Momo's Cafe, Bellingham, 7pm, Friday.

Who's Paying?

HOGWARTS SCHOOL OF WITCHCRAFT AND WIZARDRY
OFFICE OF THE ADMINISTRATIVE SUPERVISOR

3 June, 2002

PO Box 69568

Undercity Postal Division

Seattle WA 98154.01

Sir,

Got some letters for you from Potter. I'm willing to open negotiation to not forward them to you. You can send me your offer.

— B.

THE END



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